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Agrippina: the woman who was able to wield power in the male-dominated Roman Empire

Arguably one of the most powerful women in Ancient Roman history, Julia Agrippina is not devoted nearly enough attention by history books. Her son Nero and his infamous reign as emperor are known by many, yet few can recognize the name of the power-hungry woman who was behind his political rise and many of his early public endeavors. Albeit unafraid to manipulate, Agrippina should be regarded as a leading figure in the Roman Empire for her effect on the empire's civil life at a time when females were ostracized from the sphere of politics. The history accounts in which she is depicted often paint her as a criminal, for reasons such as licentiousness and involvement in murderous plots. Agrippina, however, may not be worthy of the criminalized depiction that is attributed to her. This paper will demonstrate that her impact as a driven woman who is able to wield power in the Roman Empire should be her lasting historical legacy, rather than the possibly inaccurate criminalized description of her.

Around 15 AD, not long after the death of Augustus, Julia Agrippina (Agrippina the Younger) was born. Her parents were Agrippina the Elder, daughter of Marcus Agrippa and Julia the Elder, and Germanicus Caesar. Her maternal side directly connected her to Augustus's lineage, since Julia the Elder was the daughter of the first Emperor of the Roman Empire (one might propose that Agrippina the Younger inherited her intrinsic drive for power from her mother, who had the same "obsessive conviction of her right, as a descendent of Augustus, to continue the line of the Julian succession"¹). Agrippina's birth followed that of her three older

¹Barrett, Anthony. *Agrippina: Mother of Nero*. Taylor & Francis, 2005.

brothers, the most notable of which is Caligula, and was before that of her two younger sisters, Drusilla and Julia Livilla. Emperor Tiberius, who was forced to marry Julia the Elder by Augustus and ruled from 14 AD to 37 AD, was emperor for most of Agrippina's youth. His reign can be deemed successful if one considers the fact that he left the empire in a state that was stable, however it was not without its scandals and murderous plots, per usual in the leadership of the early Roman Empire. Postumus, a contender for his throne, "was murdered, probably at Tiberius's orders,"² an event that delineates a common, albeit barbaric, theme of killing off one's political competitor. His marriage with his wife Julia was often depicted as unhealthy. Neither his nor her emotions were considered in the arrangement of their union. Julia had "little say in initial marital arrangements made for her by the emperor"³ and Tiberius had been required by Augustus to divorce his previous wife Vipsania, whom he had loved and with whom had fostered a healthy relationship. This event depicts the theme of marriages solely based on political moves rather than love. This historical contextualization should be used to understand the belief system of ancient Romans and the malicious practices that were common among the public leaders.

Agrippina's initial relationships with men, prior to her marriage with Claudius, demonstrate a transition for her from a state of powerlessness to a state of power. Most likely already exposed to loveless martial unions and licentious relationships among patrician families, Agrippina married Domitius Ahenobarbus in 28 CE. She was only thirteen years old at the time and had "neither agency nor apparently any intrinsic interest for the historian,"⁴ a theme which she shared with her grandmother. From a young age, she was taught that marriages were not intended to foster loving relationships; rather, she was a pawn in a political move. The couple

²Pohl, Frederik. "Tiberius: Roman Emperor." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 28 Sept. 2018, www.britannica.com/

³Ginsburg, Judith. *Representing Agrippina: Constructions of Female Power in the Early Roman Empire*. Oxford University Press, 2006, 25

⁴ Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina*, 25

gave birth to Nero, the infamous future emperor of Rome. When he died, she was a widow at the age of twenty-five. Rather than waiting for her fate to be determined for her, she decided to find herself a suitable husband. After pursuing flirtatious relationships with men of power, such as Servius Sulpicius Galba who was bound to be the future emperor, she found a new husband in Gaius Sallustius Passienus Crispus, whose positive qualities included his wealth, eloquence, and “imperial favor to recommend him.”⁵ There is very little circulating information about the marriage and subsequent death of Crispus, but multiple conjectures have been thrown accusing Agrippina of poisoning him. However, a poisoning accusation is an all-too-common theme from this time period and an easy way to slander someone’s name because it is “the murder weapon impossible to disprove and traditionally associated with ambitious women.”⁶ Historians were often harsh critics of powerful females, so the validity of the rumor cannot be known for certain. Either way, the death of Crispus was fortunate for Agrippina in the fact that it left her in a financially secure position. Her first two husbands clearly delineate a transitional period for Agrippina. In the first marriage, she was at the whim of the men in her family, who would dictate to her the husband that would be most beneficial to the family lineage. However, after Domitius’s death, Agrippina began to make decisions that would shape her future: namely, her next husband. The painting of Agrippina as a transgressive flirt and possible murderer in the cases with these men cannot be verified; in fact, there is a high “likelihood that accounts of Agrippina’s life and career have been molded by a standardized preconception of the politically ambitious woman.”⁷ Given the sexist society in which she lived and the prejudiced accounts of the historian, it is not unlikely that her early criminalized depiction in history is inaccurate.

⁵ Ibid, 35

⁶ Barrett, *Agrippina: Mother of Nero*, 98

⁷ Ibid, 14

However, it is likely that the image of an intelligent and persuasive leader would be a fitting description for the great-granddaughter of Augustus.

Agrippina's leadership and political influence are demonstrated in Caligula's rise to the throne. When Rome became aware of the imminent death of its weakening emperor Tiberius, it was time for a new emperor to be determined. Caligula was deemed "formidable by the power he derived from his able and ambitious sister, Agrippina,"⁸ a statement that attributes Caligula's power to Agrippina's ambition. He was competing against two other worthy candidates for the empire: Claudius and Tiberius (carrying the namesake of the ruling emperor). However, Agrippina saw an opportunity through her brother to climb the hierarchical government structure and was determined to have him in the emperor's seat. To all, "She calmly assumed it that her brother was to be chief of the state... Her conduct, if not the natural effect of her lofty ambition, was admirably calculated to influence an uncertain, wavering multitude."⁹ Caligula, in a large part due to his sister's influence, rose to power and became the emperor after Tiberius. He rewarded his sisters with several honors, including those of the Vestal Virgins, which was significant in the fact that "the formal involvement of women in public life was limited essentially to certain priestly offices and, in particular, to membership in the Vestal Virgins."¹⁰ Even though women were suppressed from involvement in the political world, it is shown that Agrippina is as much involved as her sex will allow her to be. Power-hungry and intelligent, Agrippina is depicted in historical books as attempting to use her brother's new position to wield her own power through her influence over him. She created a goal to secure the imperial position for her offspring and to remain close to the seat of power, which she did through techniques such as persuasion and manipulation, two common themes in the realm of politics. Caligula has a

⁸Schele de Vere, Maximilliam. *The Great Empress, A Portrait*. J.B. Lippincott & Co, 1870, 62

⁹ Ibid, 63

¹⁰Barrett, *Agrippina: Mother of Nero*, 5

large debt that he owed to Agrippina; without her, one might question whether or not he would have been able to ascend to the position of emperor. A rumor that was circulated about Agrippina and her brother is that they were engaged in an incestuous relationship. Multiple historical sources made claims of this nature, however these are extremely difficult to prove. In addition, great contemporary enemies of Caligula who unabashedly insulted him never spoke of any sexual relations between the two, which may indicate that these conjectures were falsely constructed.¹¹ Agrippina is often negatively painted as licentious, however many of these accusations of her “sexual proclivities must be deemed unproven or improbable.”¹² As far as historical accounts are concerned, there were no eyewitnesses to any incestuous relationship and many of Agrippina’s other supposed sexual relations are equally debatable. The relationship between the siblings had its nadir in 39 AD, when Caligula claimed that Agrippina and their sister Julia were colluding with Drusilla’s husband, Lepidus, in a conspiracy plot against him. This theory tainted the names of the sisters, but in “all likelihood, the two sisters were merely victims of Caligula’s unbalanced mind.”¹³ Agrippina and her sister were subsequently exiled, but it is evinced that their brother’s reasoning may have been misconstrued. In conclusion, Agrippina’s relationship with Caligula demonstrates her leadership through the way that she was influential in his rise to the position of emperor, but also the fact that her criminalized depiction in history may be inaccurate.

Agrippina’s marriage to the emperor Claudius demonstrates both her desire for power and a reemergence of her possibly unjustified immoral reputation. After two years of exile, she and her sister were allowed to return to Rome after the assassination of Caligula. Claudius,

¹¹ In *Agrippina: Mother of Nero*, Barrett claims that “no charge of incest is made against Caligula by either Seneca or Philo, both of whom are viciously hostile towards him and especially offended by his immorality” (Barrett, 62)

¹² Barrett, *Agrippina: Mother of Nero*, 62

¹³ Graalman, Diane Staines. “Agrippina the Younger.” Oklahoma State University, 1971, 11

Agrippina's uncle, was elected to the seat of emperor. Upon her arrival, Agrippina married her second husband Crispus, as aforementioned earlier in the paper when discussing her first two marriages. Agrippina and Claudius were married after the death of their two spouses.¹⁴ Claudius's appearance was often made fun of because he was unattractive and possibly deformed. An ambitious woman, Agrippina most likely recognized that the marriage was a political move that would most closely tie her to the top of the empire's power pyramid. Through this union, Agrippina was able to wield the power that she craved, and "Under the influence of Agrippina the laxity and disorders of the first years of Claudius' reign gave place to a certain order and discipline,"¹⁵ clearly demonstrating the positive leadership effect that she possessed. The famous historian Dio even seems to claim that "Agrippina had Claudius under her complete control,"¹⁶ highlighting the fact that Agrippina may have been more politically powerful than Claudius at the time through her control over him. Agrippina was smart in the way that she influenced the empire--rather than going directly to Claudius, which most likely would have been committing political suicide, Agrippina "arrange[d] for the freedmen to persuade Claudius of the wisdom of her advice."¹⁷ Many of Agrippina's individual political decisions are unknown because they are not recited in ancient history books, however it is clear that she had an instrumental effect on the empire in Claudius's reign. Though her moves may have been manipulative, they were tantamount to necessary for a woman to be able to be involved in politics at the time. As part of the slander against her, she is accused by multiple historians of murdering those who threatened her position of power and forcing Claudius to commit many executions. Agrippina, however was a popular figure in Ancient Rome. For this reason, "it is

¹⁴ The death of Agrippina's husband, as aforementioned, was most likely due to old-age. However, Claudius had his previous wife murdered because he believed she was having affairs with other men

¹⁵ Guglielmo Ferrero, *The Women of the Caesars*. New York: The Century Co., 1911, p. 286.

¹⁶ Barrett, *Agrippina: Mother of Nero*, 116

¹⁷ Ibid, 117

doubtful that her popularity could have withstood large scale persecutions of her enemies,”¹⁸ a fact that discredits these accusations against her. Through her marriage, she also helped to secure her son’s position as future emperor: Agrippina is depicted as goading Claudius to quickly commit to adopting her son Nero, possibly insinuating that “Claudius was pressured into taking this step without adequate thought.”¹⁹ Claudius’s adoption of her son was crucial in order to further promote the idea that Nero should be the subsequent emperor after the death of his adoptive father. In 54 AD, Claudius died; following this event, there were numerous accusations that Agrippina had poisoned him with various historians citing different reasons. As previously mentioned, this accusation was not uncommon for high-powered women to receive and was almost impossible to disprove. Though Agrippina may have committed the crime, there are claims that Agrippina’s political role was secure and she would have no need to murder her husband.²⁰ Nero was also very young and it would have been more difficult to secure the emperor’s position for him than if Claudius had died years later, another reason as to why Agrippina is not as likely to be the murderer. Through her actions as the wife of Claudius, Agrippina is clearly a born leader and one might conclude that her widespread criminalization is not objectively based.

Her role as the mother of the infamous leader Nero again demonstrates her impact in the political world of Ancient Rome. Her genius is shown immediately after her husband’s demise: rather than revealing his death immediately, she needed to “make the Roman populace believe that Claudius was still alive while she investigated a way by which Nero could be declared emperor with the least possible difficulty.”²¹ She posed Nero as the most logical choice for

¹⁸ Graalman, “Agrippina the Younger.”, 26

¹⁹ Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina*, 48

²⁰ Graalman, “Agrippina the Younger.”, 30

²¹ Ibid, 31

future emperor because, although young, he would be able to lead the army better than his contender Britannicus, who was a mere thirteen years old at the time. After solidifying the position of the throne for her son, she only then prepared for the funeral of her deceased husband. Once Nero had claimed the emperor's seat, Agrippina had an unprecedented position of power. Her son "left his mother the management of all public and private businesses,"²² a statement that shows the political power Agrippina had over her son's reign. In order to be involved in senatorial proceedings, which were illegal for a woman to attend, Agrippina would hide in the curtains so that she would still be updated on the events that took place and the decisions that were made²³. Her interest in Rome's politics intimidated many high-powered men and she was insulted for her involvement. Though Nero's position as emperor is often depicted as corrupt, the early years of his reign are not depicted in this negative light. These were the years when Agrippina was predominantly in power, showing that she in fact might have provided the only redeemable aspects of Nero's reign. Coins from the time period of 54 AD through 55 AD may also demonstrate Agrippina's political dominance over Nero. On the coins, "Her profile was larger than that of Nero and appeared on the sovereign side of the coins, while the profile of Nero appeared on the reverse side."²⁴ The construction of the coins alludes to the fact that Agrippina had more control in the empire than her son. After those initial years in power, Agrippina's control over Nero and her popularity began to wane. In fact, Nero would come to have his mother murdered in 59 AD. Though the events of her death are not pertinent to this paper, it is important to recognize that Nero felt that his mother's murder was a necessity in order to remove her from all control. In conclusion, it is clear through Nero's rise to power and

²² Suetonius, *Life of Nero*, translated by J. C. Rolfe. (Loeb Classical Library: William Heinemann Ltd), LIX, 1

²³ Graalman, "Agrippina the Younger.", 37

²⁴ *Ibid*, 35

his initial stint in power that Agrippina was a true leader and worthy of recognition in history for being one of the greatest Ancient Roman female leaders.

Agrippina was a powerful woman who was able to be a leader in a time period that suppressed strong female voices. Though often criminalized in history, she should be more recognized for her ability to have a positive impact on politics in Ancient Rome. The conjectures against her, including murderous plots, are quasi-clichés and many may not have any basis in truth. The subjective accounts of ancient historians have proven to be difficult resources to get an accurate depiction of this powerful woman due to the sexist climate of the time period. In conclusion, it is necessary to regard Agrippina as a trailblazer of her time, wielding power when women were typically unable.

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