

Seneca, *Apokolokyntosis* and *fritilli*

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1. How did Claudius become a pumpkin?

A well known passage from Cassius Dio provides us with a possible title for a famous work by Seneca, the *Apokolokyntosis divi Claudii*:

ὄθενπερ Λούκιος Ἰούνιος Γαλλίων ὁ τοῦ Σενέκα ἀδελφὸς ἀστειότατόν τι ἀπεφθέγγετο. συνέθηκε μὲν γὰρ καὶ ὁ Σενέκας σύγγραμμα, ἀποκολοκύντως αὐτὸ ὥσπερ τινὰ ἀθανάτισιν ὀνομάσας.

Seneca's brother, Lucius Junius Gallio, made a witty quip about this. *Pumpkinification* was another work by Seneca – a word drawn from an analogy of deification.¹

Ever since the humanist Hadrianus Junius² times all scholars have identified the work that Dio alludes to with the extant satirical work. Only two manuscripts carry a title including a Greek word: the 9th-13th century Sangallensis 569 (*divi Claudii ΑΠΟΘΗΟΣΙΣ Annei Senecae per satiram*) and the 15th century Vaticanus Latinus 4498 (where a relatively recent title has been added: *Senecae ἀποκολοκύντως*). Other manuscripts (such as the 9th-10th century Valentinianensis 411: *Senecae ludus de morte Claudii*) only have Latin titles. *Αποκολοκύντως* never appears in Medieval codexes. The variety of titles for the various versions of the text³ suggests that originally the work had no title at all, at least in the late antiquity Latin tradition which the medieval copyists borrowed from. The Greek title

¹ Cass. Dio 60,35,3.

² Junius (1556: 44-45).

³ See Roncali (1990), VI-XXIV; Reeve 1984, dates the codex Sangallensis to the 9th-10th century.

embarrassed many scholars as they were unable to explain how the pumpkin transformation, which the Senecan text doesn't describe, had taken place. This is an incomplete overview of proposed solutions:⁴

- 1) The pumpkin refers to Claudius' stupidity. Pumpkins are similar to a head but with no brain. A "pumpkin" is a blockhead. Most of the joke lies in the title itself and not in the text.⁵
- 2) The work is incomplete and the metamorphosis of the emperor may have been described in the missing section. The end of chapter VII and beginning of VIII have been lost.⁶
- 3) A pumpkin was a purgative kolokynth, a poisonous substance which was supposedly added to the effect of poisonous mushrooms by means of an enema.⁷
- 4) The pumpkin was an allusion to a symbol in the mysteries of Cybele.⁸
- 5) Claudius' soul transmigrated to a vegetable, according to a doctrine alluded to in Augustine's *Contra Faustum* 5.10.⁹
- 5) The title should be corrected to Ἀποκολοκένωσις¹⁰ because the satire describes the emperor's death as a liberation from flatulence (*anima, ventus*). His last words were allegedly: *vae me, puto, concacavi me*.¹¹
- 6) Ἀποκολοκύντωσις was a punishment using a pumpkin, inserted as in the ἀποραφανίδωσις.¹²
- 7) *Cucurbita* was a nickname used by some senators for Claudius. This was similar to his predecessor who had been nicknamed *Caligula*.¹³
- 8) Instead of a transformation into a pumpkin, the title refers to a "gourd's apotheosis", referring to a dunderhead going to heaven.¹⁴

⁴ See the *status quaestionis* in Coffey (1961); Bringmann (1985: 889-892); Roncali (2014: 675-679).

⁵ See for ex. Weinreich 1923, 11.

⁶ Naber (1937) supposed that a Christian monk removed a part of Seneca's work because Jesus or the Christians were ridiculed.

⁷ Cf. Suet., *Claud.* 44,3; see Graves (1960) (he first published his theory in *Sunday Times* London, May 18, 1958); Athanassiakis (1974: 12-13); Christensen (2010); Roncali (2014: 677).

⁸ Derooy (1951).

⁹ Ronconi (1947: VIII-IX).

¹⁰ Currie (1962); Pulbrook (1981).

¹¹ Sen., *Apoc.* 4,3.

¹² Wagenvoort, (1934). The ἀποραφανίδωσις was the punishment inflicted on adulterers in Athens which consisted of inserting a radish up their anus.

¹³ Hoyos (1991).

¹⁴ Russo (1948: 17-18); Conte (1994: 420); Freudenburg (2015: 94), who also hypothesizes a Latin *concurbitatio*, similar to *consecratio* and to the joke between *consecravi me* and *concacavi me*.

- 9) Claudius was transformed into a *fritillus*, a dice-box, made from a bottle-gourd (*cucurbita lagenaria*).¹⁵ Todd writes: “In effect, the Apocolocyntosis is the ‘Fritillification’ of the deified Claudius”.¹⁶

This last proposal is probably the closest to the truth. In the Senecan satire Claudius is likened to a *fritillus*, but sometimes a comparison with a pumpkin also appears possible. Apostolos Athanassiakis¹⁷ sees an allusion to a round pumpkin in the following passage:

non mirum quod in curiam impetum fecisti: nihil tibi clausi est. modo dic nobis qualem deum istum fieri uelis. Ἐπικούρειος θεὸς non potest esse: οὔτε αὐτὸς πρῶγμα ἔχει τι οὔτε ἄλλοις παρέχει. Stoicus? quomodo potest “rotundus” esse, ut ait Varro, “sine capite, sine praeputio”? est aliquid in illo Stoici dei, iam uideo: nec cor nec caput habet.

It is no wonder you have made an assault upon the senate-house; nothing is closed to you. Only tell us what sort of a god you want him to be made. He cannot be an Epicurean god, neither having himself any care nor causing any to others. A Stoic? How can he be ‘round,’ as Varro says, ‘without head or prepuce’? Yet there is something in him of the Stoic god, now I see. He has neither heart nor head.¹⁸

Being round with neither heart nor head, Claudius was something similar to a Stoic god. The similarity consists in his being a pumpkin.

Seneca, however, depicts Claudius as more of a *fritillus* than a pumpkin.

Fritilli are often mentioned by Seneca when describing Claudius’ love for playing dice. He remarks: *aleam studiosissime lusit, arte librum quoque emisit, solitus etiam in gestatione ludere*.¹⁹

The above quoted passage “*si mehercules a Saturno petisset hoc beneficium, cuius mensem toto anno celebrauit Saturnalicus princeps*” refers to the Saturnalia, when dice games and gambling were allowed in Rome.²⁰ When Claudius was expelled from the *curia* of the gods, nearly everybody was happy for their regained freedom. An exception was the many lawyers who had been informed by

¹⁵ Todd (1943).

¹⁶ Todd (1943: 105).

¹⁷ Athanassiakis (1974).

¹⁸ Sen., *Apoc.* 8.1-2; transl. by Perley Ball.

¹⁹ Suet., *Claud.* 33.

²⁰ Suet., *Aug.* 71; Mart. 1,14,7; 5,84; 7,91,2; 11,6; 13,1,7; 14,1; Lucian., *Saturnalia* 1; see also below.

a *iurisconsultus* that: *Dicebam vobis: non semper Saturnalia erunt* (I told you the Saturnalia would not last forever).²¹ During his funeral procession down the Via Sacra a dirge was sung:

caedite maestis pectora palmis o causidici, uenale genus; uosque poetae lugete noui, uosque in primis qui concusso magna parastis lucra fritillo.

Smite on your breasts, ye shysters forsaken, with hands of despair, o bribe-taking crew; ye too, half-fledged poets, now should bewail; and ye above all, who quickly were able to gather great gains by shaking the dice-box.

At the end of the satire Seneca stages a trial in the kingdom of the dead with a final sentence by Aeacus:

tum Aeacus iubet illum alea ludere pertuso fritillo. et iam coeperat fugientes semper tesseris quaerere et nihil proficere: cumque recollectos auderet mittere talos, lusuro similis semper semperque petenti, decepere fidem: refugit digitosque per ipsos fallax adsiduo dilabatur alea furto. sic cum iam summi tanguntur culmina montis, inrita Sisyphio uoluuntur pondera collo. nam quotiens missurus erat resonante fritillo utraque subducto fugiebat tessera fundo.

Then Aeacus commanded him to gamble with a bottomless dice-box. And already he had begun to search for his constantly escaping dice and to accomplish nothing; for

Every time when he wanted to throw from his clattering dice-box,
Both of the dice escaped him by way of the hole in the bottom.
Then when he gathered them up and once more ventured to play them,
Over again they gave him the slip, and kept him pursuing,
Constantly baffling his hopes by skipping away through his fingers,
Always trickily sliding through with the same old deception,—
Tiresome as when poor Sisyphus reaches the top of his mountain
Vainly to feel his burden go rolling back from his shoulders.²²

²¹ Sen., *Apoc.* 12.

²² Sen., *Apoc.* 15.

It is worth quoting now an epigram of Martial where the *fritillus* himself is defined *regnator* as if it was the king of the festival.

*Unctis falciferi senis diebus,
Regnator quibus imperat fritillus,
Versu ludere non laborioso
Permittis, puto, pilleata Roma.*

In these festive days of the scythe-bearing old man, when the dice-box rules supreme, you will permit me, I feel assured, cap-clad Rome, to sport in unlaboured verse.²³

It is possible that Martial was thinking of the famous Senecan *Apokolokyntosis* when he was writing these verses²⁴ but it is also possible that it was customary to defining the *fritillus* as king of Saturnalia. As we see that Claudius was depicted by Seneca as a *Saturnalicus rex*, and the *rex* of Saturnalia was the *fritillus*, in both cases Martial testifies to a possible identification of Claudius with both a *fritillus* and the king of Saturnalia. On the other hand, there are reasons why we may suppose that the *Apokolokyntosis* has been written during the Saturnalia of AD 54 and was a case of Saturnalian literature (another famous case is that of Julian's *Caesares*).²⁵

2. *Fritilli*

Is it possible that *fritilli* were also pumpkins at the same time?

This paper covers archaeological evidence which could unravel the problematic question of pumpkinification, dealing first with *fritilli*.

In 1980 Carlo Pavolini²⁶ published an updated study of a class of coarse ware classified as “small oval or pear-shaped pots”. Numerous specimens from Ostia and Pompeii made up most of his research material. Their height ranges from 6.4 to 19.3 cm with a circular section. The author whittles them down to eighteen types. The classification of these small pots could be further simplified into two main shapes. The first has a lower, short, and unstable stem. Its central belly narrows towards the mouth, forming a small funnel (early specimens are cup-shaped,

²³ Mart. 11,6,1-4 (from Bohn's Classical Library, 1897).

²⁴ On some Senecan influences in Martial's epigrams see Mindt (2017).

²⁵ See Nauta (1987).

²⁶ Pavolini (1980).

later ones funnel-shaped). The second shape has no neck beneath the mouth. Its opening is larger, the walls are vertical. They date from about the middle of the 1st century AD up till an imprecise moment. They were still in use during the Severan age. Until Hadrian's time they appear to have been produced mainly in central Italy. Later, imported specimens also seem to be recognizable in Latium and Campania. Pavolini provides a variety of interpretations for their use given by various scholars: 1) they were used as lids for transport amphorae; 2) they were used as suction cups to remove lids (like a corkscrew); 3) they were included in the cement mix for vaults or domes to lighten the load; 4) they were small bottles for perfumed ointments; 5) they were lamps.²⁷ Pavolini points out that there are arguments for and against all of these hypotheses. Another theory sees these small pots as the *fritilli* mentioned by some ancient authors.²⁸ There is almost no argument against this hypothesis, except that the mouth of some examples is rather narrow. But, *fritillus* corresponds to the Greek φμόός, related to the verb φμόω: "close the mouth".

Porphyrio²⁹ says: *Fimum: quod nos fritillum dicimus, in quo coniectae tesserae agitataeque mittuntur.*

A Scholium to Juvenal³⁰ says: *Fritillo: pyxide cornea, qui φμόός dicitur Gr<a>ece [[fritinnire aves dicuntur, <id est> strepere aut sonare.]] apud antiquos nam in cornu mittebant tesseras moventesque fundebant.*

In 1983 a revolutionary archaeological discovery was made. Among the grave goods in a 1st-2nd century AD grave in Bevagna (ancient Mevania, in Umbria) there were two pots of the first shape described above (fig. 1). They had a wavy profile. One had a die at the end of the funnel. A second die was found in the gravefill. This means that there were two pots and two dice, one in a pot.³¹ This provides evidence that these pots were associated with dice games and can rightfully be labelled *fritilli*.

Pietro Egidi, who published the finds from the grave, does not know whether the die was originally placed in the belly of the pot or at its mouth. Some pots have quite a large mouth, allowing dice to be placed inside and tossed easily. The small mouths of other examples would have only allowed small dice to be inserted. Another possibility is that the dice were placed on the funnel and thrown directly. The pot's stem could not have been used to stand it on the table, so it seems likely that it was used as a handle while casting the die.

²⁷ Bibliography in Pavolini (1980: 1011-1012). Four such vases have been found in Castrum Novum, in a Roman bath: Squaglia (2016).

²⁸ Anecchino (1976).

²⁹ Porphyrio, in Hor., *Sat.* 2,7,17.

³⁰ Schol. Iuven. 14,5 ed. Wessner, p. 211.

³¹ Egidi (1983).

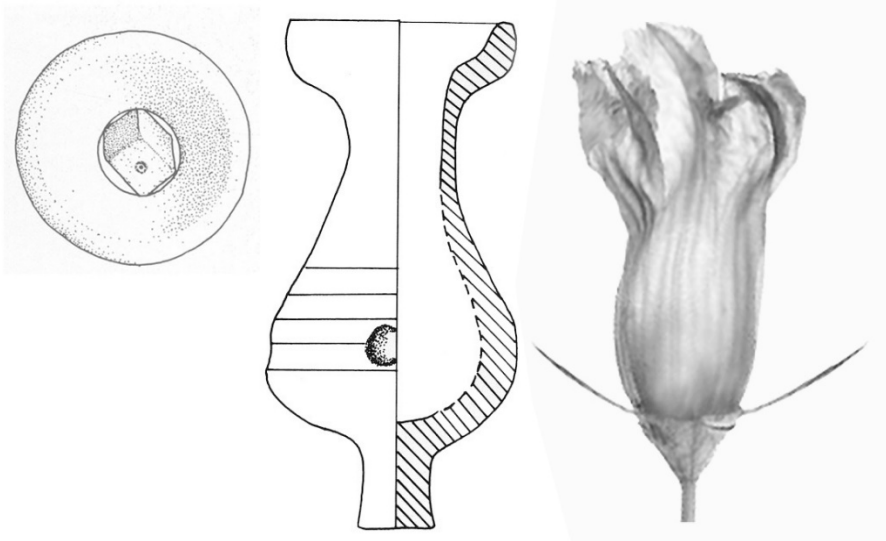


Fig. 1. Drawing of a fritillus with a dice on its funnel from a tomb in Mevania (from Egidi), and comparison with a pumpkin flower.

Why were these pots shaped like this? They were the right size for casting dice, but their stem, neck and mouth imitate the shape of a male pumpkin flower. I would guess that the meaning of Claudius' transformation is the following: he became similar to a *fritillus*, a dice box shaped like a pumpkin flower. In Latin *cucurbita* can mean both the fruit of pumpkin and also its flower.³²

As we have already seen, in chapter 8 Seneca says that Claudius cannot become neither an Epicurean nor a Stoic god, and questions:

Stoicus? quomodo potest "rotundus" esse, ut ait Varro, "sine capite, sine praeputio"? est aliquid in illo Stoici dei, iam uideo: nec cor nec caput habet.

Seneca is referring to a lost satire of Varro and denies Claudius' likeness to a sphere, but admits that he has no head nor heart. He was possibly comparing Claudius to a pumpkin flower, empty inside, with one "leg" (Claudius was a lame emperor), a "belly" full of air, a neck, and no head.

The punishment in the afterlife may allude to Claudius' final hours. Unable to evacuate his bowels, his *anima* finally left his body in an intestinal discharge.³³ In the afterlife his *fritillus* was open below and let dice be cast from it when

³² Possibly the Appendix Vergiliana, *Priapea* 12-13 (*luteae uiolae mihi lacteumque papauer / pallentesque cucurbitae*) speaks of flowers, but the verses continue by mentioning fruits.

³³ See, for ex. Athanassiakis (1973).

shaken. Claudius being similar to a *fritillus*, this lower opening possibly alluded to a description of him as the *cacator* emperor.

Theoretically a pumpkin flower could be used to cast dice by placing them inside, holding it by the stem, shaking, turning it upside down and dropping the dice on to the table.³⁴ However pumpkin flowers could be found in summer and early autumn but not during the Saturnalia festival. This fell at the end of the year. Therefore one cannot suppose that the Romans used true pumpkin flowers to play dice, but small vessels whose form was similar to that of a pumpkin flower. During the festivities dice gaming was allowed and encouraged. In order to have a dice box similar to a pumpkin flower throughout the year terracotta *fritilli* were made. They are documented archaeologically from about the reign of Claudius onwards. In the Late Antiquity *fritilli* apparently disappear from archaeological contexts and this fact could account for the different titles, unrelated to the pumpkin, in the medieval tradition. Also the Scholium to Juvenal can be explained by taking into account that terracotta *fritilli* disappeared in the 3rd century. The Scholia vetera to Juvenal were probably written in about AD 450,³⁵ when people could only hypothesize about the features of ancient *fritilli*, and its author wrote: *pyxide cornea*. In fact, no Roman horn (or possibly cornelwood) box for shaking dice is known.

We know that Claudius' *fritillus* was not a flower but was terracotta because it rattled, something that a flower does not. A *fritillus* was as much a flower as a *rhyton* was a horn. Everybody recognized a *rhyton* as a horn, even though it was clearly a terracotta cup. A Greek called a horn κέρας, and a cup shaped as a horn ῥυτόν;³⁶ in a similar manner the Romans called a pumpkin flower *cucurbita* and a small vessel shaped as a pumpkin flower *fritillus*.

During the Saturnalia slaves were relatively free: *Saturnalibus tota servis licentia permittitur*.³⁷ They could even play dice with their masters.³⁸ Many authors say that dice games were forbidden except during the Saturnalia.³⁹

³⁴ Porphyrio, in Hor., *Sat.* 2,7,15: *quod nos fritillum dicimus, in quo coniectae tesserae agitataeque mittuntur*.

³⁵ See Cameron (2010).

³⁶ See Athen., *Deipn.* 11,51.

³⁷ Macrobius, 1,7,26. Slaves wore a *pileus* on their head as a symbol of freedom: Mart. 14,1; 11,6,1-4 (*Unctis falciferi senis diebus, / Regnator quibus imperat fritillus, / Versu ludere non laborioso / Permittis, puto, pilleata Roma*); Sen., *Ep.* 18.

³⁸ *Anth.Lat.* 395,48.

³⁹ Suet., *Aug.* 71; Mart. 4,14,7; 5,84; 11,6; 14,1; Lucian., *Sat.* 2 and the image of December in the calendar of Philocalus. On gambling during this festival: Mart. 5,84; 14,1, 12.

At the very end of the *Apokolokyntosis* Claudius is condemned to be a slave of Caligula, who gives him to Aeacus as a gift:

apparuit subito C. Caesar et petere illum in seruitutem coepit....C. Caesari illum Aeacus donat. is Menandro liberto suo tradidit, ut a cognitionibus esset.

Suddenly Caius Caesar appeared and began to claim him as a slave... Aeacus gives him to Caius Caesar; and Aeacus consigned him to Menander his freedman, to be his clerk in judicial examinations.

So Claudius was presented like a *saturnalicus* emperor whose deification consisted in being similar to a *fritillus*, without a head and with a belly filled with air, like a pumpkin flower, and in becoming a slave in the tribunal of the dead, where the supreme judge, Aeacus, was far better than him during his life.

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