

# AGRIPPINA THE YOUNGER

by Ken Webb

Here it is: the factual detail, the historiography, revision exercises and advice on how to write responses on Agrippina The Younger.



**eBook**

*“Everything you wanted to know about Agrippina The Younger, but were afraid to ask.”*

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by Ken Webb M.A. (Oxon), C.Ed

*“Everything you wanted to know about  
Agrippina the Younger, but were afraid to ask.”*

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## About the author

Ken Webb was educated in the United Kingdom and graduated from the University of Oxford. He taught in several state schools before moving to Pymble Ladies' College where he taught Modern, Ancient and Extension History. In March 2008, he moved to Ravenswood School for Girls where he also taught the International Baccalaureate course in History. He is a member of the Independent Schools Examination Committee for Modern History. Ken Webb frequently lectures and runs workshops for Year 12 students in Sydney and Regional NSW. He also runs Professional Development courses for teachers. In addition to his own work, Ken Webb has contributed to colleagues' work and to newspapers and periodicals. He has also been a consultant on various history video documentaries. In November 2012, Ken Webb was a NSW State Winner of the National Excellence in Teaching Awards.

Over the years, Ken Webb has written a wide range of study guides and textbooks for NSW and Australia wide, including *"Power and Authority in the Modern World"* (Nelson Cengage Learning), *"Discovering Australian History"* (CUP), *"The Augustan Age 44 BC – AD 14"* (Get Smart Education), *"The Julio-Claudians and the Roman Empire AD 14-69"* (Get Smart Education), *"Extension History: The Historians"* (HTA of NSW), *"Spartan Society to the Battle of Leuctra 371 BC"* (Get Smart Education).

**"Agrippina the Younger"** is one of fourteen titles in the "Everything you wanted to know about... but were afraid to ask" series *written specifically* for the new NSW Modern and Ancient History syllabuses commencing 2018-19. Other titles in this series include:

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## Author's note

The purpose of this book – as with all titles in the “Everything you wanted to know about... but were afraid to ask” series – is to make life easy for students and teachers preparing for the HSC examination in Ancient History. It is not intended to be the final word on Agrippina the Younger; nothing beats wide-reading and going back to the ancient sources!

However, neither teachers nor students always have the time for such luxuries. Teachers have several other classes to worry about, not to mention a growing multitude of administrative and bureaucratic tasks to fulfill. Students have other subjects to study, and may also be burdened with a series of major works. Thus, “*Everything you want to know...*” steps in to make life easy.

### The principal aims of this book are to:

- provide the essential factual detail needed to understand the period;
- provide references to the main ancient written and archaeological sources;
- provide references to major modern written and visual sources;
- provide ideas for approaching the types of questions that can be expected in the HSC examination on *Agrippina the Younger*.

### Rationale for the structure of this book

**In the Ancient History HSC examination paper, the Agrippina the Younger topic appears in Section III – Personalities and their times, Question 22, Option J. Each year there will be TWO or THREE questions in this option: students must answer ALL parts of the question.**<sup>1</sup>

The book follows closely the structure and lay out of the Ancient History syllabus so that it can act as a close guide for teachers and students working on this topic.

The following slight variations have been employed:

- The syllabus point “*basis of her power and influence, patronage*” has been spread through Chapters 7, 8 and 9.
- “*public image*” has been placed in Chapter 12 dealing with Ancient and Modern Images.
- “*attempts on her life*” and “*death: motives, manner and impact of death*” and been combined into Chapter 10 (as would probably happen when studying this topic).
- “*impact, influence on her time, assessment of her life and career, and legacy*” have been combined into Chapter 11 (as would probably happen when studying this topic).

There are frequent revision exercises spread throughout the book to assist students in coming to terms with the factual detail.

<sup>1</sup> Specific advice on approaches to the HSC questions is given towards the end of the book.

# Chapter 1:

## Geography, topography and resources of Rome and the Roman Empire

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### The Italian peninsula

Rome is situated mid-way along the west coast of the Italy, a 1000 kilometre peninsula which protrudes from central Europe into the Mediterranean Sea. To some the Italian peninsula is said to resemble a boot. The Italian peninsula is never wider than 250 kilometres at any point.

- To the east of Italy is the Adriatic Sea, to the west the Tyrrhenian Sea and to the south the Ionian Sea.
- Extending along the spine of the Italian peninsula are the Appenine Mountains which in places rise to 3000 metres in height.
  - The Appenines are steeper in the east than in the west where they tend to slope more gently.
- Parts of Italy have been volcanic, and it can boast several active volcanoes: Mt Vesuvius near Naples, Mt Etna on the island of Sicily and Mt Stromboli on the island of Stromboli.
- Several rivers cut across the peninsular, including in the north the rivers Po and Arno, and through Rome flows the river Tiber.
  - However, Italy's rivers did little to assist commerce and navigation as they can often be very dry in summer.
  - Estuaries often silted up making them unsuitable for trade.
  - Human intervention was needed to establish proper port facilities, as happened in Rome with the port of Ostia.
- Italy was better resourced than was Greece. The Appenines were heavily wooded and there was no shortage of marble, stone and clay.

This would later make possible the development of Rome's navy and architectural wonders.

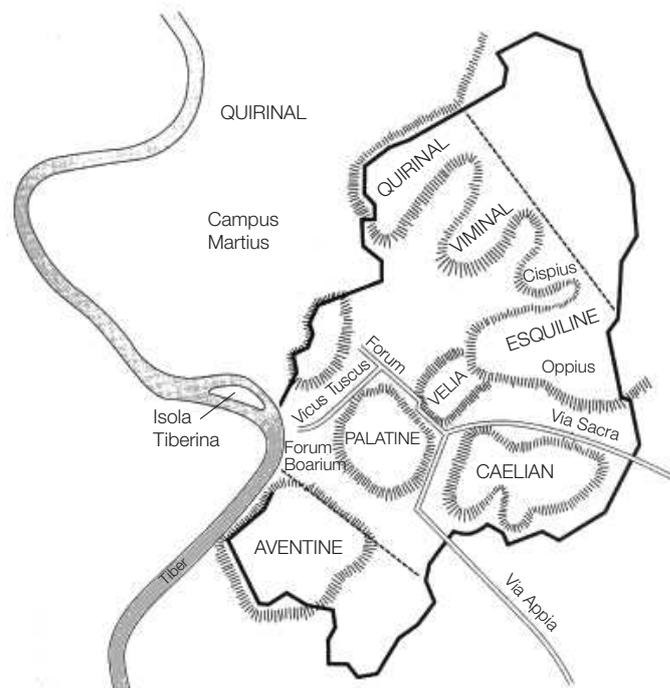
The flatter regions of Italy are located in the north around the River Po and along the west coast, in the regions of Etruria, Latium and Campania. Rome and much of these west coast areas have warm to hot summers, and cool to mild winters. Rainfall is moderate.

### Rome

Rome is located in the region of Latium, mid-way along the western coast of the Italian peninsula. Geography played a major part in Rome's location. The river Tiber gave access to the sea and inland. Settlement began around a group of seven hills close to the river, which could be easily defended. Near the Capitoline and Palatine hills is the only island on the river Tiber. This made the bridging of the river possible.

Latium is a rich fertile area, capable of sustaining a large population, especially later in Rome's history when marshy, mosquito infested regions were drained. It was also a central location for trading routes to Etruria in the north, and Campania to the south. However, richness and ease of access ensured that this region became a frequent target of marauding tribes.

Figure 1.1: Rome, its hills and the river Tiber



## The Growth of the Empire

Between 1500 and 1000 BC, many Italic tribes began moving into Italy. One of these tribes was the Latins and they settled in the region of Latium. Archaeological remains of a bronze age settlement have been found on the Palatine Hill dating to about 1000 BC. The legendary origins of Rome have two main themes:

- One story has Aeneas leading a group from the ruins of the Trojan War (c 1200 BC) to Latium.
- The second is the story of Romulus and Remus, two brothers thrown into the river Tiber, rescued and suckled by a she-wolf. Romulus eventually founded the city of Rome in 753 BC and later killed his brother in an argument.

By the 6th century BC, the Romans had increased their territorial hold in the region to include surrounding villages, expanding to the mouth of the River Tiber. Throughout the 5th century (500-400 BC), Rome was in frequent military conflict with its neighbours, including the Sabines and the Aequians. In 493 BC it signed a treaty with eight Latin towns which brought about The Latin League. By the early 4th century BC, much of Etruria (north of Rome) had come under Roman control. However, disaster was to befall Rome in 390 BC when the city was attacked by the Gauls. After several months of Gallic occupation, the Gauls were bribed to leave.

During the next 130 years, Rome gradually took over control of most of the Italian peninsula.

- By the 340s, Rome controlled Campania to the south, following campaigns against the Samnites from central Italy.
- The Latin League was dissolved but Rome signed treaties with the individual cities and the possibility of Roman citizenship in the future ensured their loyalty in the years to come.
- Between 327 and 290 BC, Rome fought several hard campaigns against the Samnites, the Etruscans and the Umbrians. Victory was finally achieved in 290 which made Rome masters of central Italy.
- By 265 BC, following major battles with the southern Italian tribes, Rome gained control of Magna Graecia (greater Greece) in southern Italy. Rome now controlled Italy from the river Po in the north, to the southern tip of the peninsula.

During the course of the next three hundred years, the Roman Empire continued to expand across the whole of the Mediterranean region and beyond.

- From 264-241 BC, Rome fought and won the First Punic War against the north African state of Carthage, its rival in the western Mediterranean. By 238, Rome was in control of Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica.
- A second Punic War was fought against Carthage from 218-201 BC. Rome again emerged victorious, though it suffered major setbacks in Italy. The result was the extension of Roman control to the west into Spain.
- Between 215 and 168 BC, Rome extended his control into Greece. Macedonia was annexed as a province in 148.
- The province of Asia had been formed by 129.
- Gallia Narbonensis (southern France) was annexed as a province in 120.

By the time of Julius Caesar's death (44 BC), the Roman empire extended from Spain in the west to Syria in the east, from Numidia in north Africa to Gaul and the areas of modern day Belgium and the Netherlands, along the eastern Adriatic coastline, into Greece to the southern coast of the Black Sea.

By the time of Augustus' death (AD 14), the empire had grown to include Egypt, Judaea, the Bosphorus region in the northern part of the Black Sea, to the stretches of the river Danube and even part of north west Germany. By the time Agrippina had married Claudius in AD 49, Roman control had crossed the English Channel into Britain.

### The resources of the empire

By the first century AD, Rome had a population of up to a million. The Europe in which Agrippina would grow up was Roman, with Rome's culture, language, religion, architecture and economy the dominant force of the time. Imperial control brought Rome great responsibilities and the burden of military control. However, it also brought Rome great wealth. Trade became a crucial part of the Roman way of life. From the distant east came silk, spices, jewels and perfumes. From Britain, Gaul and Spain Rome could

**Figure 1.2: The Roman Empire in the early 2nd century AD**



import the metals lacking in Italy, such as lead, copper and tin. From its Asian provinces came pottery, glass, dyes and resin. From Africa came ivory and wild animals, from Italy itself olive oil and wine. Most importantly, Rome was able to import the all important grain supplies needed to feed its massive population. Of particular importance in this regard was Egypt.

### Exercise 1.1

Using the terms in the box below, complete the following passage.

Rome is situated on Italy's \_\_\_\_\_ coast, to the west of the \_\_\_\_\_ mountains. The river \_\_\_\_\_ runs through it and the earliest settlement began around the \_\_\_\_\_ hills, to the \_\_\_\_\_ of the river, where the island \_\_\_\_\_ made it possible to \_\_\_\_\_ the river. The region surrounding Rome is called \_\_\_\_\_ which gradually came under Roman control. By the mid-3rd century BC, Rome controlled Italy from the river \_\_\_\_\_ in the north to \_\_\_\_\_ in the south. Wars against \_\_\_\_\_ in the 3rd century gave Rome control of Sicily, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ in the west. By the mid 2nd century BC, Rome controlled \_\_\_\_\_ in the east and formed the province of \_\_\_\_\_ in 129 BC. By Agrippina's time, the empire stretched from \_\_\_\_\_ in the north west, to \_\_\_\_\_ in the south east. The empire provided Rome with vast resources including metals such as \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ from Britain, silk and \_\_\_\_\_ from the east, and crucially \_\_\_\_\_ from the province of Egypt.

Sardinia	Greece	grain	west	Latium	Britain
spices	Appenine	Tiberina	Asia	Corsica	tin
copper	Tiber	east	Po	Spain	Egypt
seven	bridge	Carthage	Magna Graecia		

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## Chapter 2:

# Overview of Roman social and political structures; principate

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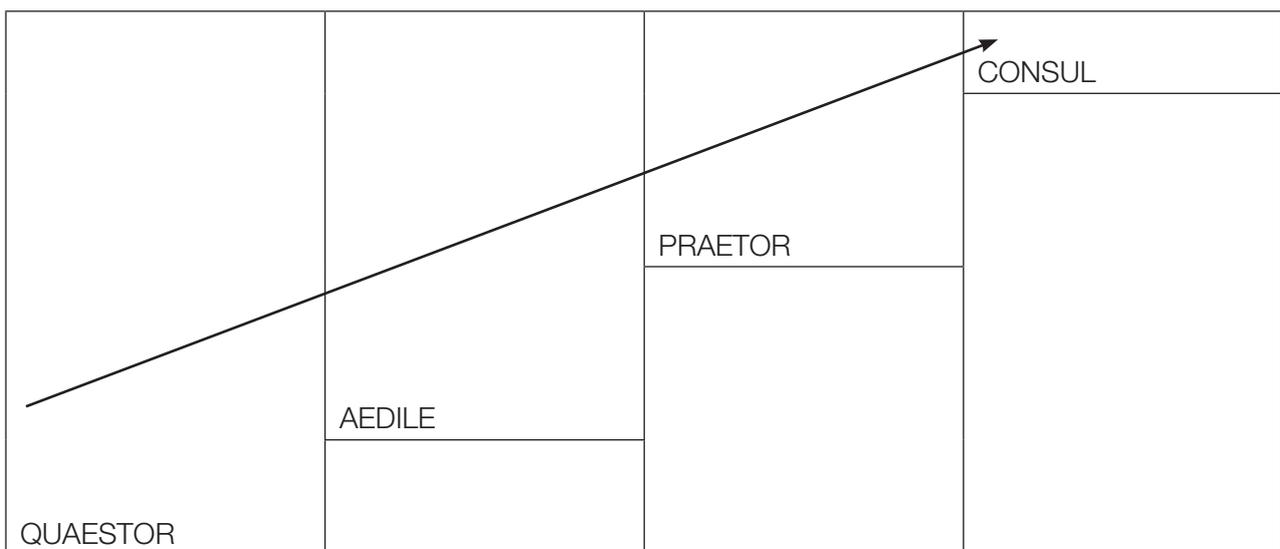
The system of government in Rome during the time of Agrippina was the principate. Today, we refer to Rome's leaders of that time as 'emperors'. Indeed this is the term which will be used most of the time in this book. However, it should be noted that this is not a term that would have been widely used at the time, certainly not during the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius. Even the term 'reign' is perhaps anachronistic. Augustus was particularly keen to avoid giving the impression that he had created a hereditary monarchy. He preferred to see himself as the "leading citizen", or "princeps" and he argued in his *Res Gestae* that he in fact exceeded others not in the power that he had, but in his "auctoritas", his "authority or prestige".

### From monarchy to republic

From its founding until 509 BC, Rome had been a monarchy and according to tradition had been ruled by seven kings, the last three of whom had been Etruscan. The last King of Rome was Lucius Tarquinius Superbus (Tarquin). The Roman people revolted during Tarquin's reign; he was overthrown and sent into exile. From that time, Rome refused to accept a monarchy, indeed the word "rex" (king) became a dangerous word in the Roman political vocabulary. It could be argued that one of the key reasons for the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC was the perception by many leading senators that the monarchy was going to be restored with Caesar as king.

Following the expulsion of Tarquin, Rome became a Republic. Instead of a king, the city now had two magistrates elected annually, called consuls. The authority which the consuls held very much mirrored that of the deposed king. In time other "magistrate" offices were created to deal with different aspects of government. These included praetors, aediles and quaestors.<sup>1</sup> It was expected that Roman men pursuing a political career would move through each office on their way to becoming a consul. This "ladder of office" was known as the "cursus honorum", as seen in Figure 2.1.

**Figure 2.1: The cursus honorum**



There were age limits on gaining office, eg a man had to be 42 years old before becoming a consul.

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<sup>1</sup> Roman political terms are explained in the glossary.

As the empire expanded, some magistrates took on posts outside of Rome after their term of office had expired. Thus, a consul might later become a proconsul of one of the empire's provinces.

The key body in the Roman Republic was the senate.

- Membership of the senate was a matter of great pride and prestige.
- Originally, the senate comprised 100 members and members came from the patrician clans.
- Membership was for life, unless a senator was proved guilty of major misconduct. Technically, the Senate was only an “advisory” body.
- However, by the second century BC, the senate had become the “de facto” (in practical reality) government of Rome.

There also existed an assembly of the people (comitia curiata) which elected consuls and voted on issues placed before it by the consuls. However, the assembly did not have the right to raise issues itself. During the four centuries of the republic, other assemblies would be formed.

Early in the life of the republic, the plebeian class in Rome forced the creation of the post of tribune. A tribune was originally an official whose job was to safeguard the lives and property of the plebeians. Ten were elected annually and they had the power to veto laws and decrees that came from the senate, or actions of the magistrates.<sup>2</sup>

## The Republic faces problems

The Romans were very proud of their republic. However, a system of government formed for ruling a city on the west coast of Italy and its surrounding area may not be the best form of government for ruling an empire as vast as the Roman Empire was to become. Indeed, from the end of the 2nd century and into the 1st century BC, major strains were appearing in Roman government.

- As the empire grew, and as large armies were needed to maintain control, the role of the general was becoming increasingly important. These generals gradually began to assert political power as well as carry out their military duties.
  - Most of the key players in the later years of the Republic – Marius, Sulla, Pompey, Crassus, Caesar – were military figures.
- Ordinary legionary soldiers began to turn to their commanders to look out for their interests.
  - This might involve pay, conditions and securing land for veteran soldiers once their period of service was over.
  - Generals with thousands of armed, loyal troops behind them were able to have a major say in political developments.
- Many of the major players in the later republic began to ignore the “cursus honorum” and demanded to be granted office long before they were eligible.
- Politics during the later republic became increasingly violent.
  - The tribune Tiberius Gracchus was murdered in 133 BC; in 121 BC Gaius Gracchus committed suicide.
  - By the 50s BC, leading political figures were recruiting bands of violent followers and political street battles became common.
  - In 49 BC full scale civil war broke out in Rome between the supporters of Julius Caesar and Pompey's senate-backed forces.

<sup>2</sup> The tribune was a popular figure in Rome. It is no accident that Augustus sought to emphasise his “Tribunician authority” rather than his military “imperium” in his ‘autobiography’ the *Res Gestae*.

## Exercise 2.1

Use the terms in the box below, to match the descriptions given on the left.

1	My position replaced that of the king and had more or less the same powers.	
2	My position was created to look out for the interests of the plebeians in Rome.	
3	I belong to Rome's most important institution which effectively was ruling by the 2nd century BC.	
4	My job was to run a province somewhere in the empire after my year of office in Rome.	
5	My post was the first on the ladder of offices that political Romans sought to climb	
6	I became a term of political abuse during the later years of the republic.	
7	I am that authority or prestige that Augustus liked to boast about.	
8	I am that term which Romans referred to a "leading citizen".	
9	I am the term that is used to describe the ladder of offices climbed by aspiring political Romans.	
10	I am that autobiographical document that Augustus wrote about his achievement when in power.	

auctoritas	consul	proconsul	Res Gestae	quaestor
princeps	rex	tribune	cursus honorum	senator

## The end of the Republic

Caesar's victory in the civil war saw the end of the republic. He became dictator for life. Though Caesar introduced many noteworthy reforms, his apparent contempt for the senate created many enemies. In 44 BC he was assassinated by a group of senatorial conspirators, led by Brutus and Cassius. However, Caesar's death did not mean the restoration of the Republic. Over the next thirteen years, civil war continued to rage across the empire.

The new figure on the political scene was Caesar's 19 year old heir, Octavian. Leading senate figures such as Cicero sought to use Octavian and his forces against Marc Antony, Caesar's former close ally. However, Octavian and Marc Antony (and Lepidus) came to an agreement called the Second Triumvirate. In a very short time, Cicero and hundreds of senate opponents were dead, Brutus and Cassius had been defeated and committed suicide.

As Lepidus was sidelined, Octavian and Antony divided the empire between them: Octavian took the west, Antony the east. Throughout the 30s BC, Antony became entangled with the Egyptian queen, Cleopatra. Octavian used Antony's infatuation with "his decadent, eastern queen" to wage a propaganda campaign against his rival. The contest for supreme control of the empire between Octavian and Antony was decided finally at the Battle of Actium in 31 BC. Octavian's victory at Actium was of enormous significance.

1. Actium marked the end of a century of civil war.
2. Octavian was in undisputed control of Rome and the empire. He was now in a position to remodel the political affairs of Rome.
3. Octavian used Actium to create a great propaganda myth. He had saved Rome not only from an Egyptian queen and her drunken Roman consort, but had convinced Romans of the need for eternal vigilance against the dangers to Roman civilisation. Octavian's military supremacy had to continue into the future. Why?

*"Because, the myth tells us, the threat was no ephemeral one, laid to rest with victory. It was permanent: Rome and the civilisation she stood for were ever in danger, for ever in need of a saviour."*<sup>3</sup>

## The creation of the principate

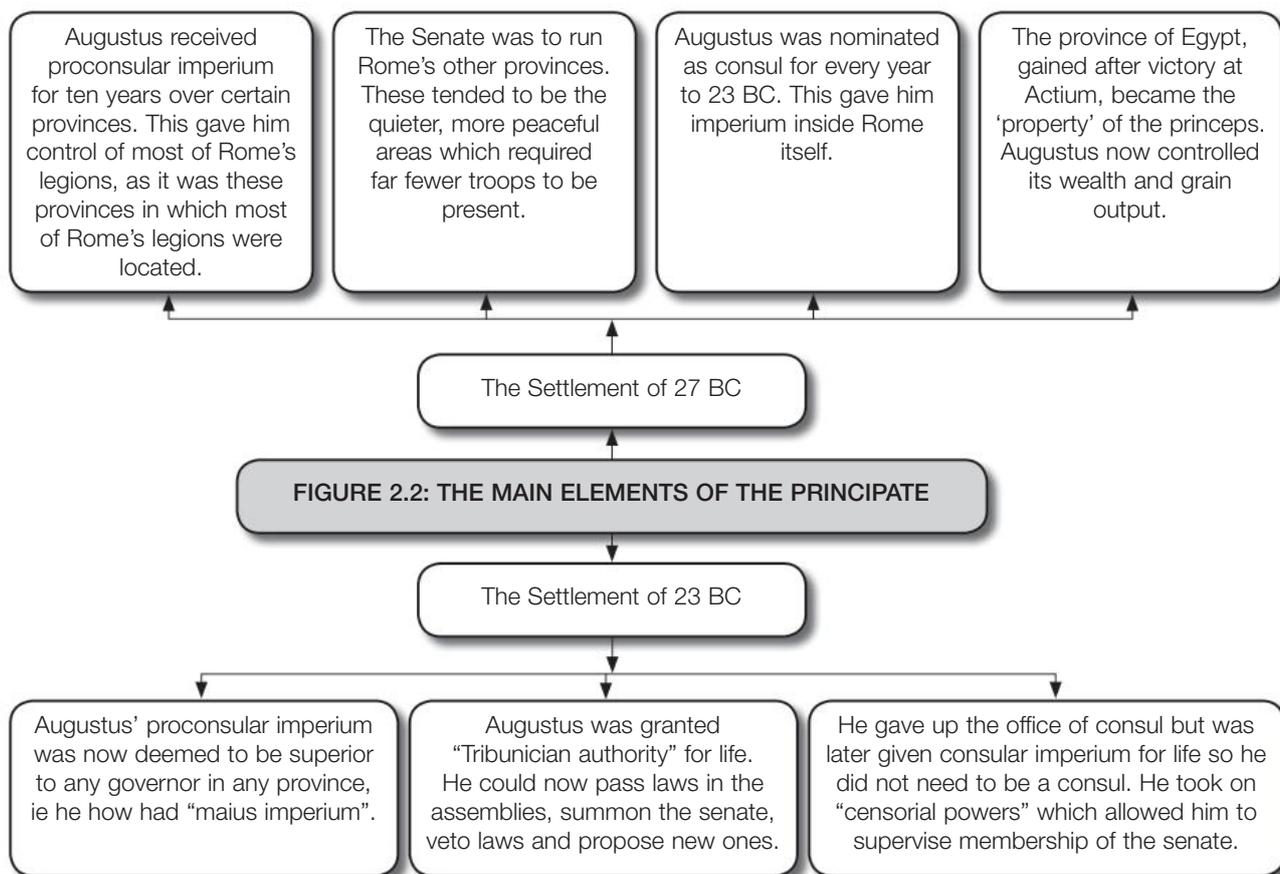
By the time Agrippina was part of the political process, the system of the principate had been in place for many years. It was a system which evolved throughout the rule of Octavian, or "Augustus" as he was known from 27 BC.<sup>4</sup> Augustus did not have a blueprint for government once he had defeated Antony. The system of the principate evolved slowly throughout his reign. However, there were constants:

- there was no way he was going to restore "real" power to the senate
- nor was he going to let go of his control of Rome's legions.

However, he also had no intention of alienating the senate as Caesar had done. Augustus wanted to be seen to be sharing power and respecting traditional republican forms. Indeed, in the *Res Gestae*, Augustus claimed:

*"...I transferred the state from my own power to the control of the Roman state and people."*<sup>5</sup>

Figure 2.2 below summarises the main elements of the principate.



<sup>3</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, A, *Augustan Rome*, Bristol Classical Press, London, 1993, p 8

<sup>4</sup> The title "Augustus" means revered one. It did not give Augustus additional powers but it did express the exalted position he held in the Roman state.

<sup>5</sup> *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, 34

Leading senatorial figures might still look back nostalgically to the true republic, but most of Rome's people were happy to see peace at last restored and were happy to have Augustus at the helm. By the time of Augustus' death in AD 14, nobody in Rome had any illusions about how the empire was being run. Augustus was in charge, and though his rule might at times seem benign, there was no room for opposition. Augustus was also able to nominate his "successor" by the granting of proconsular imperium and Tribunician authority. This would be his adopted son, Tiberius.<sup>6</sup>

By the time Agrippina was in her thirties (mid AD 40s), the principate had become a hereditary monarchy and family connections had become all important. Augustus had wanted power to pass to his daughter's sons, Gaius and Lucius, whom he had adopted. Their untimely deaths in AD 2 and 4 precluded this. Tiberius would have wanted to pass control to his son Drusus but he died early in Tiberius' reign. Tiberius' brother's grandson, Gaius succeeded him. Claudius succeeded Gaius in 41, partly because he had Praetorian Guard support, but also because he was "family", ie Gaius' uncle.

Agrippina's prime goal in life was to have her son, Nero, succeed Claudius as "princeps". Family connections were of major significance.

- Nero's mother was Agrippina, whose mother was Agrippina the Elder, whose mother was Julia, whose father was "Augustus".
- Nero's mother was Agrippina, whose father was Germanicus, whose father was Drusus, whose mother was "Livia", who was the wife of "Augustus".

## Exercise 2.2

Place the following events listed below into the correct chronological order.

1st event	
2nd event	
3rd event	
4th event	
5th event	
6th event	
7th event	
8th event	
9th event	
10th event	

Murder of Tiberius Gracchus	Expulsion of King Tarquin
Battle of Actium	Augustus granted tribunician authority for life
Creation of the post of tribune	Octavian takes on the title of Augustus
Creation of the 2nd Triumvirate	Creation of the post of consul
Assassination of Caesar	By now the senate the key political body in Rome

<sup>6</sup> Augustus was never fond of Tiberius, and though he respected his ability as a commander, Tiberius was not his first choice as successor.



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## Chapter 3:

# Role of imperial women in Roman society

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### Imperial women and dynastic politics

The women of the imperial family played a key role in the early years of the principate. Women were not allowed political power. Rome had always been a strictly patriarchal society and it was inconceivable that a woman might become a consul or sit in the senate. However, **this did not mean that imperial women had no influence.** Cultivating male allies, showing favour to some and not others, using one's wealth to develop a clientele, were some of the means by which a woman could influence political events. Some women were willing to use their bodies for the same purpose. <sup>1</sup>

Imperial women played a key role in **determining the succession.** Having a son gave an imperial woman a great responsibility but also a great opportunity for wielding power and influence. Manoeuvring one's son into power became the prime preoccupation of many imperial women.

- Augustus' wife, Livia, worked hard to ensure the succession of her son, Tiberius.
- Julia, daughter of Augustus, sought power for her sons, Gaius and Lucius with far less success. They died as young men.
- Agrippina the Elder had hopes for her sons, Nero and Drusus, only to see their futures destroyed by Sejanus (see chapter 6).
- Messalina was largely motivated by her desire for her son, Britannicus, to succeed Claudius.
- And of course, Agrippina single-mindedly endeavoured to ensure the succession of her son, Nero (see chapter 7).

Having a son could also be a **cause of great danger** for imperial women. Julia's demise could well have been the result of Livia's actions seeking to gain precedence for Tiberius over Julia's sons. Sejanus' pursuit of power during the reign of Tiberius could only be achieved with the destruction of Agrippina the Elder and her family. Agrippina the Younger lived with the ever present danger of an attack from Messalina as she sought to ensure Britannicus' chances of the succession above those of Nero.

Women were of use to Roman men because they provided a **means of establishing political alliances.** The use of female relatives by men to attract political allies was nothing new in the ancient world. Such marriages of convenience sometimes developed into genuine affection, eg the marriage of Pompey and Caesar's daughter, Julia. However, it was politics that mattered in the creation or destruction of a marriage.

*"Betrothals were broken or divorces were dictated when alliances between men became animosities. Pompey divorced his first wife to marry Sulla's stepdaughter Aemilia."* <sup>2</sup>

During his early political career, Augustus (Octavian) was quite willing to use marriage in an equally sanguine manner.

*"Octavian broke his engagement to Servilia when he became engaged to Marc Antony's stepdaughter Clodia. But he broke this engagement as well in order to marry Scribonia, who was related to his one time opponent Sextus Pompey..."* <sup>3</sup>

Marriage was often used for purely political/ dynastic purposes.

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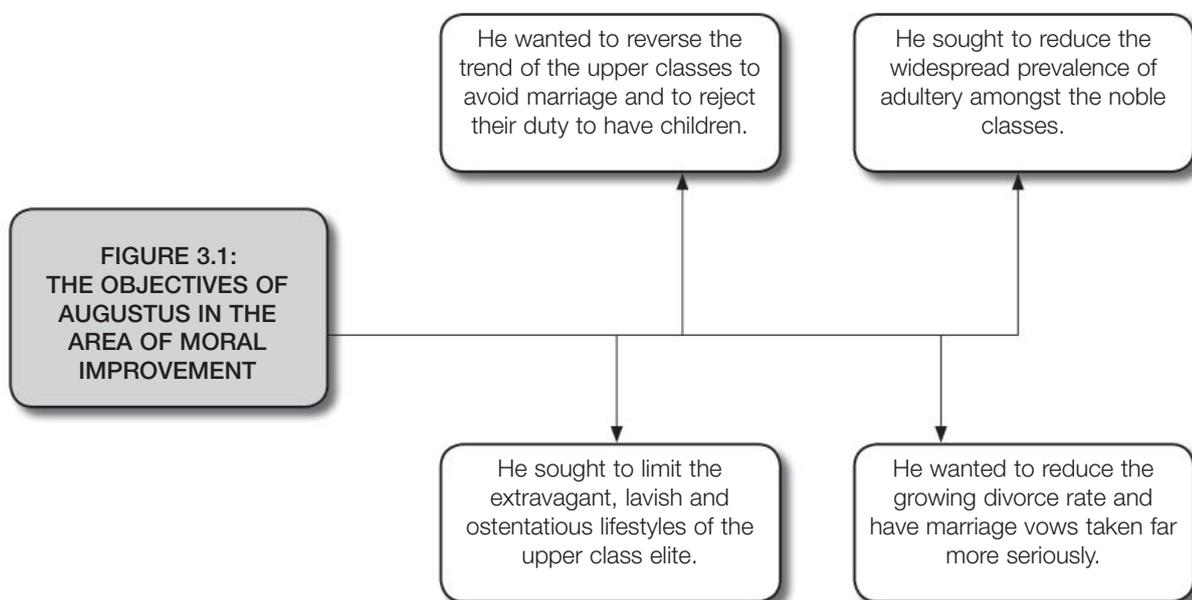
<sup>1</sup> Tacitus and Suetonius go to great lengths to illustrate this when describing the activities of Claudius' third and fourth wives, Messalina and Agrippina (see chapters 7-10).

<sup>2</sup> Pomeroy, SB, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves*, Pimlico, London, 1975, p 156

<sup>3</sup> Pomeroy, p 156

- Augustus used his sister, Octavia, to cement a political alliance with Marc Antony by having them marry.
- Augustus' loyal, right hand man, Agrippa was forced to divorce his wife to marry Julia, daughter of Augustus, following the death of her husband, Marcellus.
- Following Agrippa's death, Tiberius was forced to divorce his wife, Vipsania (with whom he was deeply in love), to marry Julia (whom he soon grew to hate).
- Augustus' granddaughter, Agrippina the Elder, was married to Livia's grandson, Germanicus.
- The ultimate in dynastic marriages was that between Claudius and Agrippina (uncle and niece).
- Agrippina's son, Nero, married Claudius' daughter, Octavia. As Nero had been adopted by Claudius, this union might have been 'technically' incestuous. To overcome this problem, Octavia was "adopted out" to another family.

One of the major aims of Augustus had been to reverse what he perceived to be the **steadily declining standards of morality** amongst the female nobility. He believed that one of the reasons for the breakdown of the republic had been moral decline. Figure 3.1 summarises Augustus' objectives in the area of moral improvement.



**Augustus certainly had cause for concern.** Laws were passed to prevent men having affairs with women deemed "respectable". Thus, they could have sex with tavern girls, prostitutes, actresses or slaves, but not other noble women. This led some senators' wives to register as a "prostitute or actress". Having so registered, a nobleman could now have sex with them and not be deemed to be breaking the law.

Several moral laws were passed by Augustus to encourage marriage, fidelity and the birth of children but proved to be largely unsuccessful. **Augustus' own hypocrisy** probably did not help matters. He had divorced his wife Scribonia, and then forced Tiberius Claudius Nero to divorce his wife (Livia) so he could marry her. The fact that Livia was pregnant with her second child at the time seemed to be no impediment. Augustus only ever had one child, and despite fifty years of marriage, never had a child with Livia. Some of Augustus' greatest propagandists, like Horace and Virgil, were also unmarried.

Augustus established the minimum age of marriage for girls at 12, and for boys 14, though males generally married later than this. Pomeroy notes that there was a major gender imbalance amongst the upper classes of early imperial Rome – there were far more males around than women.<sup>4</sup> This

<sup>4</sup> See Pomeroy, pp 164-5

was due to several factors such as selective infanticide, exposure of females, preferential treatment given to boys and the prevalence of death in childbirth, particularly for young wives.

## The role of the imperial woman

Apart from their child-bearing and marital uses, imperial women were meant to project certain values.

- They were expected to behave modestly and to display great dignity.
- The ideal woman placed the interests of her husband and children above all else.
- The Roman matron was the ideal, a woman like Antonia (wife of Drusus, son of Livia) who, though her husband died young, chose to dedicate herself to her children from then on and not seek lovers or husbands.
- Imperial women were meant to be educated and be able to educate their daughters, not only in traditional female skills such as weaving and spinning but also in the basics of literacy.

Though the expectations were high, imperial women were probably freer in many ways than women in comparable societies. Some owned businesses, were able to inherit and hand on property without having to seek male permission. Many were able to become legally independent, a condition known as *sui iuris*.

### Exercise 3.1

Read each of the following statements. Indicate true or false for each statement.

1	It was impossible for a woman in imperial Rome to formally hold a position such as consul.	TRUE/ FALSE
2	Imperial women had great freedom when deciding whom they might or might not marry.	TRUE/ FALSE
3	Imperial women were rarely used in the creation or destruction of political alliances.	TRUE/ FALSE
4	Augustus believed that moral standards amongst the upper classes were on the decline.	TRUE/ FALSE
5	During Augustus' time, rates of marriage and child birth were declining.	TRUE/ FALSE
6	Some senators' wives registered as prostitutes so that they could have affairs with noble men and so not be breaking the law.	TRUE/ FALSE
7	Augustus set a good example to upper class Romans in matters of marriage and having children.	TRUE/ FALSE
8	During the early empire, there existed a gender imbalance, with far more women around than men.	TRUE/ FALSE
9	It was not considered particularly important for noble women to be educated.	TRUE/ FALSE
10	Many imperial women were able to experience a significant degree of personal and legal freedom.	TRUE/ FALSE



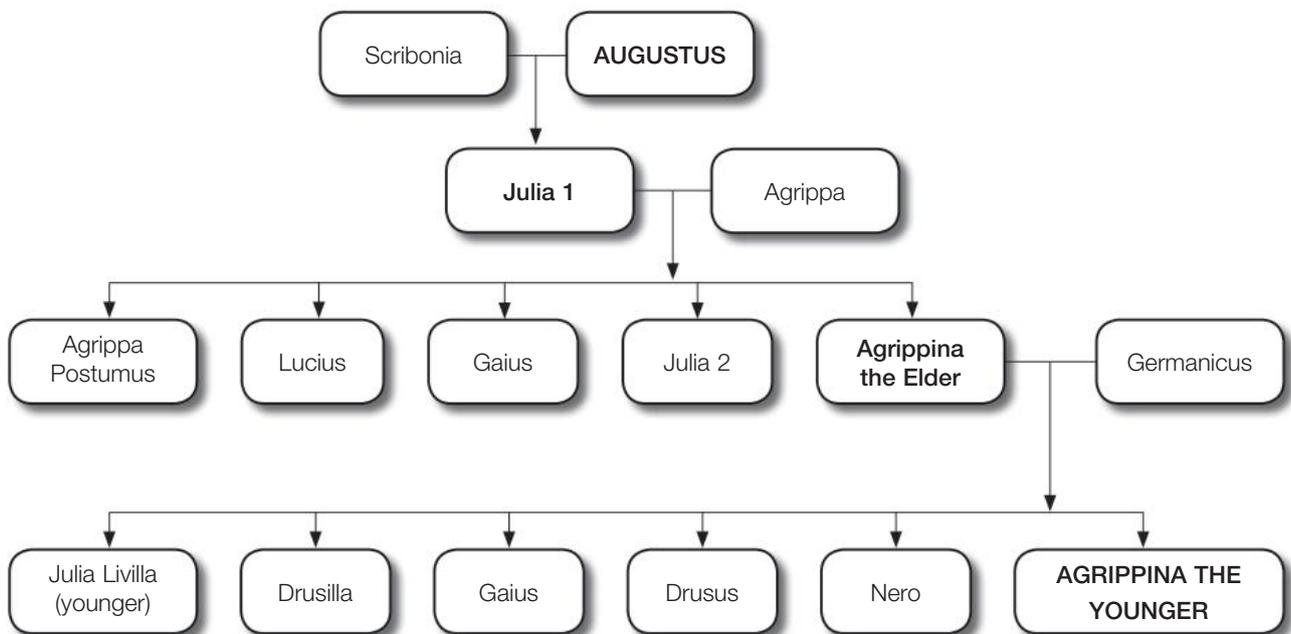
## Chapter 4: Family background and status

There was arguably no woman in Rome who could lay claim to such intimate links to the imperial family as Agrippina the Younger.<sup>1</sup> She was the great granddaughter of the Emperor Augustus, her father was the beloved Germanicus, her brother would become the Emperor Gaius (Caligula), her uncle (and later husband) would become the Emperor Claudius and her son would become the Emperor Nero.

Agrippina was well aware of the value of her family bloodline. She was a Julian, with a direct link to Augustus and would later have few qualms emphasising her dynastic connections.

*“Agrippina, great-granddaughter of the revered Augustus, would make much of her Julian descent, a descent that came through the bloodline and was not conferred merely through adoption.”<sup>2</sup>*

Figure 4.1 below illustrates her Julian lineage.

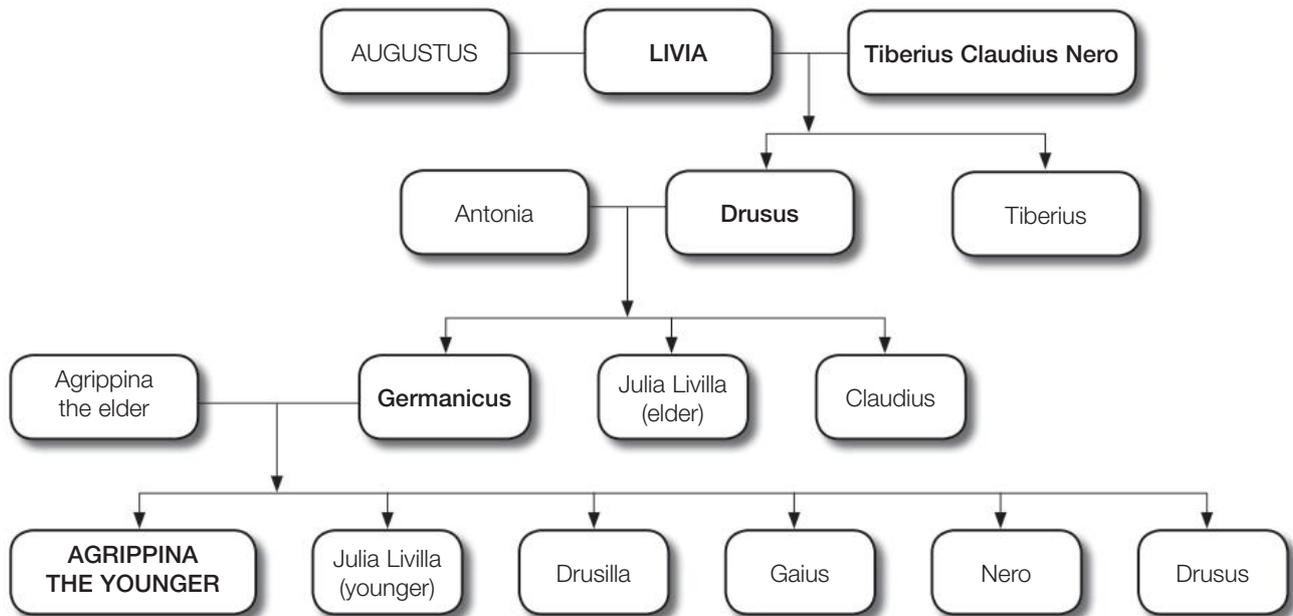


However, Agrippina did not only have Julian blood; she also had Claudian blood. The emperors of the early Roman Empire were known as the “Julio-Claudians”, ie they came from two of Rome’s greatest families: the Julians and the Claudians. Augustus was a Julian whereas his successor, his adopted son, Tiberius, was a Claudian. Agrippina’s link to the Claudian family came from her great grandmother, Livia. Livia was the third wife of the Emperor Augustus. She had previously been married to Tiberius Claudius Nero but had divorced him to marry Augustus. She already had a son, Tiberius, and was pregnant with a second child when she married Augustus. Shortly after her marriage to Augustus, she gave birth to her second son, Drusus.

<sup>1</sup> To avoid confusion between mother and daughter, Agrippina the Younger will be referred to as “Agrippina”; her mother will be referred to as “Agrippina the Elder”.

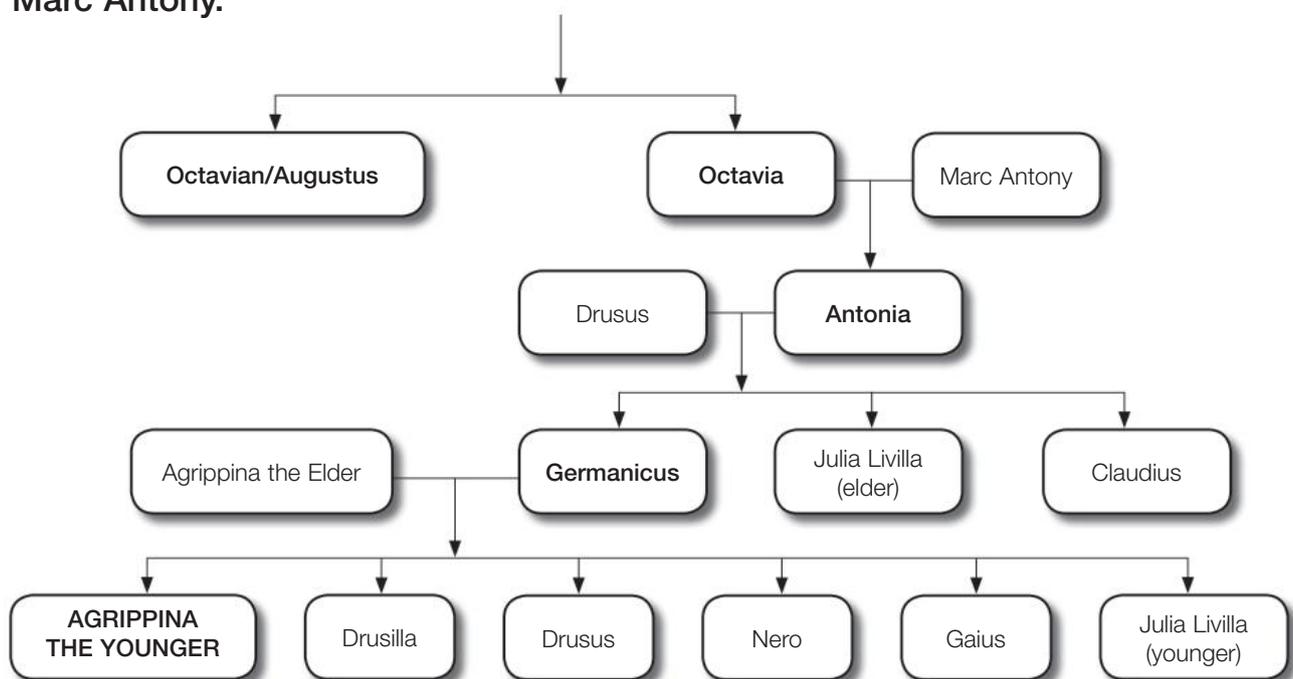
<sup>2</sup> Barrett, A, *Agrippina*, B T Batsford, London, 1996, p 13

Figure 4.2 below illustrates Agrippina's Claudian lineage.



In fact, Agrippina's links to the Julian family had a second strand. Her grandfather was Drusus, son of Livia. Drusus' wife, Agrippina's grandmother, was Antonia. Antonia was the daughter of Octavia who was the sister of the emperor Augustus.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 4.3 illustrates Agrippina's second link to the Julian family and the link to Marc Antony.



<sup>3</sup> This means that Agrippina was also a direct descendent of another giant of Roman history, Marc Antony. Antony had married Octavia in 39 BC as part of a political deal with his rival Octavian, the future Augustus. Agrippina was thus the great granddaughter of Marc Antony.

## Exercise 4.1

How well have you taken in Agrippina's background?

1	Who was the father of Agrippina?	
2	Name Agrippina's three brothers.	
3	Through which members of her family could Agrippina trace her lineage back to Augustus?	
4	Name Agrippina's two illustrious great grandmothers?	
5	To which two leading Roman families could Agrippina claim descent?	
6	Who was the mother of Agrippina?	
7	Who was Agrippina's uncle who would eventually become emperor?	
8	Through which members of her family could Agrippina trace her lineage back to Livia?	
9	Which of Agrippina's brothers would go on to become emperor?	
10	How was Agrippina related to Marc Antony?	

## Germanicus: 15 BC – AD 19

Agrippina inherited enormous status from her well-connected parents. Her father, Germanicus, was born in 15 BC to Drusus and Antonia.

- In his 20s, he fought in the regions along the Danube and in Germany, sometimes alongside the future emperor Tiberius.
- Augustus had earlier forced Tiberius to adopt Germanicus.
- In AD 12 he became consul.
- In the following year, Augustus appointed him Governor of Upper and Lower Germany, areas to the west of the river Rhine.

When Tiberius succeeded Augustus (AD 14), there were mutinies in Germany. The mutineers urged Germanicus to displace Tiberius but he loyally refused and endeavoured to restore order in the region. Suetonius says that Germanicus showed:

*"...a remarkable example of filial respect and determination by diverting their attention from this project; he took the offensive in Germany, and won a triumph."*<sup>4</sup>

Germanicus did not handle the situation in Germany well and at one stage threats were made against the lives of his wife and son, Gaius, who were with him at the time. Order was finally restored when he diverted the men towards a brief military action. However, even Tacitus, whose dislike of Tiberius and fondness for the emperor's enemies were great, cannot hide Germanicus'

<sup>4</sup> Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars, Gaius*, 1

poor handling of the situation. The mutiny was ended finally with the men handing out their own form of brutish justice against the ringleaders of the revolt. Tacitus says of the affair:

*“The soldiers revelled in the massacre as though it purged them of their offences. And Germanicus, though the orders had not been his, did not intervene. For the disgust caused by this savagery would be directed against its perpetrators, and not against him.”*<sup>5</sup>

Despite Germanicus’ seemingly poor performance in Germany, he continued to be enormously popular in Rome. When describing Germanicus, Suetonius paints a picture of a veritable ‘true Renaissance man’.<sup>6</sup> He lists Germanicus’ accomplishments as including Greek and Latin oratory, courage in battle which included frequent hand-to-hand combat, the writing of Greek comedies and a willingness to lead the search party for the bones of those soldiers who had fallen during the Varian disaster.<sup>7</sup> Suetonius describes Germanicus in the following way:

*“...Germanicus is everywhere described as having been of outstanding physical and moral excellence. He was handsome, courageous...(and had a) capacity for winning respect and inspiring affection.”*<sup>8</sup>

Anthony Barrett is less charitable to Germanicus.<sup>9</sup>

- He suggests that Germanicus did indeed have ‘charisma’ but then goes on to suggest that charisma is something leaders have when their image far outweighs the substance of their achievements.
- Barrett may well be right but as far as the Roman people were concerned, Germanicus could do no wrong.
- The love and adulation which were heaped upon Germanicus were in turn heaped upon his children, and this of course included Agrippina.
- After his ‘success’ in Germany, Germanicus was given a lavish triumph. For most Romans, the sight of Germanicus at this time in the procession that made its way to the Capitol, with its enormous number spoils and captives, would be their last.

And there in the chariot with Germanicus was the eighteen month old Agrippina.

### Agrippina the Elder: 14 BC – AD 33

- Agrippina (the Younger) also gained much status from her mother Agrippina the Elder.
- Agrippina the Elder was born in 14 BC, the son of Julia, daughter of Augustus, and Agrippa, Augustus’ most trusted and loyal advisor.
- Julia had previously been married to Marcellus but he had died in 23 BC. Her father forced her to marry the much older Agrippa; it turned out to be a productive marriage. Together, Julia and Agrippa had five children: Gaius, Lucius, Agrippa Postumus, Julia 2 and Agrippina the Elder.
- Agrippina the Elder’s siblings were not blessed with good fortune:
  - Lucius and Gaius died AD 2 and 4 respectively.
  - Agrippa Postumus was soon to be imprisoned and would be killed shortly after the death of Augustus in AD 14.
  - Julia was sent to an island exile for “immorality”, as had her mother before her.

Thus, the Julian bloodline was to rely upon Agrippina the Elder. In AD 5, she married Germanicus, son of Drusus. (Drusus was the brother of the future emperor Tiberius and son of Livia). Agrippina

<sup>5</sup> Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, I.44

<sup>6</sup> A man who has talent in a wide variety of areas: military prowess, the arts, political acumen etc.

<sup>7</sup> In AD 9, three Roman legions, led by Varus, had been destroyed by German tribes in the Teutoburg Forest. It became a matter of Roman honour to locate their remains.

<sup>8</sup> Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, Gaius, 3

<sup>9</sup> Barrett, pp 22-3

the Elder proved to be as fertile as her mother. She gave birth to nine children, six of whom survived beyond childhood. The emperor Augustus had made much of the need for fertility in the upper classes and towards the end of his life, he enjoyed having Agrippina the Elder's two older sons, Drusus and Nero, with him in the imperial box at public games.

Tacitus suggests that Germanicus' father, Drusus, had been popular because he had plans of bringing back the Republic. This would have been enough to create the dislike for Germanicus shared by his uncle (Tiberius) and his grandmother (Livia). Dislike for Germanicus passed on to Agrippina the Elder. Tacitus states:

*"...The Augusta (Livia) had a stepmother's aversion to Agrippina (the elder). Agrippina herself was determined and rather excitable. But she turned this to good account by her devoted faithfulness to her husband."*<sup>10</sup>

Agrippina the Elder was with Germanicus at the time of the mutiny following the death of Augustus in AD 14. As mentioned earlier, Germanicus feared for the safety of his pregnant wife and their small son, Gaius. He organised to move them to the safety of a Gallic tribe, the Treveri. Ashamed that they had forced Agrippina the Elder and Gaius to flee, the mutineers begged Germanicus to bring them back. Gaius was brought back but Germanicus asked that Agrippina the Elder be excused on account of her advanced pregnancy.

The following year, Agrippina the Elder played a key role in making possible the safe return of legionary forces that had been fighting Germanic tribes.

- Germanicus had been in pursuit of the German chieftain, Arminius, the man who had been largely responsible for the Varian disaster in AD 9.
- Word spread that Germanicus had been defeated and that barbaric German tribes now threatened to cross the river Rhine into Gaul.
- Agrippina the Elder assumed the role of a commander, assisting soldiers who had lost equipment and needed dressings for their wounds.
- Of even greater significance was her action in preventing the destruction of the Vetera Bridge over the Rhine.
  - Fearing the arrival of hordes of barbaric tribesmen, panicked troops wanted to destroy the bridge.
  - This would have left large numbers of Roman troops stranded on the eastern side at the mercy of Arminius.
  - Her stand on the bridge prevented its destruction and almost certainly saved Germanicus and his troops.

Tacitus is glowing in his praise for her actions:

*"...In those days this great-hearted woman acted as commander. She herself dispensed clothes to needy soldiers, and dressed the wounded. Pliny the Elder... writes that she stood at the bridge-head to thank and congratulate the returning column."*<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Tacitus, I.33

<sup>11</sup> Tacitus, I.68

**Exercise 4.2**

Read each of the following statements. Indicate whether each is fact or an opinion.

1	Germanicus was a fine Roman who showed loyalty to his emperor and inspired his men.	FACT/ OPINION
2	Germanicus was extremely popular amongst the people of Rome.	FACT/ OPINION
3	Germanicus deserved the popularity that he experienced amongst the people of Rome.	FACT/ OPINION
4	The historian Anthony Barrett seems to have a lower opinion of the talents of Germanicus than Suetonius.	FACT/ OPINION
5	The affection felt for Germanicus and Agrippina the Elder by the Roman people flowed through to his children.	FACT/ OPINION
6	Agrippina the Elder was an important figure because of her 'pure' Julian bloodline.	FACT/ OPINION
7	Livia and Tiberius hated Agrippina the Elder and sought her destruction from the beginning of Tiberius' reign.	FACT/ OPINION
8	Agrippina sensibly accompanied her husband while he was commander of the legions in Germany.	FACT/ OPINION
9	Agrippina took action to prevent the destruction of the Vetera Bridge.	FACT/ OPINION
10	Tacitus had a high opinion of the actions of Agrippina the Elder.	FACT/ OPINION

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# Chapter 5:

## Early life, ambitions and marriages

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### Birth of Agrippina the Younger

Agrippina was born on 6 November, AD 15 in the Rhine settlement of Ara Ubiorum. This is the generally accepted version of her birth, though the sources are not all in agreement. Tacitus clearly states this<sup>1</sup> and goes on to say that Agrippina later established a veterans colony there named after her. The modern day location is Cologne. Suetonius suggests that both Agrippina and her sister, Drusilla, were born in Germany.<sup>2</sup> Part of the confusion regarding the birth of Agrippina the Elder's children is the fact that she had so many children, several of whom did not survive. However, Barrett suggests that it is unlikely that both Tacitus and Suetonius would be in error regarding the birth of a woman who was to be so significant in the years to come.

The early months of Agrippina's life would have been spent in Germany and she first came to Rome in about AD 16 to live in her parents' home on the Palatine Hill. It cannot be known for certain how Germanicus felt about being recalled from Germany. However, in May AD 17 he was granted a lavish triumph for his "successes" in the German campaigns. Germanicus had managed to create a bond with his legions and the Roman public clearly viewed him as a hero. Barrett suggests that:

*"The triumph of Germanicus would be the last vivid memory Romans would have of him, and it was a memory that his daughter would exploit to the full."*<sup>3</sup>

### The death of Germanicus

In AD 17, Germanicus was sent by Tiberius to the eastern reaches of the empire to take on some delicate negotiations with the Parthians over the status of Armenia. Germanicus took his wife and his son, Gaius, on this mission but Agrippina remained in Rome. It is likely that she was placed under the care of her uncle, Germanicus' brother, Claudius.

Germanicus would not live to see Rome again. Having dealt with the tricky diplomatic situation in the east, Germanicus made his way to Syria and from there began his return to Rome. However, he fell ill and died in AD 19, aged 33.

- Germanicus was convinced that he had been poisoned. Before he died he stated that Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso, the new legate of Syria, and his wife, Plancina, had conspired to murder to him.
- Apparently there was "evidence" of spells, curses and witchcraft in Germanicus' house.
- He asked his followers to bring Piso and Plancina to justice but gave his wife, Agrippina the Elder a warning, begging her:

*"...to forget her pride, submit to cruel fortune, and back in Rome, to avoid provoking those stronger than herself by competing for their power. That was his public utterance. Privately he said more – warning her of danger (so it was said) from Tiberius."*<sup>4</sup>

Tacitus makes it clear that Germanicus' death was probably not the result of a sickness picked up in the east. He suggests that Piso had been sent to the east to frustrate Germanicus' progress, or even more. He also states that Livia had wanted Plancina to keep an eye on Agrippina the Elder. Of course it is possible that Piso's instructions from Tiberius were merely to keep an eye on Germanicus and that his assignment was a "relatively innocent one of exercising a steady influence over his young colleague."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, XII.27.1

<sup>2</sup> Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars, Gaius*, 8.4

<sup>3</sup> Barrett, A, *Agrippina*, B T Batsford, London, 1996, p 29

<sup>4</sup> Tacitus, XII, 72

<sup>5</sup> Barrett, p 30

In such circumstances, the truth is of course irrelevant; it is what people believe to be the truth that counts. In Rome there was widespread grief. Tiberius' behaviour at the time did nothing to endear him to the Roman people or to quell suspicions of possible murder. Neither he nor Livia attended the ceremonies celebrating Germanicus' life and death. The hysteria surrounding Germanicus took a while to die down. Tiberius eventually bowed to pressure and he had Piso and Plancina brought to trial.

- Piso was accused of poisoning Germanicus and of sedition; he took his own life.
- Plancina was accused of carrying out various rites and sacrifices. Plancina too eventually committed suicide.

It took some time for Germanicus' body to reach Rome. Agrippina the Elder stayed for a while in Corcyra, on the west coast of Greece, probably to ensure that news of her imminent arrival would reach Italy. Late in AD 19 the funeral cortege reached Brundisium. The progress north towards Rome of Agrippina the Elder was slow and deliberate and was accompanied by an almost hysterical outpouring of grief. In modern times the scenes that followed the death of Princess Diana in 1997 provide a possible comparison.

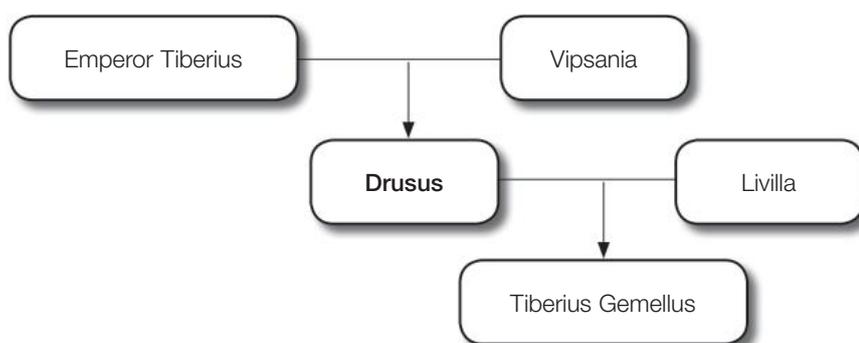
- When the procession reached Tarracina, 95 kms from Rome, it was joined by Claudius and the four year old Agrippina.
- Barrett suggests that this reunion of mother and daughter would have become a potent and vivid childhood memory for Agrippina.<sup>6</sup>

### Sejanus and the death of Drusus, son of Tiberius

During the following decade the family of Germanicus and Agrippina the Elder would be driven to destruction. At first, their elder sons, Nero and Drusus, were being steadily promoted and prepared for high office. Tiberius complained to the Senate that this process was occurring too quickly.

However, Agrippina the Elder now had to contend not only with an aging, distrustful and suspicious Tiberius, but also the ambitious and ruthless Sejanus, prefect of the Praetorian Guard. The sources, Tacitus in particular, have a problem in dealing with this period. Agrippina the Elder was probably not a pleasant person – arrogant, obsessed with power and strongly convinced that her lineage made her someone special. However, Tacitus avoids openly condemning her and prefers to aim his attacks on the dolorous Tiberius and the evil Sejanus. The not too pleasant Agrippina the Elder was, after all, on 'the side of right'.

Sejanus encouraged Tiberius to believe that the Roman state had become divided and Tacitus introduces the phrase "partes Agrippinae" – the party of Agrippina. Whether or not there was a distinctly organised political grouping around Agrippina the Elder can never be known for certain. However, what is known is that Sejanus set out to systematically destroy Agrippina the Elder and promote his own claims to power. Did Sejanus really see himself as a future princeps? Or would he seek only a regent's role? We can never be sure. However, if he was to achieve his aims he had to remove his key rivals: Drusus, the son of Tiberius, and Agrippina the Elder.



<sup>6</sup> See Barrett pp 30-1 for a detailed description of the trip from Syria to Rome.

Sejanus became the lover of Drusus' wife, Livilla and it was later believed that they had plotted together, with the eunuch, Lygdus, to slowly poison Drusus.

- In 23, Tiberius' son, Drusus, died under suspicious circumstances, though Tacitus is quick to declare Tiberius innocent of any conspiracy.
- The death of Drusus now meant that a Claudian succession relied upon Drusus' son, Gemellus.
- Drusus' death also helped clear the way for the succession to fall to Agrippina the Elder's sons, Nero and Drusus, now aged 17 and 16.

Agrippina the Elder's pursuit of her sons' claims for the succession could easily be used by Sejanus to arouse the suspicions of Tiberius and Livia, who both hoped for the eventual succession of Drusus' son, Gemellus.

### Exercise 5.1

Test your knowledge so far.

1	Where and when was Agrippina the Younger born?	
2	How was Germanicus' triumph received in Rome?	
3	Why was Germanicus sent to the east?	
4	What possible reasons could be put forward for Tiberius sending Piso to the east?	
5	What scenes accompanied the passage of Germanicus' body as it passed through Italy?	
6	Where did Agrippina the Elder's hopes for the future succession lie?	
7	Who was Sejanus?	
8	Who was Drusus?	
9	What allegedly happened to Drusus?	
10	How did Sejanus hope to use Gemellus in his campaign to destroy Agrippina the Elder?	

## The destruction of the family of Agrippina the Elder

Between AD 24-29, Sejanus systematically worked at destroying Agrippina the Elder. The young Agrippina could not have been unaware of events. She would have been a teenager when her mother and brother were placed on trial.

Sejanus' attacks were aimed at first against Agrippina the Elder's friends.

- In AD 24, C Silius and his wife Sosia Galla were put on trial. Tacitus suggests that the attack on Silius was because he was a leader of the "Partes Agrippinae". His wife had long been a friend of Agrippina the Elder from their days in Germany.
  - Silius was accused of delaying the suppression of the Sacrovir rebellion in Germany AD 21.
  - Silius committed suicide before the verdict.
  - Sosia was exiled.

*"The chain of events leading to Agrippina's (the elder) destruction was initiated by the trial of her cousin Claudia Pulchra."* <sup>7</sup>

- In AD 26, Claudia Pulchra was put on trial.
  - Claudia was a second cousin of Agrippina the Elder and granddaughter of Octavia. She had been married to P Quinctilius Varus (the commander who had been responsible for the disaster in Germany in AD 9 when three legions were destroyed).
  - Claudia was accused of involvement in magic and attempting to poison Tiberius.
  - We do not know Claudia's sentence but banishment seems likely.
  - Her son was also later put on trial but Tiberius' absence (he was now at Capri) meant that this case lapsed.

Agrippina the Elder was furious at the attack on her friend and relation. Apparently she burst in on Tiberius to remonstrate about the affair when he was making a sacrifice to the deified Augustus. Greatly angered, Tiberius grabbed her and is said to have uttered the line: *"My girl, do you think you are badly done by if you do not rule?"* <sup>8</sup>

However, shortly after this Tacitus reports that Agrippina the Elder met Tiberius and sought his permission for her to remarry. Tiberius was put in a difficult position by this request as such a marriage could have major political repercussions but so too could refusing her request. He postponed the decision till later. However, Barrett suggests that Tiberius' attitude was based on personal reasons. The object of Agrippina the Elder's interest seems to have been Asinius Gallus. Tiberius had no love of Gallus. It was Gallus who had married his beloved Vipsania after Augustus had ordered Tiberius to marry Julia. (Tiberius had been very much in love with Vipsania while his later marriage to Julia was miserable). It was Gallus who had embarrassed Tiberius at the time of his accession by asking him "how much power he would like" after Tiberius had disingenuously said that the job of princeps was too much.

Asinius Gallus did not last long.

- In AD 30 he was denounced by Tiberius. The charge was most likely a variation on 'improper relations with Agrippina the Elder'.
- He did not get a trial and was placed in solitary imprisonment.
- He died in 33 of starvation, self-inflicted or forced.

Tiberius' departure for Capri in AD 26 made things easier for Sejanus to move against Agrippina the Elder and her family. He played upon the jealousy that Drusus felt for his elder brother Nero, who

<sup>7</sup> Tacitus, IV.51

<sup>8</sup> Bauman, R, *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome*, Routledge, London, 1992, p 148

apparently was his mother's favourite. He then launched an attack against Titius Sabinus, a friend of Agrippina the Elder.

- Sejanus used one L Latiaris to befriend Sabinus and encourage him to express his anti-Tiberius sentiments.
- These comments were dutifully copied down by men hidden in the roof of Latiaris' house.
- The details were sent to Tiberius. Sabinus was arrested, condemned and then executed on 1 January, AD 28.

Sejanus now turned his attack against Agrippina and Nero. Throughout 27, proceedings were begun against each. Agrippina the Elder was accused of "insubordination" while Nero was accused of "homosexuality". The main trial did not come until AD 29. Neither Tiberius nor Sejanus would condemn Agrippina the Elder while Livia was still alive. Tacitus suggests that it was when Livia died (29) that Tiberius' reign turned into a cruel despotism.<sup>9</sup> (Suetonius, however, refers to Agrippina the Elder's son, Gaius, being put in the care of Livia "after" his mother's banishment).

A letter now arrived in Rome from Tiberius denouncing both Agrippina and Nero.

It is difficult to be certain about the course of events to befall Agrippina the Elder and her son.

*"The events that led to her downfall, which happened alongside that of her son Nero, are extremely difficult to disentangle, and contradictory versions have come down in the sources."*<sup>10</sup>

However, it is clear that even the later fall from power of Sejanus did not make life any easier for Agrippina the Elder and her family.

Nero was tried, declared a public enemy and exiled to the island of Pontia. He committed suicide in 31.

Agrippina the Elder was sent to Pandateria. Apparently she proved to be a difficult prisoner and following an altercation with a guard, she was badly beaten and lost an eye. Agrippina the Elder eventually starved herself to death. She died in October 33.

Agrippina the Elder's younger son, Drusus was imprisoned and declared a "hostis" (enemy of the state). He died of starvation sometime before his mother. Tacitus spares few details in relating Drusus' fate.

*"For eight days he staved off death on pitiable nourishment – by gnawing the stuffing of his mattress... Even when Drusus Caesar was dead, Tiberius attacked him. The charges included immorality, plots to murder his relatives, designs against the government."*<sup>11</sup>

The destruction of Agrippina the Elder, and her sons Drusus and Nero, marked the effective end of the "Partes Agrippinae".

## What about Agrippina the Younger?

It must have been a traumatic time for the young Agrippina. She was eleven when the first proceedings were launched against her mother, thirteen at the time of the trial, not yet fifteen when her brother Nero died, and not yet eighteen when her mother and her brother Drusus died.

## What was Agrippina like?

Barrett describes Agrippina as being talented, well-educated and aware of her potentially important place in the scheme of things. However, he also suggests that the fate of her mother had at least impressed upon her the need to be cautious and to avoid antagonising the powerful.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Tacitus, V.3.1

<sup>10</sup> Barrett, p 36

<sup>11</sup> Tacitus, VI.23

<sup>12</sup> Barrett, p 41

She was physically fit, as her later ‘swimming escapades’ would show and not unattractive. Her son, Nero, certainly admired her naked dead body.<sup>13</sup>

Barrett says that she was no clichéd beauty. He goes on to suggest:

*“...Agrippina was probably not especially beautiful in the normally accepted sense of the word... (but she was) an alluring woman who succeeded by using her sexual charms...a woman for whom sex was a means not so much to pleasure as to power.”*<sup>14</sup>

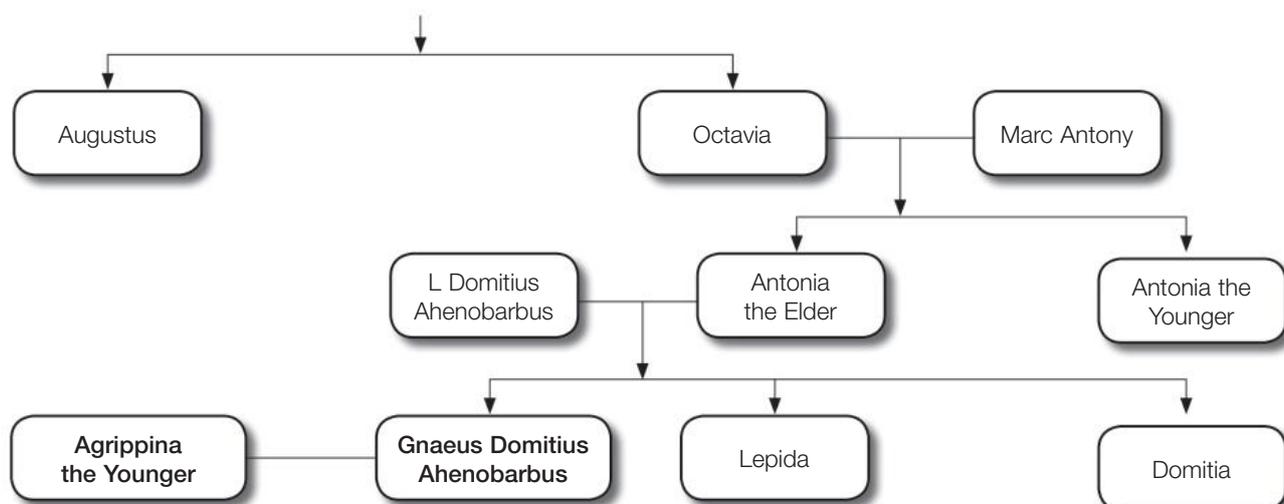
## Agrippina’s first marriage

Agrippina first married at the age of thirteen, in AD 28. Her husband was Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus, aged about thirty. Domitius could certainly boast a respectable lineage. Originally Plebeian, the family had been raised to the Patrician level by Octavian (Augustus) in 30 BC. Over time, several members of the family had been consuls. Domitius himself held the office of consul in AD 32, and unusually was allowed to hold the office for an entire year.<sup>15</sup> The sources present Domitius in a mixed light, described variously as ‘noble’ or ‘prominent’; he was noble enough for Tiberius to personally attend the marriage. Yet at the time of Tiberius’ death, Domitius was charged with incest with his sister Lepida. The charges lapsed which might suggest they had been concocted for malicious reasons. Suetonius presents a most colourful description of Domitius, suggesting that he:

*“...was a wholly despicable character...Once driving through a village on the Appian Way, he whipped up his horses and deliberately ran over and killed a boy; and when a knight criticised him rather freely in the Forum he gouged out one of his eyes there and then.”*<sup>16</sup>

Agrippina’s marriage seemed to have had no impact on the political battles which were taking place at the time. In fact, it could be argued that the marriage to Domitius – be he a fine fellow or a brute – provided Agrippina with a major advantage. It provided her protection! With attacks being launched against her mother, her brothers and her mother’s friends and allies, the world must have seemed a scary place for a thirteen year old girl, even one who had grown up in the imperial household. Against this background of attacks on the family of Germanicus, the family of Domitius would be able to offer the young Agrippina some security.

In Imperial Rome, “everybody seemed to be linked to everybody else”. As can be seen below, Domitius was not only of an ancient family but he was “a blood-relation of the Caesars”,<sup>17</sup> with a direct link back to Augustus’ sister, Octavia.



<sup>13</sup> Tacitus, XIV.9

<sup>14</sup> Barrett, p 42

<sup>15</sup> Since the later part of Augustus’ reign, it had been the practice to have four consuls a year, two serving the first six months of the year, the other two serving the second six months.

<sup>16</sup> Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, Nero, 5

<sup>17</sup> Tacitus, IV.75

## Exercise 5.2

Read each of the following statements and indicate if each is either true or false.

1	Sejanus attempted to destroy Agrippina the Elder and other members of her family.	TRUE/ FALSE
2	Agrippina the Younger was specifically targeted by Sejanus.	TRUE/ FALSE
3	It is believed that Sejanus and Livilla were responsible for the death of Tiberius' son, Drusus.	TRUE/ FALSE
4	Agrippina the Elder was a cautious and restrained woman in her political dealings.	TRUE/ FALSE
5	Tacitus suggests that a "Partes Agrippinae" had developed around the person of Agrippina the Elder.	TRUE/ FALSE
6	The fall of Sejanus from power made life much easier for Agrippina the Elder and her family.	TRUE/ FALSE
7	The sources are all agreed that Domitius Ahenobarbus was a grossly unpleasant character.	TRUE/ FALSE
8	Domitius could claim a direct blood link to the family of the emperor Augustus.	TRUE/ FALSE
9	Agrippina's marriage to Domitius was not supported by Tiberius.	TRUE/ FALSE
10	For Agrippina, the benefits of marriage to Domitius probably outweighed any disadvantages.	TRUE/ FALSE



## **Chapter 6:**

# **Role during the reign of Gaius (Caligula), including exile**

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By AD 33, Agrippina the Elder, Nero and Drusus were dead. The family of Germanicus had been reduced to Drusilla, Livilla, Agrippina, and Gaius who was now living with the Emperor Tiberius on the island of Capri. Agrippina managed to escape the mayhem of Tiberius' reign and the sources record little about her during his final years. In late AD 37, Agrippina gave birth to her only son, Nero. Was it a coincidence that the birth took place exactly nine months after the death of Tiberius? Probably not! Agrippina would have been well aware that any son of hers, with his Julian blood and direct link to Augustus, could have become a victim of the imperial power plays which had marked much of the reign of Tiberius.

- It would appear that Nero's entry into the world was a difficult, dangerous and painful experience for Agrippina. His was a breech birth, not easy even with today's modern technology.
- Suetonius suggests that Nero's birth was accompanied by ill luck. On the day of the child's purification, Agrippina asked her brother and new emperor, Gaius, for a name for the boy:

*"...he glanced at his uncle Claudius and said with a grin: 'I name him Claudius'. Since Claudius was then the butt of the Court, Agrippina was not amused and ignored the suggestion."*<sup>1</sup>

- The astrologer, Thrasyllus, is alleged to have said at the time that Nero would rule Rome but would kill his mother. Agrippina's response to this was: *"Let him kill me, but let him rule."*<sup>2</sup>

### **The new emperor and his family**

Tiberius died in March 37 and was succeeded by Agrippina's brother, the twenty five old Gaius. Gaius' accession was welcomed across Rome. Perhaps anybody would have been welcomed who was not Tiberius but as a son of Germanicus, Gaius was particularly welcomed. Gaius had become known as "Caligula" or "little boots", a term that the legionary troops of the Rhine had affectionately given him as a child from his habit of wearing soldiers' boots while stationed in Germany with his father.

The popular approval which accompanied Gaius' accession and the Senate's decision to confer all power of the princeps upon him seemed well placed.

- The cruelty and gloom of Tiberius' reign had been lifted.
- Gaius quickly established his popularity: exiles were recalled and he rescinded the hated sales tax.
- He granted bounties to the troops.
- He staged gladiatorial shows in Rome.

Gaius' show of humility towards the Senate was matched by his open display of piety.

- He travelled to Pandateria and Pontia, the island exiles of his mother and brother, and brought their ashes back to Rome.
- They were placed in Augustus' mausoleum.
- He was unable to locate the remains of Drusus but erected a cenotaph in his honour.

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<sup>1</sup> Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, Nero, 6

<sup>2</sup> This Thrasyllus is probably the son of the more famous Thrasyllus who had been Tiberius' astrologer.

- During Tiberius' reign, the birthday of Gaius' mother, Agrippina the Elder, had been declared a day of 'ill omen'; this decision was reversed.
- He honoured his late father by renaming the month of September 'Germanicus'.

In addition to honouring his parents and his late brothers, Gaius had his uncle, Claudius, the brother of Germanicus, appointed as consul. Tiberius Gemellus, son of Drusus and grandson of Tiberius, was adopted by Gaius and made Prince of the Youth. The legacies from Livia's will (she had died in 29) which had been left unpaid were now paid. Special honours were granted to his grandmother, Antonia. Gaius showered his sisters with honours (see below).

At this point, it is worth considering the reasons for Gaius' preoccupation with the promotion of family members. Gaius was ashamed of the poor birth of his grandfather, Agrippa. Suetonius says that he would break into a rage if anyone even mentioned Agrippa's name.

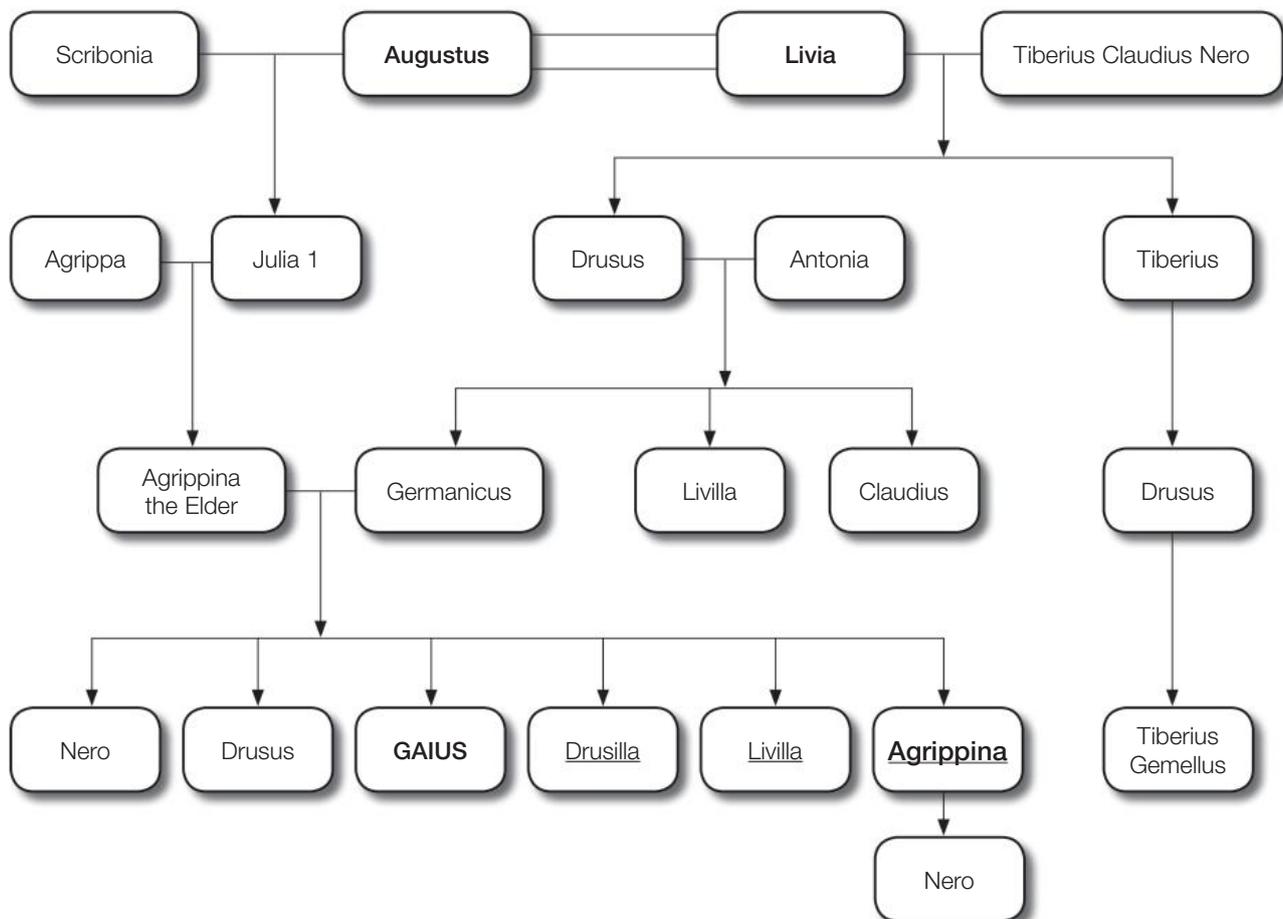
*"He nursed a fantasy that his mother had been born of an incestuous union between Augustus and his daughter Julia."*<sup>3</sup>

When referring to Gaius' outrageous allegation regarding his parentage, Bauman suggests:

*"...there may have been some method in his madness, in the sense that he was building up the image of the Domus, of the divine blood of Augustus."*<sup>4</sup>

Figure 6.1 below shows the incredibly complicated nature of imperial family relationships. It shows where in the imperial scheme of things each of the people mentioned thus far stood.

**Figure 6.1: Imperial family relationships by the time of Gaius**



<sup>3</sup> Suetonius, *Gaius*, 23

<sup>4</sup> Bauman, R, *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome*, Routledge, London, 1992, p 159

## Exercise 6.1

Have you understood the early part of Gaius' reign? Rewrite the following passage so that each sentence appears in the correct chronological order.

He displayed his piety by quickly restoring the remains of his mother and brother to Rome and carried out a series of acts honouring various members of his family. Nine months after Gaius' accession, Agrippina gave birth to her son, Nero. Agrippina seems to have escaped the worst excesses of the later years of Tiberius' reign. Gaius' accession was eagerly welcomed by the people of Rome and at first he did little to betray their trust. When the aging emperor died in 37, he was succeeded by Agrippina's brother, Gaius.

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## The new emperor and his sisters

*"The touchstone of Caligula's perception of 'the Divine Domus' is his relations with his sisters."*<sup>5</sup>

Gaius went to great lengths to promote the position of his sisters Agrippina, Livilla and Drusilla.

- He made them honorary vestal virgins.
- They were allowed to watch 'the games' from the imperial seats.
- Their names were included in vows for the emperor's safety:

*"I will not value my life or that of my children less highly than I do the safety of the Emperor Gaius and his sisters."*<sup>6</sup>

- Agrippina and her sisters were also included in the preamble to consular motions:

*"Good fortune attend the Emperor Gaius and his sisters."*<sup>7</sup>

There was no precedent for this. Barrett comments on this development thus:

*"Caligula's actions represent a key stage in the elevation of the women of the imperial house, not the status of joint ruler, of course, but to a more symbolic recognition that they shared in the mystique and majesty of the principate."*<sup>8</sup>

Along with her sisters, Agrippina now also appeared on imperial coinage as shown below in Figure 6.2. On the reverse of a bronze sestertius of AD 37-8, Agrippina appears as *Securitas* with her head turned to the right and a cornucopia in her right hand. A cornucopia is a goat's horn overflowing with fruit, flowers, and grain, signifying prosperity. Agrippina's right arm rests on a column and her left hand rests on Drusilla's shoulder. Drusilla is represented as *Concordia*, while Livilla is presented as *Fortuna*. Gaius is on the obverse of the coin.

<sup>5</sup> Bauman, p 159

<sup>6</sup> Suetonius, *Gaius*, 15

<sup>7</sup> Suetonius, *Gaius*, 15

<sup>8</sup> Barrett, A, *Agrippina*, B T Batsford, London, 1996, p 53

Figure 6.2: Bronze sestertius of AD 37-8



Such a preoccupation with promoting Agrippina and her sisters begs the question: why was Gaius doing this?

- It might have been a case of genuine affection.
- It might have been a case of re-establishing the importance of the family of Germanicus.
- There could be a straightforward political motive – Gaius was attempting to enhance the legality of his own claim to the throne.
- Bauman suggests:

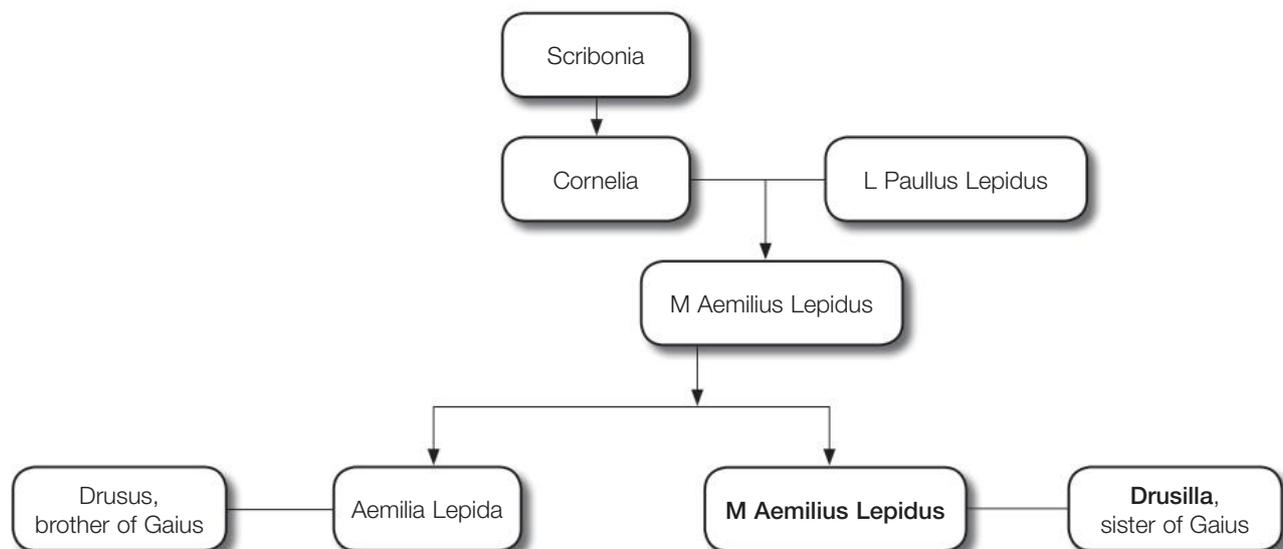
*“Caligula was reminding the world that he was not the only assurance of the continuity of the regime.”*<sup>9</sup>

Suetonius states that Gaius committed incest with all three of his sisters: Agrippina, Livilla and Drusilla. Of Drusilla he states:

*“...They say that he ravished his sister Drusilla before he came of age...Later he took Drusilla from her (first) husband...openly treating her as his lawfully married wife.”*<sup>10</sup>

### Agrippina and the conspiracy of AD 39

In late 37, Gaius suffered a major illness. Afterwards he was never the same and his reign now becomes associated with words such as megalomania, tyranny and paranoia. Suetonius says that Gaius now made Drusilla heir “to his worldly goods”. Dio suggests that her husband, M Aemilius Lepidus was designated Gaius’ heir.<sup>11</sup>



<sup>9</sup> Bauman, p 160

<sup>10</sup> Suetonius, Gaius, 24

<sup>11</sup> Lepidus' great grandmother was Scribonia, second wife of Augustus.

Drusilla died in 38. Gaius ordered a period of public mourning and it became an offence to bathe, laugh or dine with one's parents. Drusilla was deified and was now known as Panthea, the universal goddess. A temple was dedicated to her and games staged to celebrate her birthday. Bauman says that the public honours awarded Drusilla were matched by *"an avalanche of private grief"*. In late 39, Gaius and his wife Milonia gave birth to a daughter, called Julia Drusilla.

Then came the conspiracy of 39. The precise details of the alleged conspiracy have always been confused and the relationships of those involved – Lepidus, Gaetulicus, Agrippina, Livilla – far from clear.

- In 39 Gaius went to Germany and had the legate of Upper Germany, Gaetulicus, arrested and executed.
  - Was Gaetulicus involved in a plot against the emperor or was he simply incompetent?
  - Was he involved in a general conspiracy?
- The next name dragged into the story was that of Lepidus.
  - Lepidus was having affairs with both of his late wife's sisters, Livilla and Agrippina.
  - Gaius accused all three of immoral behaviour – and then of conspiracy. Suetonius tells how Gaius 'dedicated three swords to Mars the Avenger'.
- What was going on?
  - Did Lepidus see himself as a successor to Gaius who had been very ill? A link with a Julian princess such as Agrippina would do him no harm.
  - Agrippina's husband was ill (Domitius dies in 40) and perhaps she felt that Lepidus was a "safe bet" for ensuring the future of her son, Nero.
  - Did Agrippina see in Gaetulicus the military support that would be necessary for gaining and holding power?

Was this Agrippina's first bid for power? Tacitus suggests as much:

*"...In her earliest years she had employed an illicit relationship with Marcus Aemilius Lepidus as a means to power."*<sup>12</sup>

Whatever the true details of the affair, Lepidus was condemned to death. Gaius humiliated Agrippina by forcing her to carry Lepidus' bones back to Rome. She was then exiled to the Pontian islands and her property was confiscated. While in exile, Agrippina's husband, Domitius died of dropsy; her son, Nero, was now looked after by his aunt, Domitia Lepida (mother of Messalina who married Claudius in 39).

In 41, Gaius was assassinated. His successor was his uncle, Claudius.

<sup>12</sup> Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, XIV.2

## Exercise 6.2

Test your knowledge of the later part of Gaius' reign.

1	Name three honours heaped on Agrippina and her sisters.	
2	What is Suetonius' view of Gaius' relationship with his Agrippina, Livilla and Drusilla?	
3	What is Bauman's view of Gaius' elevation of the status of his sisters?	
4	What happened to Gaius at the end of 37?	
5	How was Gaius affected by the death of his sister, Drusilla?	
6	Who was Gaetulicus? What happened to him?	
7	In what "dangerous activity" was Lepidus involved?	
8	What could have been Agrippina's interest in Lepidus?	
9	What happened to Agrippina after the conspiracy?	
10	When was Gaius assassinated? Who succeeded him as emperor?	

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## Chapter 7:

# Role during the reign of Claudius

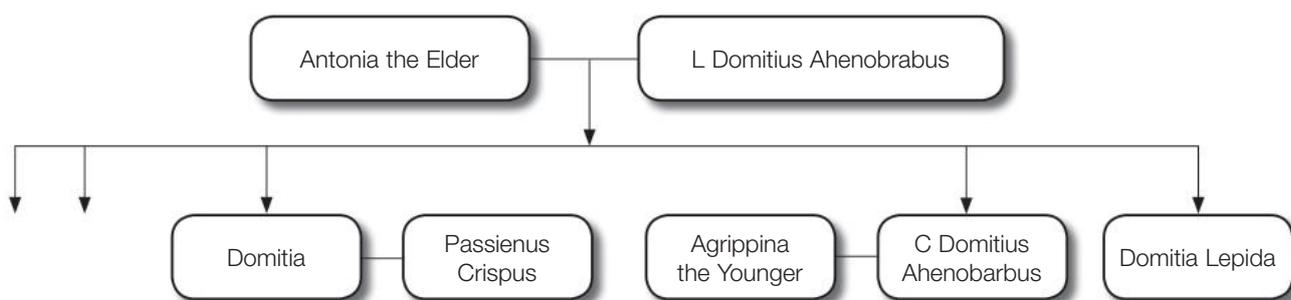
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Agrippina would reach what was arguably the peak of her power during the reign of the Emperor Claudius (AD 41-54). Following the murder of Gaius, Claudius was 'chosen' to be the next emperor after he had allegedly been discovered hiding behind a curtain, trying to flee Gaius' assassins. He was taken to the Praetorian Camp where he was later proclaimed emperor.<sup>1</sup> At this stage, Agrippina was still living in the exile which had been imposed upon her by Gaius. One of Claudius' first actions was to recall both Agrippina and her sister Livilla from exile, and to restore their property.

Agrippina's husband, C Domitius Ahenobarbus had died in AD 40 and so she was now in the market for a new husband.

### Agrippina marries a second time

In 41, Agrippina married Gaius Sallustius Passienus Crispus, the former husband of Domitia who was the sister of Domitius, Agrippina's first husband.



Agrippina had first considered taking Servius Sulpicius Galba as a husband. He had an aristocratic/ ancient patrician family background. He had a reputation as a fine general and he was wealthy. Galba probably deemed marriage to such a high profile woman such as Agrippina as too dangerous and nothing came of the match. And so, it was Passienus Crispus who would become Agrippina's second husband. Considerably older than Agrippina, Passienus had been consul in 27, and would be again in 44. In 42-43, he was a pro-consul in Asia. Passienus seems to have been an intelligent, genial man, not afraid to say what he felt.

*"...wit was combined with a lively sense of humour that could sometimes be outlandishly eccentric.. Much of his humour was dangerously directed against his imperial masters."*<sup>2</sup>

Passienus could possibly have sought a divorce to marry Agrippina and she, presumably, would have had her conviction as an *adultera* overturned. For Passienus the attraction must have been Agrippina's name. She had family connections but would have had little money as Gaius had no doubt used up most of her former wealth.

*"Passienus' desire to conclude a political marriage for his own career advancement, possibly putting his current wife aside in the process, would not, of course, have endeared Agrippina to her former sister-in-law (Domitia)."*<sup>3</sup>

Passienus died in the mid-40s. He was given a public funeral and later buried along the Appian Way. His death proved to be rather convenient for Agrippina which has led to speculation that she may in fact have poisoned him. Certainly his death left her very wealthy and now free to marry

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<sup>1</sup> Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars, Claudius*, 10

<sup>2</sup> Barrett, A, *Agrippina*, B T Batsford, London, 1996, pp 84-5

<sup>3</sup> Barrett, p 85

Claudius if he became free. However, such thoughts are at best speculation. Agrippina now seems to disappear from the sources until just before the fall of Messalina.

## The Emperor Claudius

Modern historians have suggested that Claudius ruled with far more effectiveness than the ancient sources credit him. Rome recovered from the excesses of Gaius' rule, the empire was being run efficiently, and indeed it had expanded with the successful invasion of Britain. However, the ancient sources prefer to dwell on Claudius physical infirmities and his alleged weak mindedness. He is presented as an indulgent, at times cruel man, who was manipulated by his wives and his freedmen.

*"...everything that Claudius did throughout his reign – was dictated by his wives and freedmen: he practically always obeyed their whims rather than his own judgment."*<sup>4</sup>

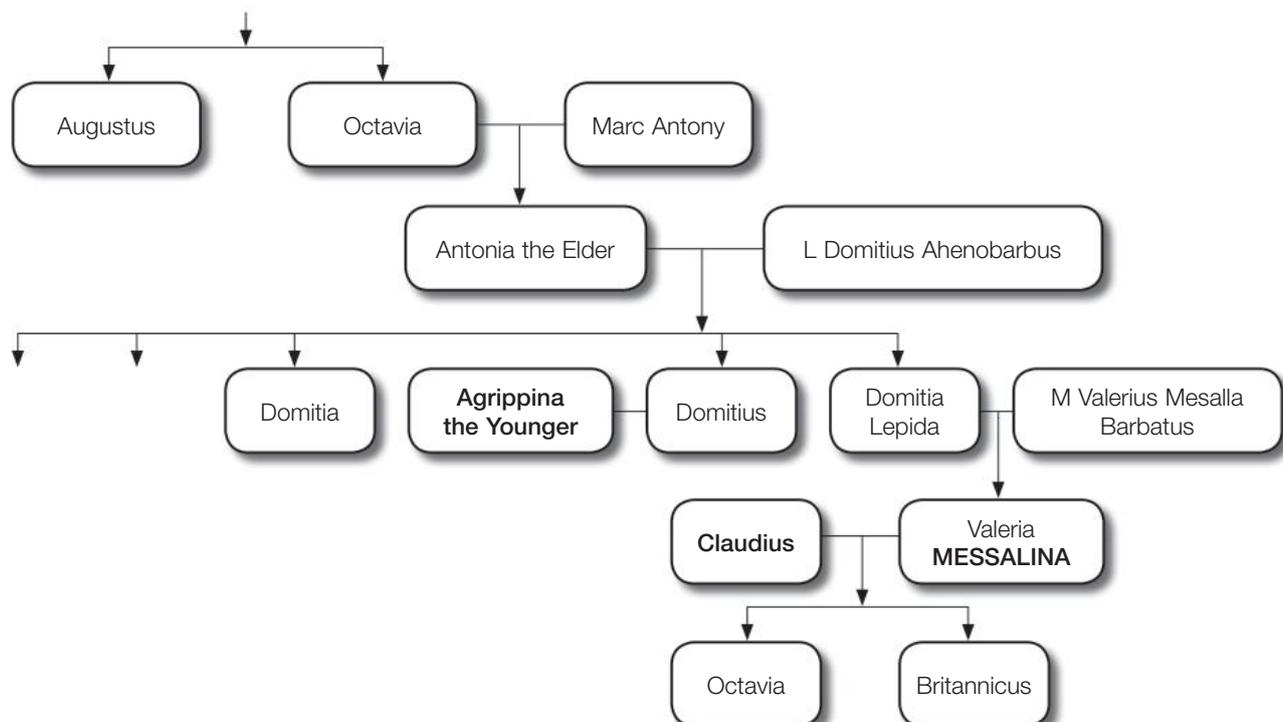
*"...Claudius...distributed honours, army commands, indulgences or punishments according to their wishes, however, capricious, seldom even aware of what he was about.."*<sup>5</sup>

Not surprisingly, Tacitus finds little disagreement with Suetonius' point of view.

*"..But with an emperor whose likes and dislikes were all suggested and dictated to him, anything seemed possible."*<sup>6</sup>

Immediately on his accession, Claudius followed Gaius' example and extended honours to members of his family. This was done for his mother, Antonia, now referred to as Augusta, and in whose honour games were given where her image was shown. Livia was granted divine honours, which now made Claudius *divae nepos*, grandson of a goddess.

Claudius had married his third wife, Messalina, in about AD 39. Messalina's date of birth is uncertain with historians offering dates ranging from as early as AD 3 to AD 26. Clearly she was much younger than Claudius (born 10 BC). Her age is of some significance. If young, her later promiscuous behaviour could be viewed as the 'wild abandon' of a teenager married to a much older man; if older, her behaviour could have had political connotations. Messalina was closely related to Domitius, Agrippina's first husband, and she could also trace her lineage to the imperial household.



<sup>4</sup> Suetonius, *Claudius*, 25

<sup>5</sup> Suetonius, *Claudius*, 29

<sup>6</sup> Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, XII.3

## Exercise 7.1

Using the terms in the box below, complete the following passage.

Claudius was proclaimed emperor after the murder of \_\_\_\_\_ when he was allegedly found hiding behind a \_\_\_\_\_ fleeing his \_\_\_\_\_'s assassins. Both \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ have a poor opinion of Claudius, claiming he was controlled by his \_\_\_\_\_ and his \_\_\_\_\_. However, modern historians see him in a more \_\_\_\_\_ light. In AD 39, he married his third wife, \_\_\_\_\_. Her mother had been Agrippina's \_\_\_\_\_. Agrippina's first husband, \_\_\_\_\_, died in AD 40. She then married \_\_\_\_\_. He died in the mid-40s, some suspected \_\_\_\_\_ had poisoned him.

Agrippina	Gaius	sister-in-law	nephew	wives
Domitius	curtain	sympathetic	Suetonius	Messalina
Tacitus	freedmen	Passienus		

## Messalina

Messalina is a figure that history finds hard to neglect. Bauman's opinion of her is:

*"The Messalina of the sources is one of the great nymphomaniacs of history."* <sup>7</sup>

Messalina's sex life is covered extensively by the sources.

- Tacitus mentions twelve lovers.
- Juvenal refers to her visits to brothels.
- Dio writes of her forcing husbands to attend their wives' sex sessions.

What Dio describes, of course, had a useful political purpose. If these husbands attended, there was a chance their careers could advance, but under Messalina's patronage; if they complained they could be charged under Augustus' morality laws for allowing their wives to indulge in extra-marital sex. By such means was Messalina able to build up her own *clientele*.

Messalina's outrageous sexual dalliances while married to Claudius make great reading. <sup>8</sup> The question arises was Messalina merely a jealous, highly sexual woman who allowed her passions to overcome her common sense? Or was she a clever, scheming woman who merely used sex to achieve political power? Whatever is the case, few were safe from the machinations of Messalina once she had targeted them.

- An early target of Messalina was Agrippina's sister, **Livilla** who soon found herself exiled to Pandateria. What was the motive?
  - Jealousy was a possibility.
  - Equally, Messalina might have seen in Livilla a political threat as a possible future wife of Claudius. If this was the case, Agrippina's decision to marry Passienus was clearly a wise one.
- In 42, Messalina arranged for the governor of Eastern Spain, **Appius Iunius Silanus**, to be brought back to Rome to marry her mother, Domitia Lepida.
  - The sources relate Messalina's failed attempts to get Silanus into her bed.
  - Playing on Claudius' willingness to accept 'dreams' and his pathetic love of his young wife, Messalina was able to convince the emperor of Silanus' plans to kill him.

<sup>7</sup> Bauman, R, *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome*, Routledge, London, 1992, p 168

<sup>8</sup> They make even greater viewing in the television adaptation of Robert Graves' *I, Claudius*.

- Silanus was executed.
- Was it just sexual rejection? It is possible that Silanus was somehow involved in the conspiracy of Scribonianus who unsuccessfully tried to raise a revolt against Claudius in the Balkans.

The conspiracy of Scribonianus traumatised Claudius and there followed much use of torture and a series of trials to seek out possible enemies. In this, Messalina played the role of “*Claudius’ Sejanus, searching out his enemies and destroying them.*”<sup>9</sup>

- A Praetorian Guard prefect, **Catonius Justus**, was removed, as was later his colleague **Rufrius Pollio**. Their positions were filled by Lusius Geta and Rufrius Crispinus, both totally loyal to Messalina.
- Messalina’s next target was **D Valerius Asiaticus**, a former consul (35 and 46).
  - The sources tell us that Messalina wanted Asiaticus’ beautiful gardens.
  - He was also a lover of Poppaea Sabina (mother of the future emperor Nero’s wife). Messalina feared and detested Poppaea Sabina and perhaps saw an attack on Asiaticus as a means of removing two rivals.
  - Messalina was again able to convince Claudius of Asiaticus’ treachery. Claudius tried him in his private quarters (*intra cubiculum*).
  - The best Asiaticus’ defence could do for him was to allow Asiaticus to choose the manner of his death.

“*Messalina orchestrated the entire drama of Asiaticus’ destruction. She was responsible for the decision to locate the trial in the palace, which enabled her to be present and also made it possible to concoct the fraudulent confessions.*”<sup>10</sup>

- Messalina now had Polybius removed. Polybius was one of Claudius’ influential freedmen, his literary secretary.
  - Destroying Polybius was an error on Messalina’s part. Claudius’ freedmen wielded much power and influence. If Messalina could destroy Polybius, why not the others like Narcissus and Callistus?
  - It was no accident that Narcissus was to be a key player in Messalina’s own destruction.

## What was happening to Agrippina during these amazing times?

Agrippina is largely absent from the sources for the period 41-46. She might have been deliberately keeping a low profile but it is more likely that she had spent time away from Rome. Her husband, Passienus, was pro-consul in Asia for some of this time and so it is likely she would have been living there.

Barrett highlights the wisdom of Agrippina being absent from Rome.

“*The absence of Agrippina from the recorded events of the reign between Claudius’ accession and the eve of Messalina’s fall speaks volumes for her good sense. She should have been the main target for Messalina’s vengeance.*”<sup>11</sup>

Agrippina had everything that Messalina needed to fear. She had true Julian blood with a direct family link to the great Augustus. She was a daughter of the beloved Germanicus and she had a son growing up quickly. The young Nero was the only surviving male descendent of Germanicus and was gaining the popular affection of the Roman people. When Claudius staged his version of ‘The Secular Games’ in 47,<sup>12</sup> youthful, noble horsemen performed ‘The Troy Pageant’. Nero received rapturous applause from the crowd, far greater than that received by Britannicus, son of

<sup>9</sup> Bauman, p 171

<sup>10</sup> Bauman, p 174

<sup>11</sup> Barrett, p 88

<sup>12</sup> Augustus had staged an earlier version of *The Secular Games* 64 years earlier in 17 BC.

Claudius and Messalina. This is something that Messalina would have noted with both growing alarm and growing anger. Tacitus makes the point that by now, Messalina had Agrippina ‘in her sights’.

*“...pity was increasingly felt for...Agrippina, owing to her persecution by Messalina. The latter, always Agrippina’s enemy and now particularly virulent, was only distracted from launching prosecutions and prosecutors by a new and almost maniacal love affair.”*<sup>13</sup>

## The fall of Messalina

The fall of Messalina from power is one of the great stories of Roman history. Tacitus goes to town on the story, sparing few details. Suetonius is somewhat more succinct:

*“Then he (Claudius) married Valeria Messalina...But it turned out that she was not only guilty of other disgraceful crimes, but had gone so far as to commit bigamy with Gaius Silius, and even sign a formal marriage contract before witnesses; so Claudius executed her..”*<sup>14</sup>

What happened to Messalina is fairly easy to describe. A problem arises when one tries to explain ‘why’ it happened. On the surface the facts seem straightforward.

- She had become infatuated with a good-looking consul-designate, Gaius Silius.
- She persuaded him to divorce his wife Junia Silana and then proceeded to marry Silius in a public, bacchic-style wedding ceremony while Claudius was away at the port of Ostia, a few miles from Rome.
- Claudius’ freedmen were eventually able to convince Claudius of the magnitude of what had happened and of the personal danger Claudius was in.
  - They saw Messalina’s action as not just another sexual adventure but a threat to Claudius’, and equally importantly their own positions.

*“...The imperial household shuddered – especially those in power... ‘While a ballet-dancing actor violated the emperor’s bedroom’, they said, ‘it was humiliating enough. Yet it did not threaten Claudius’ life. Here on the other hand, is a young, handsome, intelligent nobleman consul-to-be – but with a loftier destiny in mind...”*<sup>15</sup>

- As Claudius made his way back to Rome, the wedding party broke up but many of the guests were arrested.
  - Narcissus was given control of the Praetorian Guard for a day and he ensured that Messalina and Claudius be kept apart.
  - He knew that Messalina might still be able to soften Claudius’ anger.
- Claudius went to the Praetorian Guard camp.
  - A series of summary trials followed which led to the execution of Silius, plus that of many equestrians and senators.
- Claudius returned home and stated he would see Messalina the following day.
  - Narcissus pre-empted this and ordered the killing of Messalina.
  - Claudius was quite passive when later told of her death.

What was all this about? Figure 7.1 presents some issues for consideration.

<sup>13</sup> Tacitus, XI.12.1

<sup>14</sup> Suetonius, Claudius, 26

<sup>15</sup> Tacitus, XI.27

Maybe Messalina had become extremely worried about the increasing popularity of Agrippina and Nero, and the real danger that she and her son, Britannicus, might be supplanted in the succession. Was the 'coup' organised to secure her power?

*"But clearly more than sexual passion was involved...and there can surely be little doubt of a conspiracy."* Barrett, p 93

Claudius' leading freedmen – Narcissus, Pallas and Callistus – had become worried about Messalina after they had witnessed what she had been able to do to Polybius.

*"They also appreciated that Silius was... a consul designate with patent ambitions (who) represented a threat they had never had to fear.."* (Barrett, p 92)

**FIGURE 7.1:**  
**FOOD FOR THOUGHT ON THE FALL OF MESSALINA**

Messalina's behaviour, if political, seems odd. Was her position really in doubt? Why would she trust Silius to ensure her son's position more than Britannicus' own father, Claudius? And if she and Silius were engaged in a power grab, staging a drunken, Bacchic wedding ceremony is certainly an odd way of going about it.

Perhaps Messalina was just acting out of boredom and seeking some additional sexual excitement.

*"However, the idea of being called his (Silius') wife appealed to her owing to its sheer outrageousness – a sensualist's ultimate satisfaction."* (Tacitus XI 26)

## Exercise 7.2

Place the following events in the correct chronological order.

1st event	
2nd event	
3rd event	
4th event	
5th event	
6th event	
7th event	
8th event	
9th event	
10th event	

Death of Messalina	accession of Claudius	Appius Silanus affair
Return of Agrippina from exile	execution of Silius	death of Asiaticus
The Secular Games	Agrippina reappears in Rome	
Marriage of Claudius and Messalina	marriage of Messalina and Silius	

## Agrippina: “Wife of Claudius, mother of Nero”

Following the death of Messalina, Claudius told the Praetorian Guard that three wives had been enough for him and that from now on he would remain celibate. They could kill him if he did not keep his word. Within a year Claudius had married Agrippina.

There were several candidates lined up to be Claudius’ next wife, each with her own freedman-backing.

- Narcissus favoured Aelia Paetina. She and Claudius had been married before, and Narcissus argued renewing this union would lead to little domestic upheaval, she had already had a child with Claudius and she would be an ideal step mother for Claudius’ children Octavia and Britannicus.
- Callistus supported the cause of Lollia Paulina, a former wife of Gaius. He said as she was childless, she would be a great stepmother, nursing no jealousy towards Claudius’ children.
- Pallas supported the cause of Agrippina. He argued that she brought a grandson of Germanicus and such a union would unite both branches of the Claudian house.

Tacitus informs us that Agrippina promoted her cause by frequently visiting Claudius and using her seductiveness.

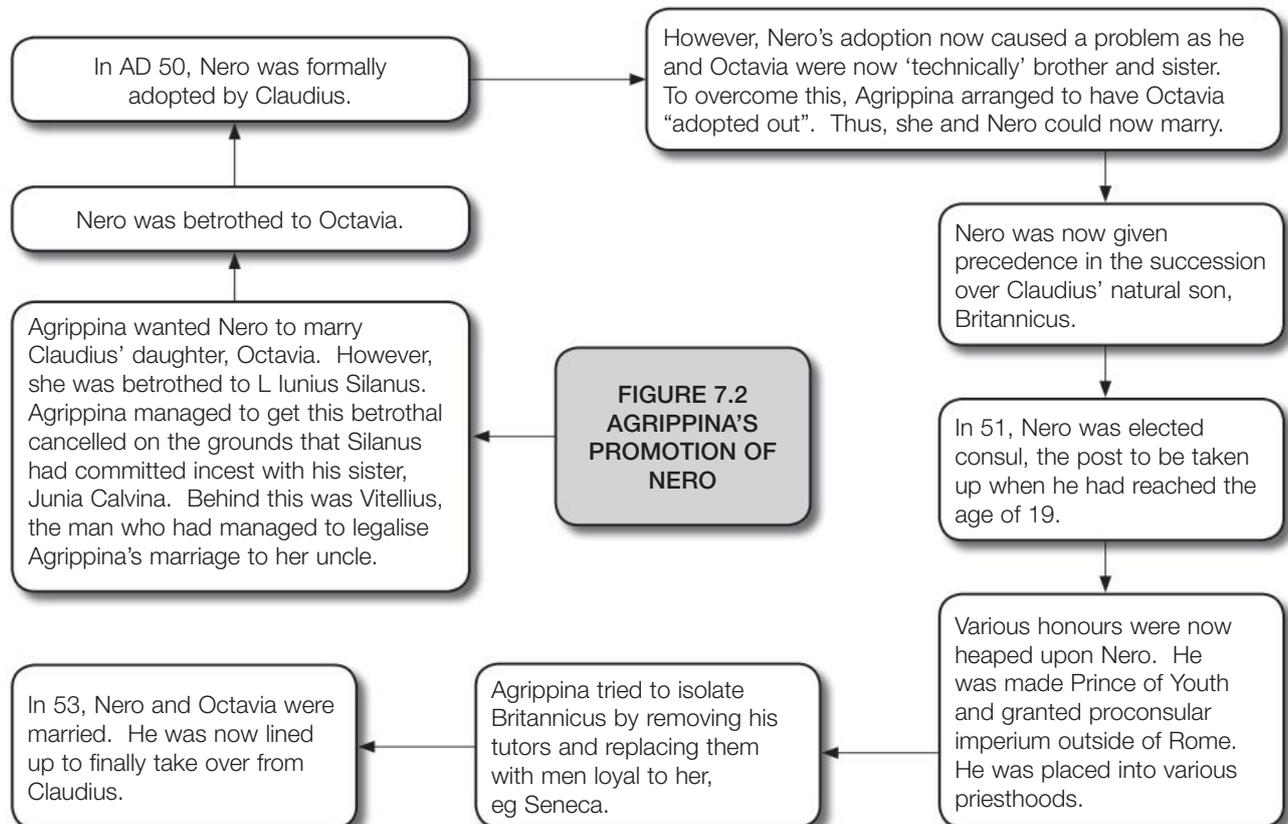
*“Visiting her uncle frequently – ostensibly as a close relation – she tempted him into giving her the preference and into treating her, in anticipation, as his wife.”*<sup>16</sup>

One problem remained – it was against Roman law for an uncle to marry his niece. This legal hindrance was overcome thanks to Lucius Vitellius who steered a law through the Senate which allowed a man to marry his brother’s daughter (though not his sister’s).

Agrippina and Claudius were married in early 49. Agrippina now set out to pursue two objectives

1. to ensure her son, Nero, succeeded Claudius as emperor
2. to come as close as possible to achieving a major share of political power.

Figure 7.2 shows how she achieved her first aim.



<sup>16</sup> Tacitus, XII.3

## Agrippina's power as Claudius' wife

The ancient sources present Claudius as a dupe who was totally controlled by his wives. Tacitus refers to Claudius "*sluggish uxoriousness*" (fondness for or excessive submissiveness to one's wife). He further suggests that under Agrippina the country was transformed. Whereas Messalina played with the state to satisfy her appetites, Agrippina ruled with an "*almost masculine despotism*."

However, Barrett questions this traditional view. He argues that Agrippina was the perfect wife for Claudius because they shared a belief that the union of their two families would provide Rome with strength and stability. Rather than being in thrall to a woman, Barrett suggests:

*"...he was in the enviable position of having a wife who shared his view of the world, and who would be an aggressive supporter of his political agenda."* <sup>17</sup>

Agrippina was keen to seek some consensus before initiating new policies. She prepared matters in advance and ensured she had friends in the right places. Her close relationship to Pallas, which was personal as well as professional, gave her access to the financial affairs of the state. In fact, the evidence would tend to suggest that under Agrippina, the regime had settled down. The sources mention 25 victims of Messalina; they mention only five of Agrippina, and unlike for the period of Messalina's marriage to Claudius, the sources for Agrippina's marriage to Claudius are complete. Barrett refers to an improved atmosphere in government circles.

*"...the attitude of senators seems to have changed from sullen hostility to supportive collaboration."* <sup>18</sup>

Whether one accepts the view of Tacitus or Barrett, it is clear that Agrippina succeeded in creating a powerful position for herself.

- She was able to remove rivals and recall supporters:
  - Seneca was brought back from exile, something Claudius had previously refused to do. He became Nero's tutor.
  - Lollia Paulina was accused of dabbling with astrology and forced to suicide.
  - Claudius' favourite mistress, Calpurnia, was banished after Claudius' casual comment in admiration for her beauty.
  - Agrippina feared Domitia Lepida's closeness to Nero. <sup>19</sup> Domitia Lepida was accused of various black magic offences and put to death.
  - Narcissus, who had supported Domitia Lepida, was sent to Sinuessa, imprisoned, tortured and eventually forced to suicide.
- She held influence over the Praetorian Guard:
  - The prefects Geta and Crispinus were removed.
  - They were replaced by her man, Afranius Burrus.
- Agrippina was bedecked with various honours during her marriage with Claudius.
  - She was given the title 'Augusta'. This made her the first living consort of a living emperor to receive such an honour.
  - She was allowed the use of the priestly *carpentum*.
  - A colony was named after her – Colonia Claudia Augusta Agrippinensium.
  - She was allowed to meet foreign dignitaries.
  - At the opening of Fucine Lake, she famously outshone Claudius by wearing a gold cloak.

<sup>17</sup> Barrett, p 103

<sup>18</sup> Barrett, p 105

<sup>19</sup> She had looked after Nero during Agrippina's exile.

- It would seem that Agrippina could even wield her influence in the provinces. In Judaea, there was a dispute between the Jews and the Samaritans, the latter supported by the Roman governor, Cumanus. Agrippina sided with the Jews and, according to the Jewish historian, Josephus, was able to have Cumanus removed and replaced by her own pro-Jewish candidate, Felix. Felix was the brother of the freedman, Pallas.

Archaeological evidence further supports the view of Agrippina's power. Barrett refers to the construction of the "Domus Tiberiana", arguing it highlighted the role of both her and Claudius in running the state. Research has shown that this was built to a single design, ie it was not gradually built up. Barrett says of the temple:

*"...the author of the Domus Tiberiana (expresses) Agrippina's grandiose concept of the role of herself and of Claudius in the overall scheme of things."*<sup>20</sup>

Agrippina frequently appeared on coins. She is seen in the Sebasteion relief from the city of Aphrodisias in 'partnership with Claudius'. This is shown in Figure 7.3. There also exists a sculpted 'cameo' showing Agrippina and Claudius on the left, with her parents, Agrippina the Elder and Germanicus, on the right.

**Figure 7.3: The Sebasteion relief from Aphrodisias**



### Agrippina and the death of Claudius in AD 54

Most of the sources suggest that Agrippina organised the murder of her husband, Claudius. If the sources are to be believed, it would appear that Agrippina had good reason to worry about her husband. Dio says that Claudius had become aware of Agrippina's schemes and that this had made him angry. Having found a woman guilty of adultery in a trial, Suetonius says of Claudius:

*"...he himself seemed fated to marry wives who 'were unchaste but remained unchastened'..."*<sup>21</sup>

Tacitus had similarly stated that Claudius saw his fate as having to endure his wives' misdeeds and to punish them for those misdeeds. The sources further suggest that Claudius was becoming reconciled with his son, Britannicus, and was regretting the haste with which he had agreed to make Nero his heir. However, it should be noted that the modern sources, such as Barrett, have

<sup>20</sup> Barrett, p 126

<sup>21</sup> Suetonius, Claudius, 43

their doubts. A massive change of mind like this on the part of Claudius could have caused massive disruption in Rome. This could well have created the sort of chaos in Rome that Claudius had fought so hard to avoid.<sup>22</sup>

Tacitus relates that Agrippina used the talents of the poisoner, Locusta, to prepare the lethal dose which was administered by the eunuch, Halotus. The poison was sprinkled on Claudius' beloved mushrooms. However, his excessive drinking seemed to have saved him, as did a timely major bowel movement. Agrippina now dragged in Claudius' doctor, Xenophon, to help her.

*"...while pretending to help Claudius to vomit, he put a feather dipped in a quick poison down his throat. Xenophon knew that major crimes, though hazardous to undertake, are profitable to achieve."*<sup>23</sup>

### Exercise 7.3

Read each of the following statements and indicate if each is either true or false.

1	Agrippina had no problems in marrying Claudius.	TRUE/ FALSE
2	Barrett argues that Agrippina was a most unsuitable wife for Claudius	TRUE/ FALSE
3	Claudius seems to have acquiesced meekly to Agrippina's desire to have Nero succeed him.	TRUE/ FALSE
4	Powerful though Agrippina became, she could only wield her influence "through" men	TRUE/ FALSE
5	Agrippina soon proved to be as bloodthirsty and vindictive as Messalina.	TRUE/ FALSE
6	Agrippina's influence spread well beyond Rome into the far reaches of the Roman Empire.	TRUE/ FALSE
7	Agrippina's achievement of the title, Augusta, during Claudius' lifetime was unprecedented.	TRUE/ FALSE
8	Claudius had clearly decided to change the succession in favour of his own son, Britannicus.	TRUE/ FALSE
9	Claudius' fondness for mushrooms would be the death of him.	TRUE/ FALSE
10	Few of the ancient sources suggest that Agrippina was responsible for the death of Claudius	TRUE/ FALSE

<sup>22</sup> Barrett, p 139

<sup>23</sup> Tacitus, XII.66

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## Chapter 8:

# Role and changing relationship with Nero during his reign

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Nero was proclaimed emperor on 13 October, AD 54. He presented himself to the people, was acclaimed by the army and then the senate. He had the support of the Praetorian Guard and its prefect, Burrus. However, just to make sure, he awarded each member of the guard 15 000 sesterces.

It would seem that Agrippina had achieved her ultimate goal. Indeed, it could be argued that for a while she came as close as a woman could come to sharing power over the Roman state. The sources suggest that during the early part of Nero's reign she was able to wield power and influence, and she had control over her seventeen year old son. However, it was not long before her power and influence began to diminish, to the point where she had been pushed out of the decision making process all together. This was partly due to the machinations of Seneca and Burrus, but of equal importance was Nero's resentment of an interfering mother. At a deeper level, Agrippina failed to recognise that the days when the imperial domus and the state were one and the same, were receding into history. Agrippina was unable to either understand or accept this.

### **“The best of mothers”: the period of power and influence**

Soon after his accession, Nero showered his mother with honours. When asked by a Praetorian Guard officer for the password of the day, he replied: “the best of mothers”. Agrippina must have believed that her time had come. Suetonius says that at the start of his reign, not only did he honour the memory of Claudius, and his father Domitius but:

*“... (he) turned over all his public and private affairs to Agrippina's management.”*<sup>1</sup>

- Her late husband, the emperor Claudius, was deified. Agrippina was appointed as the priestess of the cult of the divine Claudius.
- She was granted two lictors; this was an act of great significance.
  - The lictors were men whose normal function was to attend to the interests of magistrates and other high figures of state.
  - They carried the fasces, the bundled rods often tied together with an axe, which symbolised power and jurisdiction.
  - Even Livia had only been allowed one, and then for use only when acting as the priestess of Augustus.
- Agrippina was also allowed to travel in the covered carpentum, another symbol of significant status.

*“Agrippina's privilege would have served to elevate her in the public mind to the status of a woman who had a quasi-official share in the administration of the principate.”*<sup>2</sup>

- Coins often reflect much about the realities of Roman political power. Agrippina was featured on Roman coins early in Nero's reign (as she had been during Claudius' reign). Sometimes Nero would be on the obverse, Agrippina on the reverse. Sometimes they might both be on the obverse facing each other, as shown in Figure 8.1, or superimposed on each other facing the same way.

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<sup>1</sup> Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, Nero, 9

<sup>2</sup> Barrett, A, *Agrippina*, B T Batsford, London, 1996, p 152

### Figure 8.1: Coin from the early phase of Nero's reign showing the emperor and his mother



The coin in Figure 8.1 contains the legend that “*identifies Agrippina as Agrippina Augusta, the wife of the deified Claudius, the mother of Caesar, and thus brings together on a single coin the three roles that brought her the greatest pride.*”<sup>3</sup>

- Many of the inscriptions of the early phase of Nero's reign refer to the title *divi filius*, son of the deified Claudius. However, he also includes his links to Germanicus, and adoptive links to Tiberius and Augustus. This is significant because these are links on the maternal side which made Nero the first emperor not to limit himself to paternal links in his inscriptions.

As well as symbolic power, Agrippina also attempted to exercise real power. This included removing perceived threats to her position.

*“The first casualty of the new reign was the governor of Asia, Marcus Junius Silanus. His death was treacherously contrived by Agrippina, without Nero's knowledge.”*<sup>4</sup>

Tacitus describes Silanus as lazy, and therefore presumably unthreatening. However, Agrippina may have feared that Silanus might seek revenge for the death of his brother.<sup>5</sup> It is also possible that the ‘*mature blameless*’ Silanus might have been seen as a superior candidate for leadership than the boy Nero. Silanus also had a pedigree – he was the great, great grandson of the emperor Augustus.

In late 54, there was an attempt in the Senate to change some laws which had been passed during Claudius' reign. In her role as ‘*priestess of the cult of the divine Claudius*’ Agrippina fought this. In this campaign, Agrippina was unsuccessful. However, she achieved something that would have been considered unthinkable – she attended a session of the Senate. While the Senate was debating these laws, Agrippina was able to stand behind a curtain listening to the debate. Even Livia had never managed this.

*“The amending laws were passed, but Agrippina had achieved the unthinkable; she had attended a meeting of the senate.”*<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Barrett, p 152

<sup>4</sup> Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, XIII.1

<sup>5</sup> His brother was L. Iunius Silanus, formerly betrothed to Claudius' daughter, Octavia. He had been ‘*removed*’ to make way for Nero.

<sup>6</sup> Bauman, *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome*, Routledge, London, 1992, p 193

## Exercise 8.1

Test your knowledge so far.

1	What was the password given by Nero to a Praetorian officer at the start of the reign?	
2	What significant religious role was Agrippina granted?	
3	How many lictors was Agrippina given?	
4	How many lictors had Livia been given?	
5	How do numismatics add to the image of Agrippina's power?	
6	Whom does Tacitus say was Agrippina's first victim following Nero's accession?	
7	What reason might Agrippina have had for this murder?	
8	In late 54, what did the senate try to do which alarmed Agrippina?	
9	Did the senate succeed in its aim?	
10	Despite her defeat, what had Agrippina achieved during the senate proceedings?	

### Agrippina's power and influence begins to wane

Though the honours flowed and Agrippina's position seemed to be secure, there were dangers for her even in the early days of Nero's reign. Agrippina might have been called "the best of mothers" but matters of substance were not going her way. A clear example of this was Nero's accession speech, written by Seneca. (Tacitus likes to make the point that Nero was the first ruler who needed a speech writer: "*Even Gaius' mental disorders had not weakened his vigorous speech.*")<sup>7</sup>

- Nero's speech attacked various aspects of Claudius' reign, such as the trials that had been held *intra cubiculum*.
  - Agrippina had not made much use of this method of removing opponents (unlike Messalina); she preferred to use the senate.
  - However, the speech was clearly a challenge to her.
- More importantly, Seneca was expounding the principle of the separation of the imperial domus and the state. As a woman, Agrippina could only really wield influence and power when decision making was focussed in the domus.

*"From my house, bribery and favouritism will be excluded. I will keep personal and State affairs separate. The senate is to preserve its ancient functions."*<sup>8</sup>

Tacitus also refers to an incident involving a visiting Armenian delegation. While Nero was receiving the delegation, Agrippina entered the room and intended ascending to the dais to sit next to Nero.

<sup>7</sup> Tacitus, XIII.3

<sup>8</sup> Tacitus, XIII.4

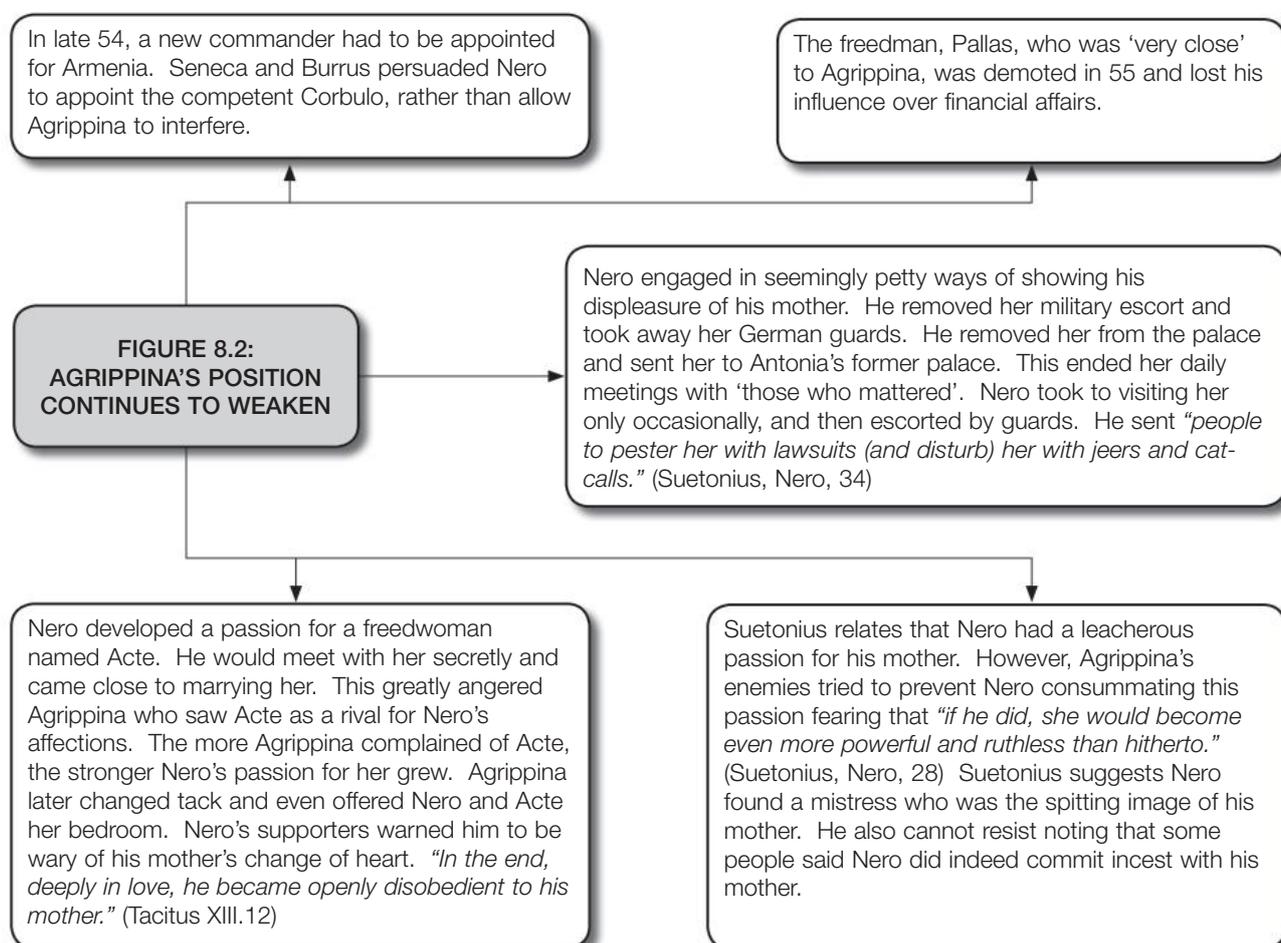
Such a move would have signalled an equality with the emperor. Seneca quickly advised Nero to descend and, in a show of filial respect, greet his mother. As Tacitus puts it, this show of filial dutifulness “*averted the scandal.*”

Figure 8.2 highlights other ways in which Agrippina’s position was weakening.

As her position came increasingly under threat, Agrippina did not sit idly by and ignore the attacks upon her.

- After Pallas’ demotion, Agrippina made sure Nero overheard her say that Britannicus was coming of age and would make a worthy successor to his father.
  - She threatened to reveal the crimes of Claudius’ later years and say that Britannicus was alive only because of her intervention.
  - She threatened to take Britannicus to the Praetorian camp and declare his legitimate claim to the throne.
  - Nero’s solution to this threat was to have Britannicus poisoned. This was done in front of everyone; Nero claimed the boy had had an epileptic fit.
- Agrippina then moved closer to Nero’s wife, Octavia (sister of Britannicus and daughter of Claudius).
- She began to hold secret meetings with various key figures, raise funds, court military figures and noblemen. Perhaps she was looking for a leader for her own party, similar to the *partes Agrippinae* of her mother during Tiberius’ time (see Chapter 5).

However, things began to settle down. Between 55 and 58, Agrippina is absent from a large section of Tacitus, presumably because he has no material with which to denigrate her. Agrippina’s position would come under its greatest threat with the arrival on the scene of Poppaea Sabina (see Chapter 10).



## Why was Nero moving away from his mother?

- (i) Was it the sly manoeuvring of Seneca to consolidate his power?
- (ii) Was it the natural evolution of government, ie the separation of domus and state?
- (iii) Or was it nothing more than a young man sick of an interfering mother. Consider what Suetonius has to say on the matter.

*“...The over-watchful, over-critical eye that Agrippina kept on whatever Nero said or did proved more than he could stand.”<sup>9</sup>*

## Soap opera and politics mix

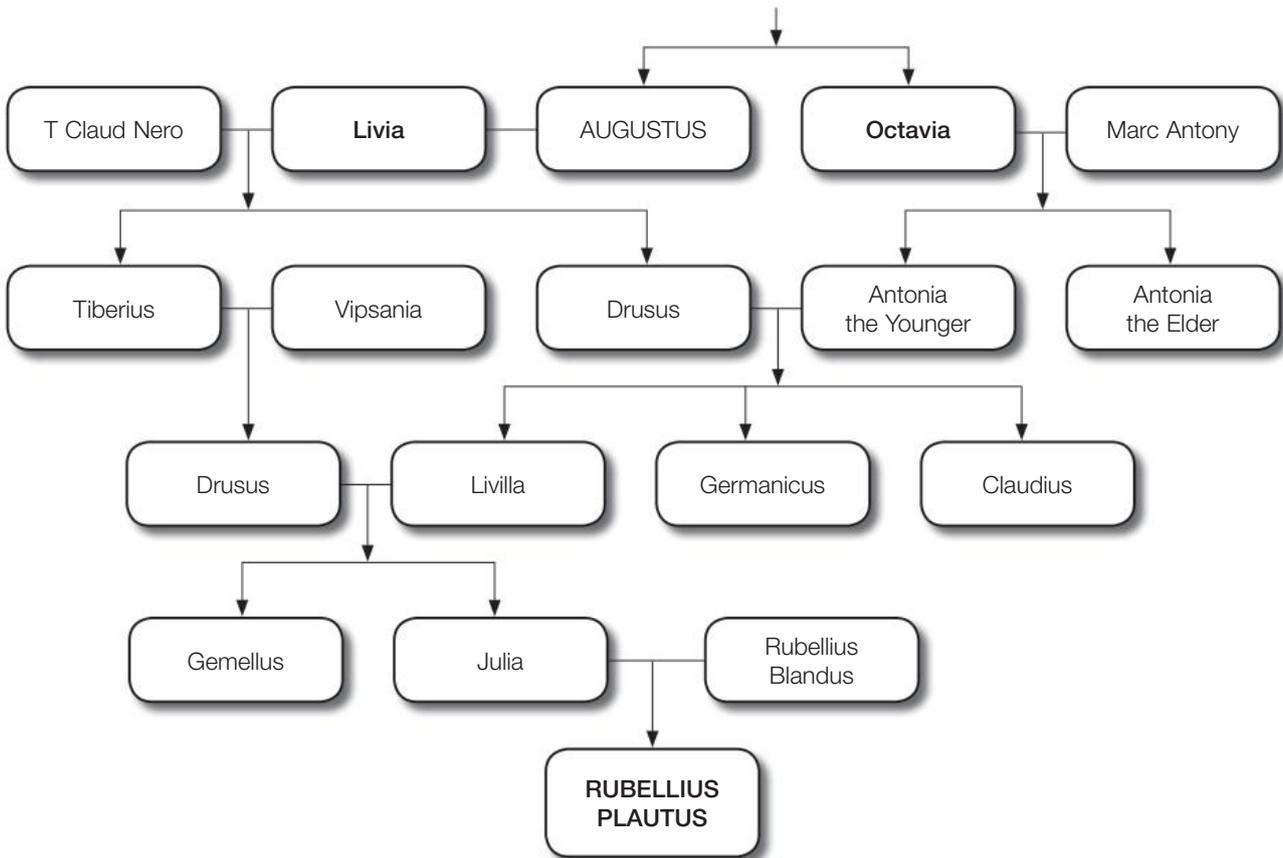
The television series, *I, Claudius*, based on the books of Robert Graves, provides a most enjoyable way of learning about the activities of the early principate. Indeed, at times *I, Claudius*, resembles a grand soap opera rather than a dissection of Roman politics. However, the politics of the Julio-Claudian period were often like this because of the close connections between the main players.

Such is the case in the Rubellius Plautus affair, as serious political manoeuvring and threats became inextricably mixed with stories of female revenge over relationships lost and broken. The key players in this story were Agrippina, Junia Silana and Domitia.

- Junia Silana was the wife of that Silius who had married Messalina in the bizarre bacchic marriage ceremony that preceded her fall.
  - Junia Silana had wanted to remarry and the object of her affections was Sextus Africanus.
  - Agrippina sabotaged this, convincing Sextus Africanus that Junia Silana was too old and was guilty of ‘bad morals’.
  - The sources suggest Agrippina may have had eyes on her property.
- Domitia was Nero’s aunt. She also had no love of Agrippina.
  - It was Agrippina who had taken her husband, Passienus Crispus, from her.
  - It was Agrippina who had destroyed her sister, Domitia Lepida.
- Junia Silana’s supporters claimed that Agrippina was involved in planning a revolt with Rubellius Plautus, and that she planned to marry him. Rubellius Plautus would have been a significant dynastic threat to Nero. Plautus could trace his ancestry back directly to Livia (great, great, grandmother) and Augustus’ sister, Octavia (great, great, grandmother), as Figure 8.3 illustrates.
- Junia Silana informed Domitia and her supporters of the pending revolt, and Domitia made sure that Nero was given the full, sensational details.
- At this point, Nero decided to kill his mother but was convinced by Burrus to allow Agrippina a chance to speak in her defence.
- Agrippina presented a spirited defence and demanded an interview with Nero. She did not try to defend herself but instead demanded punishment for the various accusers. She succeeded. Junia Silana and her supporters were exiled, Domitia’s chief supporter, Atimetus, was killed.

<sup>9</sup> Suetonius, *Nero*, 34

Figure 8.3: The lineage of Rubellius Plautus.



## Exercise 8.2

Using the terms in the box below, complete the following passage.

Agrippina's position was weakening. Nero's \_\_\_\_\_ speech, which had been written by \_\_\_\_\_, clearly foreshadowed the division between the imperial \_\_\_\_\_ and the state. Seneca further tried to undermine Agrippina during the \_\_\_\_\_ delegation affair when he prevented her from joining \_\_\_\_\_ on the imperial dais. To combat Nero's possible discarding of her, Agrippina began to promote the role of \_\_\_\_\_ and moved closer to Nero's wife, \_\_\_\_\_. Nero angered his mother with his involvement with the freedwoman, \_\_\_\_\_. He removed from office Agrippina's freedman supporter, \_\_\_\_\_ and began to take steps to reduce or annoy her such as moving her from his palace to \_\_\_\_\_'s former home. The most serious threat to Agrippina came during the \_\_\_\_\_ affair. She was accused of being involved in a conspiracy, a story that had been promoted by \_\_\_\_\_ Silana and \_\_\_\_\_. Agrippina was able to prove her \_\_\_\_\_.

Nero	Junia	innocence	accession	Britannicus
Seneca	Octavia	Domitia	Pallas	domus
Armenian	Acte	Rubellius Plautus	Antonia	

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## Chapter 9:

# Relationships with other members of the imperial court: Seneca, Burrus and imperial freedmen

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As a woman, it was impossible for Agrippina to hold power in her own right. Rome had had its powerful women in the past; the wife of Augustus, Livia, is a classic example. However, even Livia could wield her power and influence only indirectly ‘through men’. This made such women vulnerable. The destruction of Agrippina the Elder and Messalina provided clear evidence of what could happen to political women if their male support base faltered. Agrippina had power due to her manipulation of, and power over, Claudius and Nero. However, the key figures in Agrippina’s exercise of power were Seneca, Burrus, and the freedmen, Pallas and Narcissus.

### Agrippina and Seneca

Seneca managed to earn the ire of three emperors – Gaius, Claudius and Nero. Having heard Seneca’s brilliance in a legal case in the senate, Gaius, in a fit of jealousy, wanted him dead. A female friend of Seneca intervened with Gaius and persuaded the emperor to show mercy, arguing that Seneca was ill and close to death.

What was the cause of Gaius’ dislike of Seneca?

- Was it simply jealousy of Seneca’s talents?
- Barrett suggests that Seneca could have been somehow involved in the conspiracy of AD 39 (see chapter 6) in which Agrippina had become embroiled.

*“It has even been argued that the mysterious female friend of 39 might have been none other than Agrippina, and that the favour later binding Seneca to her dates from this earlier intervention.”*<sup>1</sup>

One of the earliest victims of Claudius’ reign was Livilla (Agrippina’s sister) with whom Seneca had been ‘involved’. Seneca was charged with adultery but there was probably a political dimension to the case. He was sentenced to death but the sentence was commuted to exile on the island of Corsica. Perhaps Claudius and Messalina were opposed to Seneca because he represented the old Julian faction. Messalina must have played a key role in Seneca’s case as he was able to return to Rome only after her death.

Once Messalina was gone and Agrippina had ensnared Claudius (see chapter 7), Seneca was brought back to Rome thanks to Agrippina. In 50, he became praetor, and Nero’s tutor. There could be several motives behind Agrippina’s action:

- She might have wished to build up her reputation by associating with such a major literary figure.
- Nero’s education had suffered when he was looked after by Domitia. Tacitus certainly alludes to such motives:

*“She judged that owing to his literary eminence this would be popular. She also had designs on him as a distinguished tutor for her young son...”*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Barrett, A, *Agrippina*, B T Batsford, London, 1996, p 68

<sup>2</sup> Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, XII.9

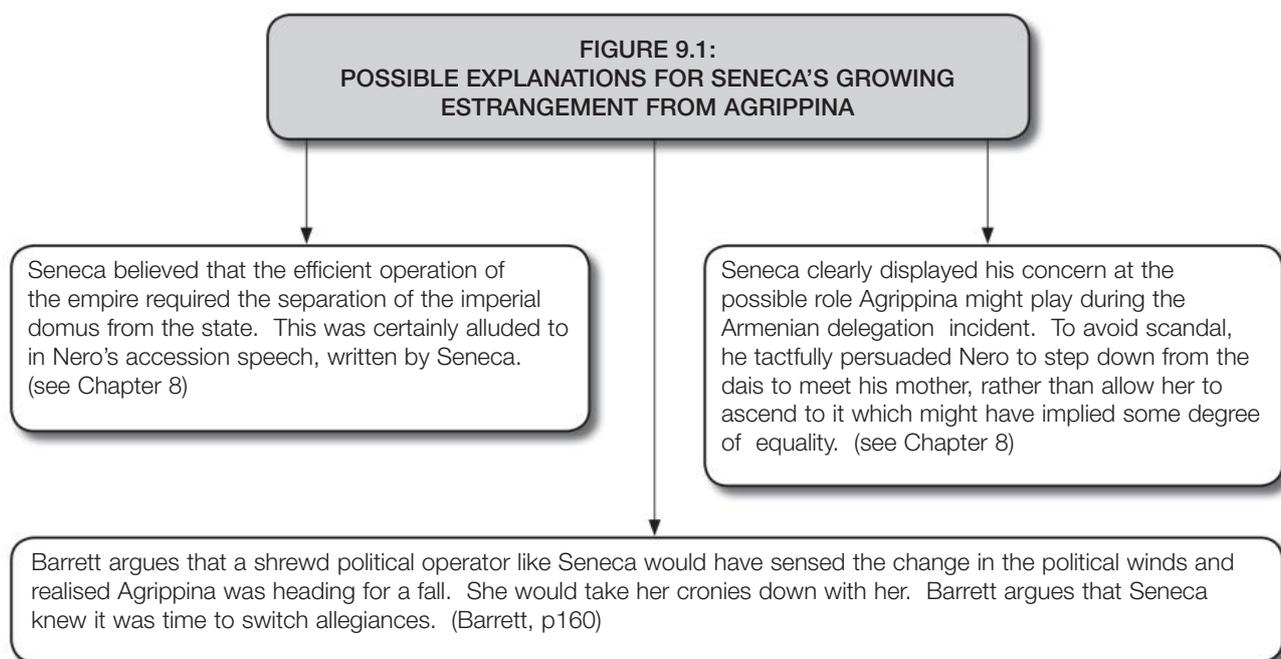
- Perhaps she wanted Nero taught by a mind with similar political views to hers. Had she and Seneca not thought along similar lines in 39? They would have:

*“...seen the value of a ‘constitutional’ form of principate that operated through consensus and the liberalism of the ruler than through the simple exercise of power, and the advantages of imparting this principle to Nero.”<sup>3</sup>*

Seneca prospered thanks to Agrippina, as did members of his family, eg in 51-2, his brother, Junius Gallio was appointed Governor of Asia.

Rumours abounded that there was also a ‘personal’ basis to the relationship between Agrippina and Seneca. In 58, Seneca was accused by Publius Suillius of having had an affair with Agrippina. Would they have risked an affair during Claudius’ reign? It is possible but extra-marital affairs for the emperor’s wife could be dangerous, as Messalina learned.

When Nero became emperor, Seneca and Agrippina began to draw apart as Seneca tried to limit her influence in the state. Tacitus suggests that Seneca worked with Burrus in trying to limit Agrippina’s power and that she “encountered their united opposition.” It is impossible to know to what extent Seneca might have tried to colour Nero’s political thinking. However, what is clear is that he and Agrippina began to move apart. Figure 9.1 suggests three possible explanations for this.



The possible role of Seneca in Agrippina’s death raises an interesting issue. Was he complicit in her demise? Dio certainly likes to argue this line but his account is often hostile to Seneca. It was probably not in Seneca’s interest to remove Agrippina from the scene completely, better to keep her around to irritate Nero who in turn might feel a continuing need to lean on Seneca’s advice.

However, once Nero had tried to murder his mother, there was no turning back. Seneca tried to press Burrus to finally deal with Agrippina but Burrus refused and she was eventually killed by Anicetus and others. (see Chapter 10)

Following the death of Burrus in 62, Seneca left political life to devote himself to his literary studies. However, his name became embroiled in a conspiracy to kill Nero in 65 and he was ordered to commit suicide.

<sup>3</sup> Barrett, p 107

## Exercise 9.1

Place the event in the box below in to the correct chronological order.

1st event	
2nd event	
3rd event	
4th event	
5th event	
6th event	
7th event	
8th event	
9th event	
10th event	

Seneca is brought back from exile	Gaius declares a desire for Seneca's death
Seneca writes Nero's accession speech	Seneca forced to suicide by Nero
Seneca exiled to Corsica	Seneca becomes Nero's tutor
The Armenian delegation incident	The death of Burrus and Seneca's retirement
Female intervention saves Seneca's life	Accused of adultery with Agrippina

## Agrippina and Burrus

Following their marriage, Agrippina persuaded Claudius that the Praetorian Guard would be more efficiently run and less divisive if it had one prefect rather than two. Consequently, the two prefects who had been placed in their positions by Messalina, Lusius Geta and Rufrius Crispinus, were replaced by Sextus Afranius Burrus. Agrippina saw in Burrus a man who could stabilise the political situation and who would clearly add strength to her position. Tacitus makes the point that Burrus realised to whom he owed his elevation.

*"...Thereupon the command was transferred to Sextus Afranius Burrus, who was a distinguished soldier but fully aware whose initiative was behind his appointment."*<sup>4</sup>

Burrus played a major role in easing the transition from Claudius to Nero. Following Claudius' death, Burrus cooperated in ensuring that a loyal Praetorian Guard would rally behind the new emperor. His name is often linked with that of Seneca. However, it is unlikely that the two men were consciously working in partnership. Each had a specific function, though in times of crisis, they would work together. This was seen in the Armenian delegation incident and at the time of Agrippina's death.

<sup>4</sup> Tacitus, XII.42

Like Seneca, Burrus sought to control the young Nero's behaviour.

- During the Rubellius Plautus affair (see Chapter 9), Burrus dissuaded Nero from immediately putting Agrippina to death. In this Burrus was probably motivated by both loyalty and self-interest; Agrippina's departure could have lessened his influence in the state.
- Barrett suggests that Burrus' gradual move away from Agrippina was ironic as he clearly owed his position to her, and was in general sympathy with her ideas.

*"The parting of ways for Agrippina and... (Burrus)... may well have been brought about by nothing more complicated than a natural instinct for self-preservation."*<sup>5</sup>

- Burrus played no role in the death of Agrippina and indeed refused to order his guards to murder her, arguing that members of the Guard had sworn an oath to protect all members of the imperial family.

Burrus did not last long after Agrippina's death. He died in 62, possibly from poisoning.

## Agrippina and Pallas

Marcus Antonius Pallas played a major role in Agrippina's efforts to wield power and influence. He supported her candidature as Claudius' fourth wife, pushed for the adoption of Nero and in his role as a *rationibus*, he played a key role in the empire's finances, and so, by association, did Agrippina.

During the reign of Claudius, Agrippina had a strong ally in Pallas who was able to lessen the influence of another of Claudius' freedmen, Narcissus, who opposed Agrippina's influence.

- Pallas first appears at the time of Sejanus' fall. He was so trusted by his mistress, Antonia, that he was given the job of delivering her letter to Tiberius that would finally bring down Sejanus.
- He was probably freed before Antonia's death in 37 as he took his nomen (Antonius) from her.
- Under Claudius he regulated the financial affairs of procurators of the imperial provinces. Barrett refers to the duties of an *rationibus* as also having responsibility for imperial palace finances, the emperor's estates, roads and grain distribution.
- Pallas was to become a rich man. As for Agrippina:

*"...Pallas' position would have given Agrippina unique access to the financial operations of the state."*<sup>6</sup>

Following the death of Messalina, Tacitus tells the story of the debate that took place regarding who should become Claudius' next wife. (see Chapter 7). Pallas championed Agrippina, presenting several key arguments in her favour:

- She would bring to the marriage a grandson of Germanicus, a child who clearly deserved imperial rank.
- Such a union would link two branches of the imperial house.
- It would be foolish to allow such a young woman of proven fertility to take her glorious name to another family.

The benefits Pallas gained from his association with Claudius and Agrippina went beyond amassing a fortune. Pallas and Agrippina were exceedingly close and were most probably lovers for some time. Pallas was able to obtain lucrative posts for members of his family. Pallas' brother Felix, who shared Agrippina's pro-Jewish sentiments, was appointed procurator of Judaea. In appreciation for her assistance, Felix had coins minted in Judaea with Agrippina's name embedded in a wreath on the reverse side.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Barrett, pp 159-60

<sup>6</sup> Barrett, p 133

<sup>7</sup> Felix appears in Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 24, verses 26-27. "Some days later Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was a Jewess, and sending for Paul he let him talk to him about faith in Christ Jesus...."

Nero's removal of Pallas can be seen as an attempt by the young emperor to lessen the power of his mother.

*"The removal of Pallas marked a significant stage in Nero's determination to distance himself from his predecessor. It also represented a serious blow to Agrippina."*<sup>8</sup>

The details of any case against Pallas remain unclear, but it probably revolved around various claims of financial impropriety. Pallas escaped at this time and continued to live in some style but his days of power were gone. However, he remained in Nero's thoughts. He eventually died in 62, poisoned on Nero's orders Tacitus tells us *"for reserving his own immense riches for himself by living so long."*<sup>9</sup>

## Agrippina and Narcissus

Narcissus was a loyal freedman to Claudius and arguably the most influential of the freedmen until Agrippina arrived on the scene. In 43, he played a major role in ending a potential mutiny before Claudius' departure for Britain. He was also the key figure in bringing about the end of Messalina. (see Chapter 7)

Narcissus was no friend and ally of Agrippina. When Claudius was looking for a new wife, he championed the cause of Aelia Paetina.

- He argued that she and Claudius had been married before and had had a daughter.
- Their marriage would cause no major domestic disruptions.
- Aelia Paetina would be a good step-mother to Britannicus and Octavia.

Pallas' promotion of Agrippina's cause won out and Narcissus' relationship with Agrippina did not get any better.

The sources show the two of them frequently at odds. One of the most notable incidents concerns the draining of the Fucine Lake. This involved the digging of a five kilometre tunnel, opened in 52. A mock naval battle was staged to mark the event, the famous "gold cloak" occasion (see Chapter 7). The opening was a disaster. Once the mock battle was over, the sluices were opened but instead of a torrent of water pouring through, there was a mere trickle. The tunnel had been sunk at the wrong depth.

The tunnel was dug deeper and after a gladiatorial show, a second opening was staged. This time the opposite happened; the out rush of water was so great, Claudius and members of his group were almost drowned.

Agrippina openly blamed Narcissus and there were accusations that his misappropriation of funds was responsible for the disaster. Narcissus responded by *"assailing her dictatorial feminine excess of ambition."*<sup>10</sup>

*"The lines were now clearly drawn between Agrippina and the freedman, and we might date from this incident the beginning of the end for Narcissus."*<sup>11</sup>

Tacitus suggests that Narcissus now felt doomed, regardless of who succeeded Claudius: Nero or Britannicus. He was hated by Nero's mother and he had had Britannicus' mother murdered. However, he remained devoted to Claudius. Confident he could bring down Agrippina, he decided to make overtures to Britannicus.

Narcissus, who suffered from gout, went to Sinuessa for a cure and was there when Claudius died. When he returned to Rome, Narcissus' position was precarious: Claudius was gone, the senate was not keen on him, he was no friend of Nero and Agrippina was his enemy. He was soon placed

<sup>8</sup> Barrett, p 169

<sup>9</sup> Tacitus, XIV.65

<sup>10</sup> Tacitus, XII.57

<sup>11</sup> Barrett, p 130

under guard and within a year he was dead, either murdered or forced to suicide. Narcissus' final gesture was strange – he burnt a pile of letters which could have incriminated Agrippina, according to Dio. Bauman doubts that this happened.

*“If there was any destruction of documents it will have been carried out by Agrippina’s agents.”*<sup>12</sup>

## Exercise 9.2

Indicate whether each of the following statements is true or false.

1	Burrus owed his appointment to Agrippina.	TRUE/ FALSE
2	Burrus was reluctant to assist in Nero becoming the emperor after the death of Claudius.	TRUE/ FALSE
3	Nero valued Burrus' role enormously and sought to extend it even after Agrippina's death.	TRUE/ FALSE
4	Agrippina's closeness to Pallas greatly assisted her exercise of power and influence.	TRUE/ FALSE
5	Pallas continued to wield power well into the reign of Nero.	TRUE/ FALSE
6	Pallas was eventually killed on Nero's orders.	TRUE/ FALSE
7	Narcissus was extremely loyal to Claudius.	TRUE/ FALSE
8	Narcissus argued strongly for the marriage of Claudius and Agrippina.	TRUE/ FALSE
9	Narcissus was a key player in the murder of Britannicus' mother, Messalina.	TRUE/ FALSE
10	Narcissus' involvement in the Fucine Lake incident improved his relationship with Agrippina.	TRUE/ FALSE

<sup>12</sup> Bauman, R, *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome*, Routledge, London, 1992, p 186

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## Chapter 10:

# Attempts on the life and eventual death of Agrippina the Younger

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### Poppaea Sabina

*“Poppaea Sabina was destined to achieve what the professional politicians of two reigns had not been able to do, namely the complete and final destruction of Agrippina.”*<sup>1</sup>

Tacitus does not hold back in describing what a despicable woman Poppaea Sabina was, suggesting that she had every virtue except virtue. Her maternal grandfather had been a consul in AD 9. Her father had become entangled with Sejanus during the reign of Tiberius and her mother was that Poppaea Sabina who had been destroyed by Messalina.

- The sources agree that Poppaea was a most beautiful woman.
- Apparently, she was willing to bestow her feminine favours on a variety of men if it brought her gain.
- She was married to the Praetorian Prefect, Rufrius Crispinus but was seduced by M Salvius Otho (later emperor for a brief time) and married him.
- Poppaea became what we would describe today as a trendsetter in the area of fashion and style.

Her liaison with Nero began in 58. Nevertheless, Poppaea also hoped to keep Otho, “a real man”, but Nero sent him off to be governor of Lusitania until the end of the reign.

### To murder one’s mother

Tacitus opens his account of the year 59 in dramatic style.

*“When the new year came, and Gaius Vipstanus Apronianus and Gaius Fonteius Capito became consuls, Nero ceased delaying his long-meditated crime.”*<sup>2</sup>

Tacitus makes much of Poppaea’s taunting of Nero. She realised that Nero would never divorce Octavia and marry her as long as Agrippina was alive. She mocked him, alleging that he was not a real emperor but a mere pupil. She asked Nero if he doubted her love, her child-bearing capacity or her beauty.

*“...Poppaea nagged and mocked him incessantly. He was an emperor under orders, she said – master neither of the empire nor of himself.”*<sup>3</sup>

She told Nero that he was scared of marrying her because she would tell him about his mother’s treatment of the senate and the outrage felt by the public about her arrogance. With a combination of tears and seduction, she eventually won him over to ‘dealing with Agrippina’ once and for all.

Agrippina did not sit idly by and allow her fate to be decided by another woman. The sources make much of her efforts to lure Nero into an incestuous relationship with her. She would dress as sexily as possible, come close to Nero and endeavour to lead him into her bed. Suetonius has few doubts about the incest.

*“...some say that he did, in fact, commit incest with Agrippina every time they rode in the same litter – the stains on his clothes when he emerged proved it.”*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bauman, R, *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome*, Routledge, London, 1992, p 199

<sup>2</sup> Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, XIII.58

<sup>3</sup> Tacitus, XIII.58

<sup>4</sup> Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, Nero, 28

Tacitus is a little more circumspect and is not as categorical as Suetonius. He relates that friends of Nero persuaded Acte to warn Nero against consummating a relationship with his mother, arguing that the Praetorian Guard would simply not tolerate such sacrilegious, unRoman behaviour.

## The failed attempt to murder Agrippina

The question now arose, how to actually kill Agrippina.

- Poison had always been a tried and tested method used by several generations of Julio-Claudian family members.
  - Suetonius suggests that Nero had attempted poisoning on three occasions.
  - Tacitus says that this method was not considered. The death of Britannicus was still too fresh in people's minds and another poisoning would not have looked good.
  - Agrippina had built up a resistance to poisons with her frequent swallowing of antidotes.
- Another plan was for Agrippina to be crushed in her bed by falling ceiling panels.

A solution to the problem was found by Anicetus, Nero's former tutor and an old enemy of Agrippina. Anicetus' idea was to build a collapsible ship which would hurl Agrippina into the sea.

In March 59, Nero invited his mother to dine with him at his residence in Baiae during the festival of Minerva. The evening went extremely well and old enmities between mother and son seemed to have been cast aside. Agrippina prepared for her return trip to Bauli:

*"Nero was in a very happy mood as he led Agrippina down to the quay, and even kissed her breasts before she stepped aboard."*<sup>5</sup>

Once the boat was on its way, on a given signal the roof collapsed, crushing Agrippina's friend Crepereius Gallus, killing him instantly. However, the ship did not break up. Agrippina's friend, Acerronia Polla called out for help, claiming to be Agrippina, 'the emperor's mother'. This was not a good move and she was quickly *"struck dead by blows from poles and oars and whatever ship's gear happened to be available."* Agrippina was not recognised. She jumped into the water and swam away, to be rescued later by an oyster boat's crew.

## Matricide at last

Once ashore and back home, Agrippina sent a message to Nero, describing her lucky escape and putting her survival down to "divine mercy and his lucky star". Agrippina clearly thought it best to feign ignorance of what had obviously been an assassination attempt, believing this was the only way she might survive.

Nero was now in a state of panic, fearing that Agrippina might arm her slaves, whip up the army or gain access to the senate.

*"Now that events had turned critical, Seneca and Burrus realised that there was no way that Nero could be dissuaded from taking the final drastic step, but were equally reluctant to allow their own names to be tarnished."*<sup>6</sup>

- Seneca suggested that the Praetorian Guard might be used to finish things.
- Burrus opposed this on the grounds that the Guard had taken an oath to defend the entire imperial family.
- The task then fell to Anicetus.

<sup>5</sup> Suetonius, Nero, 34

<sup>6</sup> Barrett, A, Agrippina, B T Batsford, London, 1996, p 189

To make things easier for Anicetus, Agrippina's messenger to Nero, Agerinus, was arrested during a piece of theatrical farce. As he gave his mistress' message to Nero, a sword was planted at his feet and he was accused of attempting to kill the emperor on Agrippina's orders. Her death now became justified. Anicetus and others forced their way into Agrippina's villa at Bauli. Agrippina said to them that if they had come to visit her, she wanted the emperor to know that she was feeling better. If they had come to kill her, she did not believe it could be on her son's orders. At this, Herculeius struck her on the head. As Obaritus drew his sword:

*"...she cried out: 'Strike here!' – pointing to her womb. Blow after blow fell and she died."*<sup>7</sup>

When Nero later saw her dead body, he is alleged to have commented on his mother's surprising beauty. If this is true, it would tend to discredit earlier claims of incest. Agrippina was cremated quickly and her remains placed in an uncovered and unenclosed grave.

Nero now took on a "gloomy countenance". Nero later admitted, according to Suetonius, that from now he was hounded by his mother's ghost and that the furies pursued him with their whips. Persian magicians were employed to conjure up the ghost in order to seek its forgiveness.<sup>8</sup>

### Why did Nero kill Agrippina?

For protection following Agerinus' plot? This is most unlikely and few in Rome took seriously the alleged crime of Agerinus.

Was it to punish Agrippina for her previous crimes? Tacitus says that only a fool could believe such things. Nevertheless, Rome indulged in thanksgiving and games for the emperor's deliverance. Agrippina's birthday was declared a day of ill omen.

Was it simply so he could marry Poppaea Sabina? Nero did divorce Octavia and marry Poppaea – but not for three years.

### The results of Agrippina's death were mixed to say the least.

Nero brought back some of the people Agrippina had exiled such as Junia Calvina and the praetors Valerius Capito and Licinius Gabolus.

Burrus and the Praetorian Guard offered their congratulations to Nero on his escape from the plot. Burrus' earlier loyalty to Agrippina was soon forgotten.

*"Once she was off the scene self-interest took over, as it always did, and impelled them to a show of loyalty to the reigning princeps. A donation of cash no doubt encouraged their sense of duty."*<sup>9</sup>

Tacitus suggests that the main result of Agrippina's death was to have the final restraints on Nero removed.

*"Then he plunged into the wildest improprieties, which vestiges of respect for his mother had hitherto not indeed repressed, but at least impeded."*<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Tacitus, XIV.8

<sup>8</sup> Suetonius, Nero, 34

<sup>9</sup> Barrett, p 191

<sup>10</sup> Tacitus, XIV.12

**Exercise 10.1**

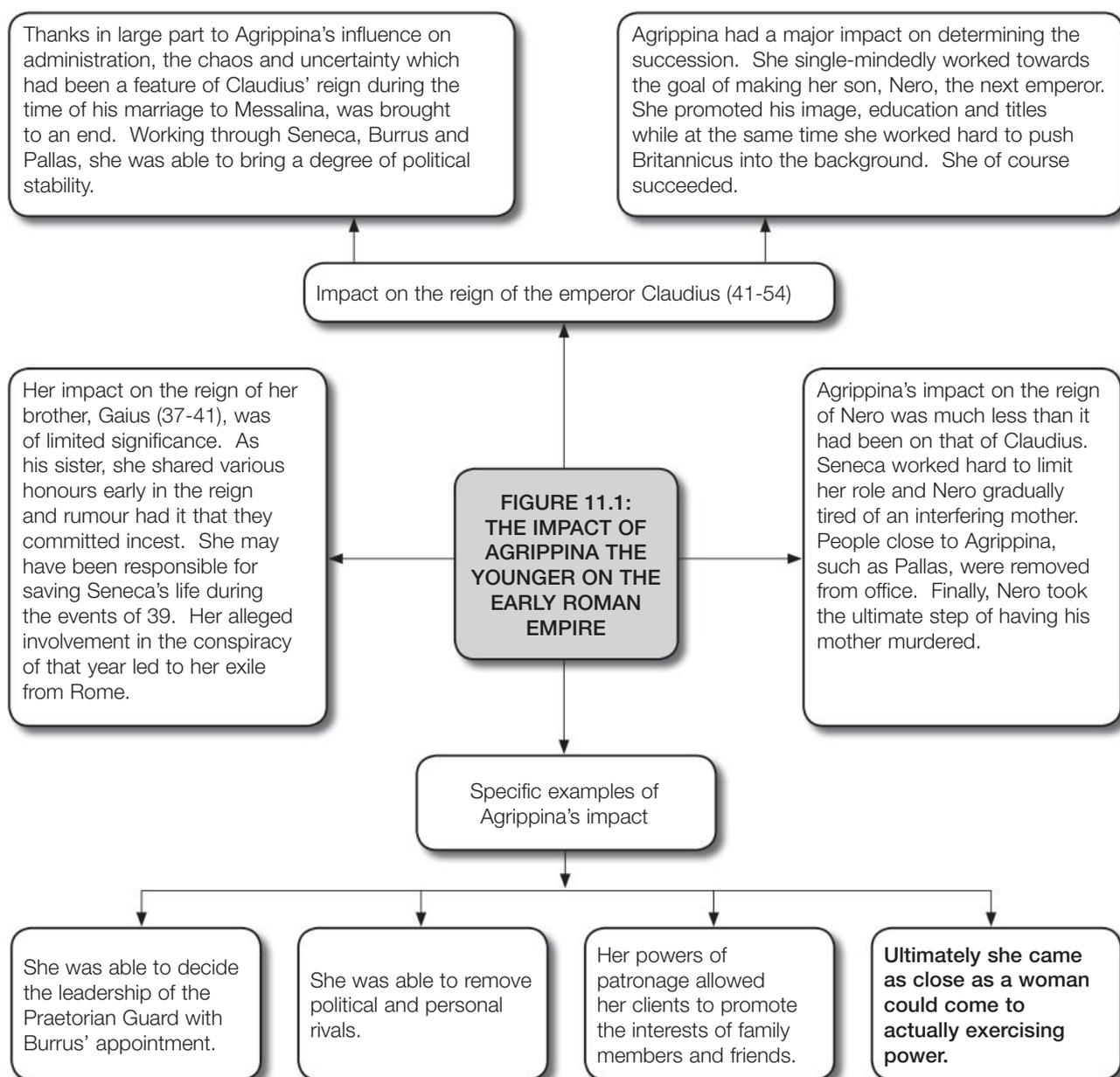
Match the personality in the box below with the description given on the left.

1	His sword was plunged into Agrippina	
2	Agrippina's luckless messenger	
3	Husband of Poppaea Sabina	
4	Agrippina's friend killed when claiming to be 'the emperor's mother'	
5	Nero's main love interest from 58	
6	First wife of Nero	
7	Agrippina's friend, crushed on the boat	
8	Reluctant to use the Praetorian Guard to kill Agrippina	
9	Nero's collapsible boat builder	
10	Keen to be absolved of Agrippina's murder and have Burrus commit the final act	

POPPAEA SABINA	AGERINUS	ANICETUS	BURRUS
ACERRONIA POLLA	OBARITUS	M SALVIUS OTHO	
CREPEREIUS GALLUS	SENECA	OCTAVIA	

## Chapter 11: Impact, assessment and legacy

Love her or hate her, there is no denying that Agrippina the Younger had a massive **impact** on the early years of the Roman Empire. Her actions and her impact have been covered in detailed in the preceding chapters. Figure 11.1 summarises some of the elements of the impact she had on Rome.



An **assessment** of the career of Agrippina is always difficult. The legend that has been passed down to us through history is such that it makes her one of the most fascinating Romans of the early empire period. If legend is to be believed, she slept with her brother Gaius, tried to overthrow him, married her uncle Claudius, murdered him, and then slept with her son, Nero, in order to maintain her political influence. It is a great story – a heady mix of betrayal, incest and murder. Of all the occurrences mentioned above, the only one about which we can be certain is that she married her uncle Claudius.

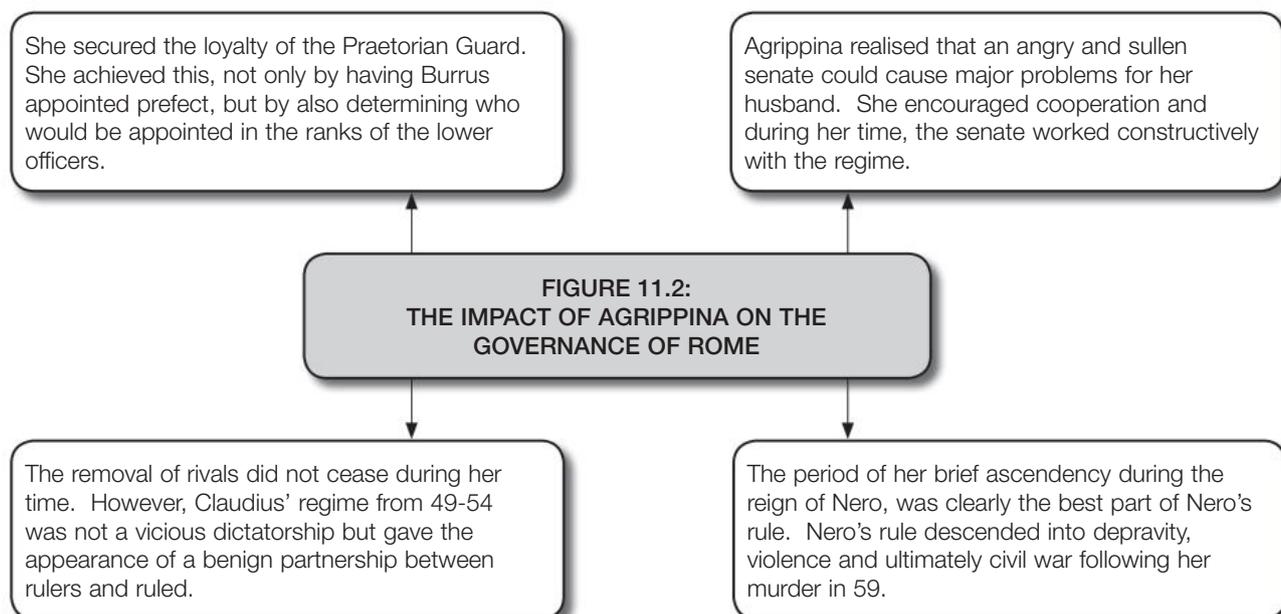
It is almost impossible to be one hundred per cent certain about Agrippina's career because the sources from ancient times are almost universally hostile to her. As a result, there is a tendency for modern readers to focus on the seamy side of her life rather than on the able administration that did much to stabilise the second half of Claudius' reign. It is not difficult to understand why the sources are so hostile.

- Suetonius, of course, loves the gossip and is willing to include almost anything he has heard about her. Whether or not he is able to verify the stories he tells is an issue his historical method would not have taken into consideration.
- However, Tacitus was not the scandal-monger that Suetonius was. Tacitus had no love of the empire and his republican sentiments drove him to paint the empire in a negative light.
  - Whether he is attacking Tiberius' perversity, Claudius' incompetence or Nero's outrageousness, the empire was an easy target.
  - Agrippina's involvement in the affairs of state would have opened her up to attack regardless of her gender.
- However, her gender was an issue. Women were not expected to be involved in politics; that was not their natural role. To the ancient writers, Agrippina's ambitions would have been viewed as feminine evil.

Modern scholars from the 19th century German writer Adolf Stahr to Syme to Werner Eck pepper their accounts of her life with terms such as 'violent', 'robust criminality', 'murderous immorality' and 'depraved'.

However, such an assessment of Agrippina is surely unjust. Certainly, she was ruthless, determined, ambitious, Macchiavellian in the extreme. However, it could be argued that any political figure who makes it to the top of the political ladder in any country during any period of history, must be ruthless, ambitious, determined and manipulative. To accuse Agrippina of such traits is thus not actually saying much. And there is no denying her achievements. Thanks to the influence of Agrippina, the government of her husband, Claudius was transformed – for the better. Figure 11.2 suggests some of the ways in which this was achieved.

What was the **legacy** of Agrippina the Younger? During her time she was powerful and influential, and it was largely Agrippina who was responsible for determining the succession. However, it could be argued that there was no long lasting impact of her life. While she was alive, she survived only by establishing powerful alliances and isolating opponents. This Agrippina achieved brilliantly during Claudius' reign but failed spectacularly during Nero's.



However, she quickly disappears as time moves on:

- There is little physical memory of Agrippina beyond representations on coins, the occasional cameo, statues and the occasional relief such as the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias.
- No political groupings were formed to resurrect her reputation after her death. Any supporters she had were either removed or, sensing the political trends of the time, simply took up new allegiances.
- Subsequent emperors, such as Vespasian (AD 69-79), made no efforts to commemorate her life and achievements. Roman writers merely succeeded in blackening her name.
- The only evidence we have of Agrippina being remembered can be found during the reign of Trajan (AD 98-117). A head of Agrippina was discovered in Trajan's forum. This may have been put in place to support Trajan's claims to honour family members.
- The next sculpted appearance of Agrippina came in a relief on a 1915 fountain built in the German city of Cologne. The fountain was restored in 1955. In 1993 a statue of Agrippina was placed in the city's town hall to honour her role in the ancient founding of the city.

Perhaps Agrippina's legacy was that she formally defined the place of a woman in the Roman political system. She failed to break down the staunchly conservative patriarchal attitudes of her contemporaries for whom politics was no place for a woman. It would be over 150 years before a woman would again attempt to play a key role in Roman political life. This could suggest that part of Agrippina's legacy was to act as a warning to aspiring political women. The price a woman might have to pay for attempting to wield power and influence was to end up being beaten and cut to pieces by a band of assassins on the orders of one's son.



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## Chapter 12

# Ancient and modern images and interpretations of Agrippina the Younger

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### The physical interpretation of Agrippina the Younger

The Agrippina who is represented in statues, on coins and in reliefs, is quite different to the immoral, often outrageous and vicious woman presented by the ancient writers. In fact, as will be discussed below, she appears positively demure, matronly, indeed even pious. Figures 12.1 and 12.2 present Agrippina in such a manner.

**Figure 12.1:**  
Statue of Agrippina in reclining pose



**Figure 12.2:**  
Statue of Agrippina in reclining pose



Figures 12.3 and 12.4 come from a relief of the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias (Turkey). The relief in Figure 12.3 shows Agrippina holding the hand of Claudius, indicating perhaps a degree of affection or agreement. The toga-clad figure on the right of this relief represents the senate and people of Rome crowning Claudius.

**Figure 12.3:**  
Agrippina and Claudius from the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias.



**Figure 12.4:**  
Nero and Agrippina from the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias.



The relief in Figure 12.4 shows Agrippina placing the crown on the head of her son, Nero. This would seem to suggest an increase in her power and influence has occurred.

## The written interpretation of Agrippina the Younger

As was mentioned in Chapter 11, the ancient writers shared a strong hostility towards Agrippina the Younger. She is presented as immoral, brutal, willing to use any degree of violence, unconcerned about abusing the legal system to remove rivals to her husband's political power, or people she perceived as rivals on a personal level. She is seen as manipulative and unprincipled. This is certainly the view shared by Tacitus, Dio and Suetonius. Suetonius enjoys the gossip of incest and violence attributed to her, but his account lacks the malice of the other two.

Here is a standard representation of Agrippina from Dio Cassius (late 2nd/ early 3rd century)

*As soon as Agrippina had come to live in the palace she gained complete control over Claudius. Indeed, she was very clever in making the most of opportunities, and, partly by fear and partly by favours, she won the devotion of all those who were at all friendly toward him. At length she caused his son Britannicus to be brought up as if he were a mere nobody... She made Domitius the son-in-law of Claudius at this time and later brought about his adoption also. She accomplished these ends partly by getting the freedmen to persuade Claudius and partly by arranging beforehand that the senate, the populace, and the soldiers would join together in shouting their approval of her demands on every occasion.*<sup>1</sup>

- Claudius is represented as being controlled by a woman.
- Agrippina's ability to exercise patronage is shown.
- Her manipulation of the various aspects of the state is shown.

Most modern writers, at least up to the late 20th century, have generally tended to echo this view of the ancients. Up to this time, the writing of ancient history remained very much the reserve of middle-aged men who usually did not question the male-dominated, patriarchal nature of their own times. Thus, why would they feel inclined to question a similar set of values from early imperial Rome? Consequently, the accounts of Tacitus, Dio and Suetonius were generally accepted.

Here is a typical 20th century view of Agrippina from a male writer.

*Agrippina...exhibited an undisguised lust for power... (Both Agrippina and Messalina) were quite unscrupulous in the means by which they sought to gratify their fancies, and both used their influence with the emperor to remove those who stood in their way.*<sup>2</sup>

Another male writer describes Agrippina as "ambitious and unscrupulous". Commenting on the situation shortly after Nero's accession:

*"...Agrippina now meant to rule through her son. She murdered or drove to suicide potential foes... Her power was advertised on the coinage... Nero's name and titles were banished to the reverse."*<sup>3</sup>

However, since the 1970s, the writing of history, both modern and ancient, has come under the influence of a wide range of historiographical trends. Notable amongst these have been the writing of feminist history and the appearance of gender studies. This has led to historians approaching a figure like Agrippina from a different perspective. Instead of a woman-hating middle-aged man, fearful of a threat to the natural "patriarchal" order of things, we now have sympathetic women able to view Agrippina as an intelligent, determined woman who should be admired for achieving as much as she did in a world totally dominated by men.

<sup>1</sup> Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, LXI 32.1-2

<sup>2</sup> Cary, M, *A History of Rome*, Macmillan, London, 1954, pp 527-8

<sup>3</sup> Scullard, HH, *From the Gracchi to Nero*, Methuen, London, 1970, pp 314-5-6

Such a view can be found in the work of Judith Ginsburg: *Representing Agrippina: Constructions of Female Power in the Early Roman Empire* (OUP 2005).

- Ginsburg argues that Agrippina's role in history has been affected by the repetition of distorted stereotypes such as “wicked stepmother”, “domineering woman” and “sexual transgressor”.
- Tacitus' treatment of Agrippina needs to be seen in the wider context of his attack on Julio-Claudian rule. His treatment of Agrippina is thus a literary construct to assist his wider aim.

In fact a close examination of the numismatic and statuary evidence suggests a figure quite different to that presented by Tacitus and Suetonius.

- This evidence often presents Agrippina as:
  - a traditional Roman matron and priestess
  - an icon of domestic correctness, moral uprightness and public piety.

An example of this approach can be seen in the coin below in Figure 12.5 which comes from the reign of Claudius c 50-54. Agrippina appears on the reverse, advertising her ‘Augusta’ title: “Agrippinae Augustae”

**Figure 12.5: Coin from the reign of Claudius c 50-54**



### Fictional interpretations of Agrippina

Not surprisingly, literature, cinema and opera have all attempted to present a perhaps fanciful view of Agrippina.

- An opera composed by George Frideric Handel appeared in 1710 for the Venice Carnivale. Though the characters are historical, this is an amusing farce which attempts to comment on contemporary politics rather than reflect the realities of early imperial Rome. Even so, Agrippina is presented as an unscrupulous schemer.
- In 1956, the actress Gloria Swanson played Agrippina in the film *Nero's Mistress*. This film does not seek to take the story seriously; it is a comedy in which everybody is trying to kill everybody else. Brigitte Bardot appears as Poppaea Sabina.
- In 1985, Ava Gardner played Agrippina in the epic twelve hour mini-series *Anno Domini*. This covered the years AD 30-69, and attempted to give a sweeping view of Rome and the rise of Christianity at this time. Gardner's role in this big budget, all-star production was not great and it presented Agrippina in the usual manipulative way.
- The classic 1976 BBC series, *I, Claudius*, based on the books of Robert Graves, had Barbara Young playing Agrippina (called Agrippinilla in the show). Agrippina was presented in the normal scheming, unscrupulous manner of which the ancient sources would approve.

For interpretations of Agrippina the Younger, let us leave the last word with Robert Graves. Scurrilous though Graves' version might be, he could not be faulted on the depth of his research and his command of the classics.

*Agrippinilla...cared only for power. Sexually, as I (Claudius) have said, she was completely immoral; yet she was by no means prodigal of her favours. She only slept with men who could be useful to her politically.*<sup>4</sup>

### Exercise 12.1

Choose the name in the box which best matches the descriptions below.

1	I bear no malice towards Agrippina but how can I not include all the sordid stories that I have discovered about her life?	
2	I turned the career of Agrippina into little more than a farcical story set to opera.	
3	My relief suggests that Agrippina's power and influence grew as time went on.	
4	My film version took a light-hearted look at the story of Agrippina.	
5	Just because I wrote about 150 years after her death, my critical account of Agrippina is still worth considering.	
6	The BBC had me playing Agrippina in the usual stereotypical, manipulative manner	
7	Just because I am a middle-aged man who lives in a male-dominated society, that does not mean that my view of Agrippina is necessarily wrong.	
8	You can hardly expect me to say nice things about Agrippina when I hate the whole idea of Julio-Claudian rule supplanting the republic	
9	Mine has to be the all time classic fictional representation of Agrippina, though I sure did my research homework.	
10	My representation of Agrippina suggests a matronly and pious appearance.	

DIO CASSIUS	HANDEL	TACITUS	ROBERT GRAVES
BARBARA YOUNG	GLORIA SWANSON	ROMAN COINS	
SUETONIUS	SEBASTEION OF APHRODISIAS		M CARY

<sup>4</sup> Graves, R, *Claudius the God*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1961 edition, p 396

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# Advice on writing responses for the personality section in the Ancient History HSC paper

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## The basics of the Ancient History examination

The HSC examination in Ancient History is a three hour paper and students are allowed a five minute reading time before the examination commences.

The paper is divided into four sections.

### Section 1 is the core: Cities of Vesuvius – Pompeii and Herculanium

- Do this question first. Students will have had five minutes reading time to study the sources and so they will be fresh in the mind. In the reading, focus only on the Core.
- ALL questions in this section must be answered.
- Some questions will be straightforward and ask you to use both a source (or sources) and your own information to provide an answer.
  - Such a question might be a simple description style question.
  - Or it might ask you to provide some form of assessment which requires a judgment and for which a straight description is inadequate.
- Longer answers might be in the form “To what extent...” Such questions require an argument and could expect you to make a judgment about how useful a source(s) is (are) in discovering an aspect of Pompeii.
- Simpler questions might relate to the survey area – these may or may not involve a reference to a source – these will be of a lower mark value.
- The mark allocation can change from year to year. Thus, students need to be aware of the mark value of each question and allocate time accordingly.
  - Do not spend too long on low mark questions.
  - Be sure to spend adequate time on greater mark questions.
- Be careful to have revised both Pompeii and Herculanium.
- Spend only 45 minutes on this section. Once the clock has ticked around to 45 minutes, move on to the next section. Do not write beyond 45 minutes under any circumstances – even though you think you have a wealth of things to say.

### Section II of the paper comprises the Ancient Societies <sup>1</sup>

- There are eight questions in this section.
- Students answer only one question from this section.
- Do this question second or third; spend only 45 minutes doing it.

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<sup>1</sup> For more detail on how to respond to the Ancient Society question, see: Webb, K, *Spartan Society to the Battle of Leuctra 371 BC*, Get Smart Education, Mona Vale, 2018.

- The Ancient Society question will (usually) have three or four separate questions within it. Each question expects a different type of response and consequently the mark value for each question will vary.
- Allocate time appropriately – do not spend twenty minutes on a three mark question; do not spend five minutes on a fifteen mark question! Time allocation is the essence of exam technique.
- Over the years, the mark value of each part of this question may well vary.

### **Section III of the paper comprises the Personalities in Their Times**

- There are ten questions in this section.
- Students answer only one question from this section.
- Students answer all parts of this question.
- This is a structured question with different parts. Students must allocate time accordingly. If a part is worth 15 marks, you would probably spend about 27 minutes on this; if it is worth ten marks about 18 minutes. For much lower mark parts, much less time.
- Ensure that if a part refers to a specific given source, or asks for additional sources, that these are included. Higher value parts would expect not only a use of sources but also some attempt at evaluation of the source.
- Spend only 45 minutes on the Personalities (Agrippina) section. Once 45 minutes is up, move on!

### **Section IV of the paper comprises the Historical Periods <sup>2</sup>**

- There are ten questions in this section.
- Students answer only one question from this section.
- There will be two alternatives from which students can choose – answer only ONE of the two alternatives given.
- This question is a full essay. It is a good idea to leave this question till last. If a student has made errors on timing throughout the examination, it is better to have a single essay question to do at the end rather than a structured question with several parts. It is still possible to write a reasonable essay response in 35 minutes.

**Time allocation is crucial. Be obsessive about it. 45 minutes for each section.**

<sup>2</sup> For more detail on how to respond to the Historical Period question, see: Webb, K, *The Fall of the Roman Republic 78-31 BC*, Get Smart Education, Mona Vale, 2019; Webb, K, *The Augustan Age 44 BC – AD 14*, Get Smart Education, Mona Vale, 2019; Webb, K, *The Julio-Claudians and the Roman Empire AD 14-69*, Get Smart Education, Mona Vale, 2019; Webb, K, *The Greek World 500-440 BC*, Get Smart Education, Mona Vale, 2019.

## Answering the Agrippina the Younger question

This question will contain two or three parts. One of the parts will be worth 10 or 15 marks. Allocate time accordingly.

Option J – Agrippina the Younger (25 marks)

Here are some possible lower mark value questions.

- (a) Outline Agrippina's links to the Julian family. (3)
- (b) With reference to Source K, describe the how Agrippina promoted the position of Nero during the reign of Claudius. (4)
- (c) What arguments did Pallas use to justify Agrippina's marriage to Claudius. (3)
- (d) Describe Agrippina's experiences during the reign of Gaius. (5)

Some questions may be of a descriptive/ narrative/ outline style.

- "Describe Agrippina's relationship with....."
- "Describe the background of....."
- "Describe the basis of Agrippina's power....."
- This style of question is calling out for accurate, detailed historical information.
  - Do not spend time trying to present sophisticated analysis or projecting complicated arguments.
  - Reference to the ancient sources and historians can be made but the emphasis should be on the factual detail for the small value questions. Source reference is crucial for higher mark questions.
- Avoid waffle and vague generalization, eg:
  - AVOID: *Agrippina the Younger was very well-connected and had a variety of links with the imperial family through descent and marriage. She had several relations who achieved major status in Rome. Her marriages allowed her to increase her status and wealth, even before she married Claudius.*
  - INSTEAD: *Agrippina was very well-connected to both the Julian and Claudian sides of her family. Her father was the great hero Germanicus, son of Drusus who was the son of Livia and brother of the emperor Tiberius. Her mother was Agrippina the Elder, granddaughter of Augustus. Her brother, Gaius, became emperor in 37. The death of her second husband Passienus Crispus left her very rich.*
- Do not ignore the source that may be referred to in the question.

### 10 or 12 or 15 mark questions

- This question is always going to be of a much more difficult nature. It will require a sophisticated response that contains clear analysis. It will not be adequate to simply provide lots of factual information, no matter how detailed.
- Questions in part (b) will be of the type:
  - "Assess the impact of Agrippina....."
  - "Assess the role of Agrippina in....."
  - "Evaluate Agrippina's relationship....."

- This style of question is expecting an argument. “Assess” expects students to provide a judgment about the focus of the question. “Assessing Agrippina’s role” during Claudius’ reign does not mean simply giving a list of the things that Agrippina did at this time. It requires the student to make a judgment:
  - Was Agrippina’s influence beneficial to Rome/ or did it make things worse for Rome?
  - Did Agrippina’s power and influence change the nature of the principate?
  - Did Agrippina really control Claudius and to what effect?
- Judgments made about Agrippina need to be backed up by the sources. These sources might be:
  - the generally unsympathetic male, ancient writers like Tacitus;
  - modern writers like Barrett who try to be even-handed;
  - modern feminist writers who try to view Agrippina from new perspectives;
  - archaeological and numismatic sources.
- Better responses will attempt to go beyond simply parroting the views of the ancient writers, but will attempt to make a comment about the sources they are using.
  - It might be appropriate to question Tacitus’ republican sympathies as he writes about the early empire.
  - It might be appropriate to question Suetonius uncritical historical method.
  - It might be appropriate to question the male bias of a modern writer like Cary.
- As this is a higher mark question, allocate time correctly. If it is worth 15 marks, spend about 27 minutes on it; if it is a 12 mark question, spend about 23 minutes on it; if it is a 10 mark question, spend about 18 minutes on it.

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# Responding to HSC questions on “Agrippina the Younger”

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The purpose of this section is to provide some ideas on answering the types of questions which might be asked in the HSC. These outlines are not presented as the ‘be all and end all’ responses to these questions. To provide a sense of reality to this section, what follows is a ‘first draft response’ to each question, ie what were the first ideas that came into the author’s head as he thought about each question?

Questions might be asked on any of the following areas:

### *Lower mark value questions:*

- A description of Agrippina’s family background and status
- A description of Agrippina’s early life
- A description of Agrippina’s marriages
- A description of the bases of her power and influence
- A description of her relationship with Claudius
- A description of her relationship with Nero
- A description of her relationship with Seneca and Burrus
- A description of her relationship with the freedmen

### *Higher mark value questions:*

- An analysis of the impact of the career of Agrippina
- An assessment of the influence she was able to wield
- An assessment of Agrippina’s legacy
- An evaluation of the various images and interpretations that have been produced regarding Agrippina’s career
- An assessment of Agrippina’s achievements
- An evaluation of her relationship with Nero
- An evaluation of her relationship with Seneca and Burrus

Indeed, students should be aware that questions can be posed on any aspect of the topics indicated in the HSC syllabus for Ancient History.

## **Question 1:**

**Describe the main events in the life of Agrippina up to the accession of Claudius in AD 41.**  
(6 marks)

This question requires a detailed descriptive/ narrative response. Markers will be looking for detailed, accurate information which covers the entire period of her life from AD 15 to the accession of Claudius in 41. Some pitfalls to avoid:

- Do not get too carried away talking about other major figures from this period.
  - It will of course be necessary to refer to Germanicus, Agrippina the Elder, Tiberius, Sejanus and Gaius.

- However, the question is not about them, so only bring them in when such information is assisting in your description of Agrippina.
- eg it would not help you to go into great detail about Sejanus' methods and motives.
- Reference to the sources is also needed. However, as this is a strictly descriptive response, be careful when referring to sources. If appropriate, it is obviously a good idea to refer to the sources, eg when describing Gaius' treatment of Agrippina at the start of his reign, reference to coins of the time would help.
- The kind of detail that would be required could include:
  - Brief details of her birth in AD 15
  - Being left in Rome when her parents traveled to the east.
  - Mention of her father's funeral and the accompanying hysteria.
  - Mention of her family's tribulations under Tiberius and Sejanus (but do not get carried away).
  - Details of her marriage to Domitius Ahenobarbus
  - Her absence from the sources during the later part of Tiberius' reign
  - The favoured treatment she and her sisters received from Gaius at the start of his reign.
  - The conspiracy of 39 and her alleged role in this.
  - Agrippina's exile and subsequent return once Claudius became emperor.

## Question 2:

### Assess the achievements of Agrippina. (15 marks)

The key word in this question is "assess". It is not enough for students to merely list everything that Agrippina did, though some narrative detail will be needed. The better responses will attempt to develop an argument rather than merely provide simply facts. Possible lines of argument might include:

- (1) Agrippina was the most successful woman in Roman history. She approached the political process with two clear aims; (i) to wield real power and influence and (ii) to ensure the succession of her son, Nero. The fact she was able to achieve both of these aims is testament to her success as Rome's most successful woman.
- (2) Agrippina brought stability and calm to the Roman body politic which was in dire need of such a development. The dozen or so years that had preceded her marriage to Claudius were marked by the bizarre behaviour of Gaius and the often bloody machinations of Messalina. Agrippina's time as Claudius' wife restored stable government and ended the irrationality of the Messalina era. Her death in 59 removed one of the key stabilizing influences on Nero and this led to his extreme behaviour and descent into decadence which ultimately ended Julio-Claudian rule.

In answering this question, any line of argument must be supported by evidence. Evidence can come in various forms:

- specific factual detail
- evidence from the ancient sources such as Tacitus and Suetonius
- the view of modern historians such as Barrett
- evidence that can be gleaned from archaeological and numismatic sources

The better responses will not accept the evidence they use uncritically but argue that it has to be treated carefully, eg the patriarchal views of ancient writers and Tacitus' anti-imperial bias could be discussed. Such a discussion will obviously impact on a student's ability to assess the achievements of Agrippina.

**Question 3:**

**Describe Agrippina's family background and status.** (5 marks)

This question requires a detailed descriptive/ narrative response. In this question, try to present specific factual information rather than generalizations. This question will expect some detail on the nature of Agrippina's family connections. It would also be relevant to refer to her marital status.

The kind of detail that could be used might include:

- Some detail on her parents: the popular appeal of Germanicus and the great regard in which her mother, Agrippina the Elder, was held.
  - It would be appropriate to make comments about the fate of Germanicus and the immediate after effects of his death.
- Agrippina's imperial lineage can be described here.
  - Trace her Julian links back to Augustus through her mother and grandmother.
  - Trace her Claudian links back to Livia through her father and grandfather.
- Other imperial links can also be described:
  - a brother who becomes emperor (Gaius)
  - an uncle who becomes emperor (Claudius)
- Agrippina's status was thus significant due to her close links to major figures in the imperial family.
  - Her later maternal status can also be referred to (Nero was a grandson of Germanicus). This would add to her status.
- Agrippina was married off at the age of 13 to Domitius Ahenobarbus. His family had status – several members had been consul - and he himself was consul in 32.

**Question 4:**

**Evaluate the images and interpretations of Agrippina that have been produced since ancient times.** (15 marks)

The key term in this question is “evaluate”. It is not enough simply to list the ways in which Agrippina has been presented. A chronological run through from coins to statues and reliefs to Tacitus to Barrett and beyond will not constitute an “evaluation”. As each image/ interpretation is presented, an evaluation must be presented.

- A good place to start is with the ancient writers. Explain the ways in which Tacitus, Dio and Suetonius present Agrippina.
  - However, go further. Comment on Suetonius' historical method, or lack of historical method where he accepts everything. How does this affect the accuracy of his version of Agrippina?
  - Comment on Tacitus' anti-imperial bias, it shows through in his treatment of Tiberius and Claudius.
  - In this regard his treatment of Agrippina can be seen as a literary construct.
  - Not surprisingly he has little love for Agrippina.
  - The ancient writers were living in a male-dominated, patriarchal time. How would this affect their interpretations of Agrippina?
- The numismatic and statutory interpretations of Agrippina seem at variance with the written sources.
  - Explain how. What conclusions might we draw from this?

- Most modern writers tend to echo the ancient writers' views.
  - Provide examples and comment on who traditionally has written ancient history, ie middle-aged men at a time when 'women knew their place'.
- Introduce modern views from a feminist perspective where Agrippina's career is seen in a way that chooses not to focus on salacious gossip.
  - Agrippina is instead seen as a female achiever in male-dominated world.

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# Ancient and Modern sources

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Given the time, we would all like to immerse ourselves in the ancient texts and the modern interpretations that relate to Agrippina the Younger. However, students studying this topic for the HSC have only limited time – there are in fact subjects other than Ancient History. Teachers teaching this topic are burdened down with a plethora of administrative tasks and duties which prevent us from reading more widely than we would like. With this in mind, what follows is a list of sources, many of which have been referred to throughout this book.

NB: This list of sources is not meant to be exhaustive, or the most important. It comprises sources which are accessible, in the author's view reliable, and provide enough for a HSC student to extend their studies. The emphasis here is on what can be easily located and mastered by most students.

## Ancient Sources:

### ■ Suetonius: *The Twelve Caesars*

The chapters on Gaius, Claudius and Nero are easy to read and have been referred to by all secondary writers on this period. Suetonius might not pass the test of rigorous scholarship which is demanded of historians today, and some of his later sections read more like the tabloid press than a hefty historical record. However, it is still a valuable read for all students of the period and provides an 'interesting' view of Agrippina.

### ■ Tacitus: *The Annals of Imperial Rome*

Tacitus is no fan of the Julio-Claudians and clearly enjoys attacking the early emperors. Agrippina features significantly in the later section of *The Annals*. However, it should be remembered that those sections of Tacitus dealing with Gaius' reign and the early part of Claudius' reign, have been lost to us.

### ■ Dio Cassius: *Roman History*

Dio Cassius' history of Rome originally comprised 80 books, covering Rome's story from the legendary arrival of Aeneas about 1200 BC, to AD 229. Books 56-60 cover the period AD 9-54. Only fragments of the later period exist. His treatment of Agrippina echoes Tacitus' condemnatory style.

## Archaeological sources:

Agrippina's monumentary legacy is not extensive. However, there is statutory evidence, a wide variety of numismatic evidence and some notable sites such as the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias in Turkey. The image of Agrippina in these presentations is often at variance with what the ancient written sources have to say.

## Modern Sources:

### ■ Anthony Barrett: *Agrippina* (B T Batsford, London, 1996)

Anthony Barrett's book is arguably the best around on the subject of Agrippina the Younger. The early chapters establish her context, excellent for students or teachers not familiar with the Julio-Claudian period. He also explains fully her background and is clear on the matter of genealogy. The detail on Agrippina's life cannot be bettered. There is also a useful Appendices Section which deals with such things as "The decline in Agrippina's power" and "gold and silver coins of Nero".

■ **Richard Bauman: *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome* (Routledge, London, 1992)**

Bauman's book is extremely useful for understanding Agrippina's role in the early empire in a wider context. This book does not provide as much detail on Agrippina as Barrett (though it is thorough). However, Bauman has strong sections on other imperial women, such as Livia, Agrippina the Elder and Messalina. Study of these women is very useful in understanding Agrippina.

■ **HH Scullard: *From the Gracchi to Nero* (Methuen, London, 1970)**

This is an old standard, well known by older Ancient History teachers. It is still an excellent source which covers its period well though students might find some of the language difficult to handle. Scullard is very useful for gaining a clear overview of the main events during the period of Agrippina's life.

■ **Judith Ginsburg: *Representing Agrippina: Constructions of Female Power in the Early Roman Empire* (OUP, 2005)**

Ginsburg's main message is 'be wary of Tacitus' when coming to terms with the life of Agrippina. Tacitus writes for a purpose, to attack the principates of Claudius and Nero. As a result, she argues that Tacitus' Agrippina is a literary construct designed to serve this wider goal.

■ **Robert Graves: *Claudius the God* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, (orig) 1934)**

Graves' book is wonderfully entertaining and rich in detail, and he is at pains in his author's notes to have critics acknowledge the depth of his research. However, it is not always an easy read. It is very detailed on Claudius' reign and provides an interesting view of Agrippina's involvement in politics.

Finally, students should try to watch the BBC TV series "*I, Claudius*" (or ensure their teacher shows a few episodes in class). It is classic television, based on Robert Graves' books *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the King*. The two episodes on Messalina, and the final episode on Agrippina enjoyably complement students' more rigorous study. "*I, Claudius*" is easily available on DVD and can sometimes be found on streaming services.

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# Glossary

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Actium	battle fought in 31 BC where Augustus' forces defeated those of Marc Antony
aedile	magistrate in charge of games and urban services
Appenines	mountain range that stretches through Italy
auctoritas	prestige and influence
carpentum	covered litter for high ranking Romans
client	a person dependent on the support of a patron
clientele	those who receive favour from a patron and who in return promise loyalty
cognomen	family name
consul	chief magistrate of Rome
cursus honorum	ladder of office politicians climb as they get older
fasces	bundled rods symbolising power and jurisdiction
imperium	authority
intra cubiculum	trials that took place in the emperor's (Claudius) bedroom
lictor	official who attends to the interests of a magistrate or high figure
Machiavellian	sly, deceitful behaviour carried out to achieve political objectives
patrician	higher order in the early Roman republic
patron	person who gives support to a weaker person in return for loyalty
patronage	favours given by the wealthy/ powerful to the less wealthy/ powerful
plebeian	lower order in the early Roman republic
praetor	second rank in the cursus honorum, from Sulla's time important as presiding officer in courts
praetorian guard	elite guard in Rome and Italy supporting the emperor
proconsul	governor of a province, position assumed by a consul after his term of office
proconsular imperium	Augustus' authority over provinces outside of Rome granted in 27 BC
quaestor	Roman magistrate, first step in the cursus honorum, concerned with financial affairs
Res Gestae	(literally 'things done') Augustus' brief autobiography
sebastion of Aphrodisias	famous relief showing Agrippina with Claudius and Nero
tribune	officials originally elected by Plebeians to protect their rights against Patricians
tribunician authority	power vested in a tribune
triumph	major celebratory march through Rome by a victorious general

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# Dramatis Personae

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Acte	freedwomen, lover of Nero, rival to Agrippina
Aelia Paetina	Claudius' earlier wife, supported by Narcissus in marriage debate
Agrippa	husband of Julia 1, father of Agrippina the Elder
Agrippina the Elder	wife of Germanicus, mother of Agrippina the Younger
Agrippina the Younger	brother of Gaius, wife of Claudius, mother of Nero
Anicetus	one of Agrippina's assassins
Antonia	wife of Drusus, mother of Claudius, Germanicus, Livilla
Asinius Gallus	husband of Vipsania, greatly disliked by Tiberius
Augustus	founder of the principate, sole ruler of Rome 31 BC - AD 14
Burrus	Agrippina's appointee as head of the Praetorian Guard
C Domitius Ahenobarbus	1st husband of Agrippina, father of Nero
Calpurnia	one of Claudius' favourite mistresses
Claudius	Roman Emperor AD 41-54, husband of Agrippina
Domitia Lepida	looked after Nero during Agrippina's exile
Drusus (Germanicus' son)	son of Germanicus, brother of Agrippina the Younger
Drusus (Livia's son)	brother of Tiberius, father of Germanicus
Drusus (Tiberius' son)	wife of Livilla, father of Tiberius Gemellus
Gaius (Caligula)	Roman Emperor AD 37-41, brother of Agrippina
Gaius Silius	husband to Messalina in their abortive marriage ceremony
Galba	decided against marrying Agrippina, later briefly emperor in 68-January 69
Germanicus	father of Agrippina
Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso	alleged murderer of Germanicus
Julia 1	daughter of Augustus, mother of Agrippina the Elder
Livia	wife of Augustus, mother of Tiberius
Lollia Paulina	Gaius' former wife, supported by Callistus in marriage debate
Lucius Vitellius	senate ally of Agrippina
Messalina	third wife of Claudius
Narcissus	Claudius' most loyal freedman
Nero (Emperor)	son of Agrippina the Younger, Roman Emperor AD 54-68
Nero (Germanicus' son)	brother of Agrippina the Younger
Pallas	Agrippina's loyal freedman ally, responsible for financial affairs
Passienus Crispus	2nd husband of Agrippina
Plancina	husband of Piso, accused of involvement in Germanicus' death
Polybius	Claudius' literary secretary
Poppaea Sabina	object of Nero's romantic interest, later his wife
Rubellius Plautus	alleged co-conspirator with Agrippina during Nero's reign
Scribonianus	involved in an alleged conspiracy against Claudius
Sejanus	Praetorian Prefect under Tiberius, persecuted Germanicus' family
Seneca	Nero's tutor, literary star and later advisor to Nero
Thrasyllus	astrologer
Tiberius	Roman Emperor, AD 14-37
Trajan	Roman emperor, AD 98-117
Vespasian	Roman emperor, AD 69-79

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# Answers to revision exercises

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## Ex 1.1

west – Appenine – Tiber – seven – east – Tiberina – bridge – Latium – Po – Magna Graecia – Carthage – Sardinia – Corsica – Spain – Greece – Asia – Britain – Egypt – tin – copper – spices – grain

## Ex 2.1

1 – consul; 2 – tribune; 3 – senator; 4 – proconsul; 5 – quaestor; 6 – rex; 7 – auctoritas; 8 – princeps; 9 – cursus honorum; 10 – Res Gestae

## Ex 2.2

1st – Expulsion of King Tarquin; 2 - Creation of the post of consul; 3 - Creation of the post of tribune; 4 - By now the senate the key political body in Rome; 5 - Murder of Tiberius Gracchus; 6 - Assassination of Caesar; 7 - Creation of the 2nd Triumvirate; 8 - Battle of Actium; 9 - Octavian takes on the title of Augustus; 10 - Augustus granted tibunician authority for life.

## Ex 3.1

1 – true; 2 – false; 3 – false; 4 – true; 5 – true; 6 – true; 7 – false; 8 – false; 9 – false; 10 – true.

## Ex 4.1

1 – Germanicus; 2 – Nero, Drusus, Gaius; 3 – Agrippina the Elder, Julia 1; 4 – Livia, Octavia; 5 – Julian, Claudian; 6 – Agrippina the Elder; 7 - Claudius; 8 – Germanicus, Drusus; 9 – Gaius; 10 – he was her great grandfather.

## Ex 4.2

1 – opinion; 2 – fact; 3 – opinion; 4 – fact; 5 – fact; 6 – fact; 7 – opinion; 8 – opinion; 9 – fact; 10 – fact.

## Ex 5.1

1 – Ara Ubiorum, AD 15; 2 – rapturously, greeted as a hero; 3 – to negotiate with the Parthians; 4 - to check Germanicus' unstable behaviour, to frustrate his efforts, to kill him; 5 – hysterical outpourings of grief; 6 – her sons Nero and Drusus; 7 – prefect of the Praetorian Guard; 8 – son of emperor Tiberius; 9 – poisoned in a plot of Sejanus, Livilla and Lygdu; 10 – arouse concerns in Tiberius and Livia that Agrippina the Elder wanted her sons to succeed, not Tiberius' grandson, Gemellus.

## Ex 5.2

1 – true; 2 – false; 3 – true; 4 – false; 5 – true; 6 – false; 7 – false; 8 – true; 9 – false; 10 – true.

**Ex 6.1**

Agrippina seems to have escaped the worst excesses of the later years of Tiberius' reign. When the aging emperor died in 37, he was succeeded by Agrippina's brother, Gaius. Gaius' accession was eagerly welcomed by the people of Rome and at first he did little to betray their trust. He displayed his piety by quickly restoring the remains of his mother and brother to Rome and carried out a series of acts honoring various members of his family. Nine months after Gaius' accession, Agrippina gave birth to her son, Nero.

**Ex 6.2**

1 – made honorary vestal virgins, imperial seats at the games, names included in vows given for Gaius; 2 – he says Gaius committed incest with his sisters; 3 – a political move, showing the regime rested on more than just him; 4 – he suffered a major illness; 5 – he was stricken with grief; 6 – legate of Upper Germany, arrested and executed; 7 – he was sleeping with both Agrippina and Livilla; 8 – his accession to power and marriage to her could have secured the future of her son, Nero; 9 – forced to bring Lepidus' bones back to Rome, exiled; 10 – 41, his uncle Claudius.

**Ex 7.1**

Gaius – curtain – nephew – Suetonius – Tacitus – wives – freedmen – sympathetic – Messalina – sister-in-law – Domitius – Passienus – Agrippina

**Ex 7.2**

1st - Marriage of Claudius and Messalina; 2nd - accession of Claudius; 3rd - Return of Agrippina from exile; 4th - Appius Silanus affair; 5th - death of Asiaticus; 6th - Agrippina reappears in Rome; 7th - The Secular Games; 8th - marriage of Messalina and Silius; 9th - execution of Silius; 10th - Death of Messalina

**Ex 7.3**

1 – false; 2 – false; 3 – true; 4 – true; 5 – false; 6 – true; 7 – true; 8 – false; 9 – true; 10 – false.

**Ex 8.1**

1 – best of mothers; 2 – priestess of the cult of Claudius; 3 – two; 4 – one; 5 – show the high regard she was kept in, suggested a sharing of power; 6 – M Iunius Silanus; 7 – he was a possible rival for Nero's position/ fear he might seek revenge for his brother's death; 8 – reverse some of Claudius' laws; 9 – yes; 10 – she attended a session of the senate, listening behind a curtain.

**Ex 8.2**

accession – Seneca – domus – Armenian – Nero – Britannicus – Octavia – Acte – Pallas – Antonia – Rubellius Plautus – Junia – Domitia – innocence –

**Ex 9.1**

1st - Gaius declares a desire for Seneca's death; 2nd - Female intervention saves Seneca's life; 3rd - Seneca exiled to Corsica; 4th - Seneca is brought back from exile; 5th - Seneca becomes Nero's tutor; 6th - Seneca writes Nero's accession speech; 7th - The Armenian delegation incident; 8th - Accused of adultery with Agrippina; 9th - The death of Burrus and Seneca's retirement; 10th - Seneca forced to suicide by Nero.

### Ex 9.2

1 – true; 2 – false; 3 – false; 4 – true; 5 – false; 6 – true; 7 – true; 8 – false; 9 – true;  
10 – false.

### Ex 10.1

1 – Obaritus; 2 – Agerinus; 3 – M Salvius Otho; 4 – Acerronia Polla; 5 – Poppaea Sabina;  
6 – Octavia; 7 – Crepereius Gallus; 8 – Burrus; 9 – Anicetus; 10 – Seneca

### Ex 12.1

1 – Suetonius; 2 – Handel; 3 – Sebasteion at Aphrodisias; 4 – Gloria Swanson; 5 – Dio Cassius;  
6 – Barbara Young; 7 – M Cary; 8 – Tacitus; 9 – Robert Graves; 10 – Roman coins.

