AGRIPPINA THE YOUNGER

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Agrippina the Younger is viewed with suspicion by many historians. Consequently, one is forced to tread precarious ground when a study of Agrippina's life is attempted. The historian must decide whether or not modern sources have been led astray by accounts of the ancient Roman writers and their natural bias against women in politics. The material of the ancient historians in regard to Agrippina is amazingly biased against her, and one cannot but ponder the reasons for this one-sided view. Therefore, it has been necessary to review the ancient sources and the position of women within the Roman Empire before a detailed study of Agrippina's life can be undertaken.

The primary sources available for a study of Agrippina's place in Roman history are Tacitus, Suetonius, Dio Cassius and Pliny. Tacitus is considered to be the most trustworthy of the four by modern writers. The reasons are various; first of all, he appears to be more analytical than the other three; second, he is more objective in his conjectures of people and places; and last, his accuracy in relating events is superior to the other three. Tacitus lived in Rome sometime between the years 55 and 120 A. D. He was politically motivated for many years and developed an analytical mind which helped him in his self-appointed task of historian. Tacitus, however, was biased most favorably towards the Roman Republic and unfavorably against Imperial

Rome.[1] Unfortunately, this antagonism towards the Roman Empire colored his attitude towards the people he wrote about during the era in which he lived. Therefore, it can be surmised that since most Romans were predisposed unfavorably to women in any facet of government, Tacitus was probably more unfair to Agrippina in his writings than if Roman tradition had approved of the presence of women outside the home. Although Tacitus may not approve of Agrippina, he remains true to scholarly principles in that he grudgingly credits her with putting the Roman government back on its feet in 49.

Pliny the Younger, a contemporary of Tacitus, was born in 62. Although he is considered a credible historian, Pliny wrote too little about the life of Agrippina to be used as much as Tacitus in a study of her life. He can be relied on as an accurate source in a few instances when he does mention Agrippina, and for this reason he is included in a study of her life.

Suetonius lived around 69 to 140. Like Tacitus and Pliny, he was born after Agrippina's hegemony. Although he practiced law for a while, scholarship was his main interest. Probably the greatest fault of Suetonius is that he included much court gossip in his On The Life of the Caesars, and failed to distinguish between what was rumor and what was fact. However, he proves to be a valuable source in such matters as official acts of the senate, for he was allowed access to the official archives. Suetonius, then, is a reliable source when the historian desires accurate accounts of governmental proceedings, but he is not entirely reliable in his portrayal

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[1]Ivar Lissner, The Caesars, Might and Madness. (New York: Capricorn Books, 1965), p. 16.

of the private lives of those imperial personages about whom he writes.[2]

Dio Cassius is the least trustworthy of the four Roman historians. Not only is his information about certain people suspect, but his accuracy in placing events and dates is questionable. With Dio Cassius' History, the historian receives the ultimate in conjecture and an unscholarly attitude. He is used in this study of Agrippina's life to show the extremes to which an historian will sometime go in order to prove a point. Dio Cassius wished to show Agrippina as an immoral, unsavory person unfit for adulation of any kind. He is also used because some modern historians have relied on his interpretations of Agrippina's life and, by showing the inconsistencies of Dio Cassius, it is hoped that the same inconsistencies will come to light in the works of those modern historians who extensively utilized him.

Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, Suetonius, and Dio Cassius were born either a few years before Agrippina's death, or years afterward. Therefore, all were forced to rely on information supplied by those who had witnessed her life or heard about it. It is, then, reasonable to assume that much of the information they received about the character of Agrippina was either secondhand or prejudiced. One must remember that Agrippina was very unpopular by the time of her death and her good qualities were obscured by Nero shortly afterward. Consequently, Agrippina has suffered in history and will continue to do so unless more historians revise their ideas about her life. This revision can begin in two ways. First, modern writers can start by

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[2]Moses Hadas, A History of Latin Literature. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), p. 332.

questioning the authenticity of the material presented by the ancient sources in regard to Agrippina's life. Second, the position occupied by women in Rome before and during Agrippina's life is essential for any historian to know before attempting to study this woman's life; for it is the traditional treatment of women in Rome that has colored the ancient interpretations, and hence most modern histories of the life of Agrippina.

Until recently, women have held an inferior position to men. However, in the ancient world, the position of women differed from place to place. The ancient Near East at times had, and accepted, the rule of women. Hatshepsut and Cleopatra are but two examples of early women rulers in Egypt, and in other areas a woman's rule was not unheard of. Rome was different, however. In a sense, Rome was considered the fatherland and females were by tradition inferior to the males. Consequently, the mere idea of women rulers was abhorent to the tradition-minded Romans, and when a woman tried to break through this invisible barrier, as Agrippina attempted, she was both feared and hated.

Woman was a symbol of purity and stability to the Roman mind. Her place was in the home, and any deviation from the norm was severely punished. Augustus was forced to exile his first wife, Julia, when she was unfaithful, and his second wife, Livia, tread precarious ground when she became empress. The Roman empress, as well as the rest of the women within the imperial domains, was to be above reproach, and was constantly watched to make sure that she did not blunder. Women such as Livia and Antonia were highly revered by the Roman populace. They were honored as the highest females of the land

and were expected to uphold those virtues of chastity and piety which had been paramount in the Roman families of the early Republic. The lives of the imperial women were not completely sterile, though. They could be, and were, consulted about important affairs of the empire by the emperors. However, this was invariably done in private, for it was not proper for women to make decisions of state. Women like Livia and Octavia were aware of their positions and did nothing to endanger them.

With the death of Augustus, a change took place within the empire. The succession had been a thorny problem and would remain so. An opposition party to the new emperor Tiberius grew up centered around Agrippina the Elder and her husband, Germanicus. As the granddaughter of Augustus, she felt her line had a claim to the succession and fought to secure what she felt was the right of her heirs. It was in this type of uncertain environment and change that Agrippina the Younger grew up.

CHAPTER II

AGRIPPINA'S EARLY YEARS

When writing about the life of Agrippina, the historian is confronted with the insurmountable problem of not knowing the real person. Ancient writers have sullied her name to such an extent that what she must have been like is lost. She must have been an exceptional human being because she was both vibrant and bewitching. Much of her life must have been filled with sorrow, and she probably trusted few people, if any. She must have revelled in the glory and pomp that surrounded her. But none of this will we ever know for certain. There was no historian living at that time who could have recorded what the woman was really like. We are forced to rely on accounts of historians who wrote of her life after she met her miserable end.

Agrippina was born to Agrippina the Elder and Germanicus in 15 A. D., one year after the death of the emperor Augustus. Agrippina was the granddaughter of the ill-famed Julia, and, hence, the great granddaughter of Augustus. Her geneology was equally illustrious on her father's side, for through Germanicus she could claim descendency from Marc Antony. Little is known of Agrippina's earliest years other than that she was born in a German province.[1] After her father's early death in the year 19, she probably spent her time with her

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[1]Tacitus, Annals of Tacitus, translated by Alfred J. Church & William J. Brodribb. (London: Macmillian & Company, 1891), IV, 53.

mother, who was in the midst of political intrigues in Rome. Jacques Boergas De' Serviez has written that Agrippina "from her cradle had so violent a desire to rule, that she could set no limits to it. This vice was so ingrained in her very nature, that it corrupted all her actions, and produced in great abundance all sorts of crimes."[2] De' Serviez tends to generalize excessively, and he is certainly unjust to Agrippina throughout his account of her life. Agrippina had to set limits on herself and her desire to rule; if she had not, probably she would have been murdered much sooner than she was. Gilbert Charles-Picard adds valuable insight into the events that molded her character:

> Agrippina the Younger fortunately took after her mother most of all, and her great ambitions were served by a cool and clear intellect. That her morals were non-existent is hardly surprising; when a child she had seen her mother beaten up by a centurion with such violence that one eye was permanently blinded, and then her mother died of voluntary starvation; her two oldest brothers had suffered a like fate, by order of Tiberius. ... Agrippina was obliged to be a partner to the indecencies of the demented emperor (Caligula). ... Finally, after much intrigue, Agrippina had realized the desire inherited from her mother, and became wife of an emperor.[3]

One is aware that from her earliest years, Agrippina comprehended the intrigues and scandals that evolved around and in her family. Very early in life she must have learned that the arts of cunning and manipulation were a necessity to a person with her background; more than that, though, they were necessary for survival. Michael

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[2]Jacques Boergas De' Serviez, The Roman Empresses. (The American Anthropological Society Incorporated., 1925), Vol. I, p. 178.

[3]Gilbert Charles-Picard, Augustus & Nero. (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1968), pp. 87-88.

Grant is correct when he surmises that events leading to, and causing the deaths of her mother and two brothers must have left a mark on Agrippina.[4] These events surely influenced the young woman; and when one looks at her life and takes into account the times in which she lived, he should not be shocked at what ancient and many modern historians have labeled her incorrigability. If her life is considered in this perspective, one is more apt to reach a more favorable conclusion about Agrippina.

Sometime before his death, Tiberius, "having himself in person bestowed the hand of his granddaughter Agrippina, Germanicus's daughter, on Cneius Domitius (Ahenobarbus), directed the marriage to be celebrated at Rome." In choosing Domitius, Tiberius "looked not only to his ancient lineage, but also to his alliance with the blood of the Caesars, for he could point to Octavia as his grandmother and through her to Augustus his great uncle."[5] As with most marriages of the time, Agrippina's was one of convenience based on nobility. Most historians agree that Ahenobarbus was a most unsavory individual and, although Agrippina could boast of one of the most royal unions in Rome, her mate was less than ideal. During their brief marriage, Ahenobarbus was seldom at home for he was required by military duties to be absent on countless campaigns.

In 37 Tiberius died, a victim of old age and disillusionment. The most likely heir to the throne was Gaius Caligula, the brother of

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[4]Michael Grant, Nero. (New York: American Heritage Press, 1970), p. 22.

[5]Tacitus, Annals, IV, 75.

Agrippina.[6] Although "he was generally considered a fool, was the laughing-stock of freedmen and women, and such a gawk and clown that it had been impossible to put him into the magistracy," he was the only logical successor of Augustus.[7] Agrippina and her two sisters, Julia and Drusilla, were recalled to Rome by Caligula in order that he might rectify all the injustices his family had suffered during the reign of Tiberius. Upon their return, Caligula:

> had it decreed that their names should be included in the roles which the magistrates and the pontiffs offered every year for the prosperity of the prince and his people. ... there should also be included a prayer for their felicity. ...Even the sisters of the emperor acquired a sacred character and a priviledged position in the state. For the first time the women of the imperial family acquired the character of official personages.[8]

After so many years of ostracism and a precarious existence, Agrippina and her sisters were accorded the highest honors ever given to Roman women. It is plausible that until this display of homage by Rome, Agrippina had not considered the possibility of attaining power in the capital city. Although she had been present at Tiberius' court and had witnessed the various governmental functions, the all too tenuous position of her family would have discouraged her involvement in Roman politics. With the death of Tiberius and the ascendancy of Caligula to power, the situation was transformed rapidly. Agrippina was allowed to experience, if only for a few years, the exhilarating

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[6] B. H. Warmington, Nero, Reality & Legend. (New York: Norton & Co., Inc., 1969), p. 13.

[7] Guglielmo Ferrero, The Women of the Caesars. (New York: The Century Co., 1911), pp. 212-213.

[8] Ferrero, Women, pp. 228-229.

feeling of being lauded by the Roman public. This and various other honors, such as being named a Vestal Virgin,[9] most certainly would have influenced her. She had always realized she was descended from Rome's most illustrious line, but now she began reaping the benefits of it. It would seem a most natural outcome for Agrippina to have desired more power later in life, for she knew she was special.

Later in the year 37, Agrippina gave birth to her only child, Gaius Domitius Tiberius (later given the name Nero). Her husband, Ahenobarbus, is said to have exclaimed that out of the union of such amoral creatures as himself and Agrippina, only evil could come.[10] This prophesy, at least with regard to Nero, was to prove to be all too true. Before the year had run its course, Ahenobarbus had died in a far off Roman province. At the age of 22, Agrippina was a widow.

In early 38 events began to occur which resulted in a rapid deterioration of Agrippina's position. This was in large part due to Caligula, whose mind had never been quite stable, and his increasing inability to grasp reality. Unfortunately, the historian is unable to rely on Tacitus for information about the period between 37 and 41, for this part of his Annals has been lost. Therefore, one must rely on information supplied by Suetonius and Dio Cassius--information which is sometimes unreliable. Caligula desired a marriage with his sister, Drusilla, who was already married. He was greatly influenced by Oriental practices and especially Egyptian customs which allowed such

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[9] Dio Cassius, Roman History, translated by Earnest Cary. (Loeb Classical Library: Cambridge, Mass., 1968), LIX, 5.

[10] Dio Cassius, Roman History, LIX, and Suetonius, Life of Caligula, VII, cite this particular incident. However, one cannot but wonder at its accuracy.

marriages.[11] Such a custom was naturally alien to conservative Rome and encountered opposition. Caligula, however, paid no attention to Rome and treated Drusilla as his wife; but in 38 Drusilla suddenly died.

Many sources indicate that after the death of Drusilla, Caligula forced Agrippina and Julia to perform incest with him.[12] The status of the two women became increasingly precarious, and in 39 conditions suddenly became grimmer. Caligula accused Agrippina and Julia of conspiracy with Drusilla's widowed husband, Lepidus. The emperor was convinced that Agrippina, Julia, and Lepidus were in league together in order to usurp his throne. Caligula demanded the execution of Lepidus and the banishment of the two sisters.[13] That Lepidus had transpired to take over the throne is possible, but that Agrippina and Julia were partners to the crime is open to conjecture. In all likelihood, the two sisters were merely victims of Caligula's unbalanced mind.

Along with the charges of treason, Caligula also charged Agrippina with having improper relations with not only Lepidus, but several other men as well.[14] But Suetonius attempts to clear Agrippina's name by coming to her defense. He argues that Caligula had forced Agrippina to bed whomever he chose to send to her. Further, Agrippina was

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[11] Ferrero, Women, p. 234.

[12] Dio Cassius, Roman History, LIX, 5.

[13] The Cambridge Ancient History, The Augustan Empire 44 B.C.-A.D. 70, Vol. X. Ed. S. A. Cook, F. E. Adcock, M. P. Charlesworth (New York: The MacMillian Co., 1954), p. 695. (Hereafter cited C.A.H.).

[14] Dio Cassius, Roman History, LIX, p. 335. Cassius supports the hypothesis that both Agrippina and Julia were Lepidus' lovers. See also Pliny, Natural History, XXIV, p. 441.

forced to acquiesce largely out of fear that her life would be forfeit if she did not.[15] In 39 Lepidus was executed and Agrippina and Julia exiled and deported to the Pontian Islands. They had been convicted, not of treason, for that would have demanded the death penalty, but "because of their relations with Lepidus. . . and many impious and immoral acts."[16] To further add to her degredation, Agrippina was forced by Caligula to carry the ashes of Lepidus in an urn to Rome after he was executed in front of her.[17]

When she was exiled, Agrippina was forced to leave behind the one comfort in her life, her son. Accounts are varied as to whom his care was entrusted. Some, Dio Cassius among them, assert that Nero was left in the charge of a ballet dancer and a barber in a remote Italian villa. Others contend he was left in the care of his aunt.[18] No matter which account is accurate, Nero was away from his mother for over two years, a length of time very important to the development of any young child. Perhaps this separation was responsible for Agrippina's tendency to be overly strict and concerned about Nero later in life.

Nothing is known of the two years Agrippina spent in exile. Certainly her banishment must have lacked the vitality and amusement she had learned to take for granted in Rome. More importantly, though, Agrippina probably had little to occupy the hours of the day, and was

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[15] Suetonius, Life of Caligula, translated by J. C. Rolf. (Loeb Classical Library: William Heinemann Ltd.), VII, 2.

[16] Dio Cassius, Roman History, LIX, 331.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Suetonius, Life of Caligula, VII, 7, asserts both of these views.

forced to turn within herself for companionship. It is entirely reasonable to assume that in these two years Agrippina decided on the course her life was to take. She had every reason to expect Caligula's life to be a short one, for it was well known that he was deranged and grew increasingly worse month by month. In 41 Caligula was murdered, and Agrippina was to re-emerge in Rome a much wiser and more clever woman--a woman willing to bide her time for that most precious commodity, power.

CHAPTER III

AGRIPPINA AND CLAUDIUS

After the death of Caligula in 41, Rome chose Claudius emperor. He was the brother of Germanicus and, hence, the uncle of Agrippina and Caligula. Rome had long made fun of this unfortunate man, who was somewhat physically disabled and elderly (by Roman standards) at the time he came to the throne. Until recently, most historians have considered Claudius to have been an insignificant emperor. However, in the past thirty to forty years, many noted historians have reversed the trend and given him a more favorable epitaph.[1]

In 41 Agrippina and Julia were allowed to return to Rome, and Claudius restored their property to them.[2] Julia's return was short-lived for she was exiled for adultery in 42, along with the philosopher Seneca. The banishment of Julia has been attributed to Messalina, the wife of Claudius. According to most historians, Messalina was a totally unscrupulous character who kept constant surveillance over the more appealing Roman women in order to keep them from influencing her husband.[3] Agrippina was, of course, one of these women, and Ferrero con-

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[1] See Arnaldo Momigliano, Claudius, The Emperor & His Achievements. (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1930).

[2] Dio Cassius, Roman History, translated by Earnest Cary. (Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Mass., 1968), LX, 375, Vol. VII.

[3] Guglielmo Ferrero, The Women of the Caesars. (New York: The Century Company, 1911), p. 253.

tends that "Agrippina, like her mother, was a virtuous woman and was enabled to remain in Rome. Though Agrippina remained at Rome, she was isolated and reduced to a position of helplessness."[4]

Shortly after the banishment of Julia, Agrippina married Pausenius Crispus, one of Rome's most influential senators and wealthiest men.[5] It is likely that Agrippina married Crispus in order that Messalina should have no reason to accuse her of wrongdoing. The marriage lasted only a short time. By 47 Agrippina was once again a widow, but a widow with an immense fortune. In the next year Claudius had Messalina murdered for her constant intrigues against him and her numerous love affairs.

After the death of Messalina, Claudius decided not to marry again, probably because he had had two unhappy marriages. However, he was persuaded by one of his favorite freedmen, Pallas, that Rome needed an empress. According to Tacitus, the arguments of Pallas convinced Claudius to marry again. With guidance from Pallas, Claudius chose Agrippina, whose beauty had not failed to captivate him, as his wife.[6] There was an obstacle to the marriage, however. It was against Roman tradition for an uncle to marry his niece; such a relationship was considered incestuous. Vitellius, a highly influential Roman senator, was sent to the senate to speak in behalf of the marriage between Claudius and Agrippina and to obtain a view of senatorial thought on

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[4] Ferrero, Women, p. 254.

[5] Pliny, Natural History. (Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Mass., 1960), XVI, 242.

[6] Tacitus, Annals of Tacitus, translated by Alfred J. Church & William J. Brodribb. (London: Macmillian & Co., 1891), XII, 5.

the matter. The oratorical abilities of Vitellius were of such an impressive nature as to convince the senate to sanction the imperial marriage:

> Agrippina stands first in nobility of birth. She has given proof too that she is not barren, and she has suitable moral qualities. It is, again, a singular advantage to us, due to divine providence, for a widow to be united to an emperor who had limited himself to his own lawful wives. . . But it will be said, marriage with a brother's daughter is with us a novelty. True, but it is common in other countries, and there is no law to forbid it. Marriages of cousins were long unknown, but after a time they became frequent. Custom adopts itself to expediency, and this novelty will hereafter take its place among recognized usages.[7]

In 49 Agrippina and Claudius were married with senatorial approval. Ferrero points out that because Agrippina was the daughter of Germanicus, it was a "powerful recommendation with the people, the praetorian cohorts, and the legions. . . she was intelligent, cultured, simple, and economical." She had grown up in the midst of political affairs and knew how the empire was governed. Furthermore, up to this point, her lifestyle had been above reproach.[8] One concludes somewhat grudgingly from Tacitus and obviously from Ferrero, that Agrippina was well liked in Rome. Tacitus accurately suspects Agrippina's marriage to Claudius to have been the paramount object at this time in her life.[9] Ferrero is probably mistaken in thinking the marriage "was an act of supreme self-sacrifice on the part of a woman who had been educated in

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[7] Tacitus, Annals, XII, 6.

[8] Ferrero, Women, p. 275.

[9] Tacitus, Annals, XII, 7.

the traditions of the Roman aristocracy, and who therefore considered herself merely a means to the political advancement of her relatives and children."[10]

Agrippina, undoubtedly, did not relish the idea of being married to the laughingstock of Rome, but she was intelligent enough to realize that the power of Rome lay with the emperor. If she wanted power, the most feasible way to acquire it was through marriage to Claudius. Further, it is doubtful that Agrippina viewed the marriage solely as a means for her son, Nero, to eventually become emperor. This was part of her plan, but it must be remembered that Agrippina was an ambitious woman and was desirous of power for herself as well.

Tacitus writes that after the marriage of Claudius and Agrippina there came:

> a revolution in the State, and everything was under the control of a woman, who did not, like Messalina, insult Rome by loose manners. It was a stringent, and, so to say, masculine despotism; there was sternness and generally arrogance in public, no sort of immodesty at home, unless it was conducive to power.[11]

Consequently, from the pen of one of Rome's greatest historians, one can see that Agrippina did play an integral part in Roman affairs after her marriage. This passage is perhaps the only time in his description of her life that Tacitus praises Agrippina. Ferrero, as if to add credence to the all too short passage Tacitus uses to commend Agrippina, adds that "under the influence of Agrippina the laxity and disorders of the first years of Claudius' reign gave place to a certain

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[10]Ferrero, Women, p. 276.

[11]Tacitus, Annals, XII, 7.

order and discipline."[12] Ferrero certainly does not exaggerate her importance, but adds valuable insight into the prejudice Tacitus felt for this woman:

> The government of Agrippina was from the first a great success . . . concord and tranquility returned to the imperial house, to the aristocracy, to the senate, and to the state. Although Tacitus accuses Agrippina of having made Claudius commit all sorts of cruelties, it is certain that trials, scandals, and suicide became much less frequent under her rule. During the six years that Claudius lived after his marriage with Agrippina, scandalous tragedies became so rare that Tacitus, being deprived of his favorite materials, set down the story of these six years in a single book. . . Agrippina encountered virtually no opposition, while Tiberius and even Augustus, when they wished to govern according to the traditions of the ancient nobility, had to combat the party of the new aristocracy with its modern and oriental tendencies. This party no longer seemed to exist when Agrippina urged Claudius to continue resolutely in the policy of his ancestors, for one party only, that of the old nobility, seemed with Agrippina to control the state.[13]

Dio Cassius relates that Agrippina had the support of the freedmen, and that they had favored her marriage because many of them feared their future if Britannicus, the son of Claudius, inherited the throne. This was in large part due to the way Messalina had died. The freedmen feared the retribution of Britannicus if he were made emperor. The freedmen considered Agrippina to have another favorable advantage, her son Nero. He was five years older than Britannicus, and, therefore, closer to being a man. Because of Nero's age, he would be a possible contender for the throne in the event of Claudius' death.[14] Although much of Dio's writings lack plausibility,

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[12]Ferrero, Women, pp. 281 & 282.

[13]Ferrero, Women, pp. 286-287.

[14]Dio Cassius, Roman History, LXI, p. 15.

his account of the freedmen and their support of Agrippina is credible, as was their fear of Britannicus.

Shortly after her marriage, Agrippina had her son Nero betrothed to Octavia, the daughter of Claudius. Octavia originally had been promised to L. Junius Silanus, a great-grandson of Augustus. Silanus was, according to Warmington, in actuality closer to being the heir of Claudius than was Britannicus. This was largely because of Silanus' age; he was 22 and Britannicus was still a child.[15] Warmington argues that "even before her own marriage, Agrippina had determined to destroy (Silanus) and thus leave her son as politically the most suitable husband for Octavia."[16] Such a statement is questionable, for Agrippina probably had no concrete plan in her mind for Nero's marriage before her own had been realized. That she desired a match between Nero and Octavia in the year 50 is obvious, but that she wanted Silanus destroyed is open to speculation. Warmington also insinuates that Agrippina had L. Vitellius, the man who had been so influential in procuring her marriage, charge Silanus with having had incest with his sister. Because of this accusation, Claudius terminated the engagement between Octavia and Silanus. On the day Octavia and Nero were betrothed, Silanus committed suicide.[17] Tacitus gives a similar account of Silanus and, like Warmington, blames Agrippina for his disgrace and death. It is highly probable that she was responsible for Silanus disgrace. Her motive was to insure not only Nero's but also her own claim

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[15]B. H. Warmington, Nero, Reality & Legend. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1969), p. 16.

[16]Warmington, p. 17.

[17]Ibid.

to power and the Roman throne.

In 50, Agrippina persuaded Claudius to adopt Nero. Tacitus, once again, attempts to prove that Agrippina had ulterior motives in her desire to have Nero adopted by Claudius. He contends that Agrippina took Claudius' highly esteemed freedman, Pallas, as her lover. Pallas in turn convinced Claudius to adopt Nero as his own son.[18] This adoption proves to Tacitus that Agrippina was endeavoring to establish Nero over Britannicus. The historian has a valid point in that it was not befitting the appearance of an empress to have a lover, but it should not color his judgment of this specific instance. However, he is correct in that the adoption apparently did lay the foundation for Nero's eventual overshadowing of Britannicus.

Ferrero argues that Agrippina's persuasion of Claudius to adopt Nero does not mean that she "wished to set Britannicus aside and give the advantage to Nero." It merely proves that she did not wish the family of Augustus to lose the supreme power, and for this reason she prepared Nero as the second successor. Moreover, "Augustus and Tiberius had always sought to prepare more than one youth for the highest office, both in order that the senate might have a certain freedom of choice," and that "there might be someone in reserve, in case one. . . should die prematurely, as so many others had died."[19] It would appear that it was a logical outcome of Claudius' marriage to Agrippina for him to adopt Nero. Agrippina certainly had ambitions for Nero, and it was only natural for her to wish to see him become

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[18]Tacitus, Annals, XII, 25.

[19]Ferrero, Women, p. 290.

emperor. Ferrero accurately points out that it was good insurance for there to be more than one heir apparent to the throne. It should be remembered that Tiberius' son Drusus, and before that Augustus' intended heir, had died. Therefore, one can see the feasibility of Nero's adoption. However, Ferrero is naive in not realizing that such a move was advantageous to Agrippina.

Tacitus writes that in 51 Agrippina advanced her policy of favoring Nero over Britannicus even further. In that year Nero was prematurely admitted to political life in his fourteenth year by being permitted to wear the toga Virilis, the dress of a man.[20] Nero's admittance to manhood must have been made possible through the instigation of Agrippina, for boys of his age were seldom, if ever, given the honor of the toga Virilis. "At the same time those of the centurions and tribunes who pitied the lot of Britannicus were removed, some on false pretexts, others by way of seeming compliment."[21] Some time after Nero was given the toga Virilis, Tacitus cites an incident in which Britannicus met Nero and called him by the name Domitius, Nero's name before his adoption. Accordingly, Agrippina took the incident to Claudius as evidence that Britannicus was being taught not to accept Nero's adoption by the people with whom he associated. Consequently, Claudius "punished with banishment or death all his son's best instructors and set persons appointed by his stepmother to have the care of him."[22] Tacitus is the only historian, ancient or

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[20]Tacitus, Annals, XII, 41.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid.

modern, who mentions this incident. Therefore, one should consider how he found this information. If it were true, it would lend credence to his assumption that Agrippina was an unscrupulous woman; one cannot help but be skeptical about its accuracy.

Throughout the early years of her marriage, Agrippina's power continued to grow:

> Agrippina, too, continued to exalt her own dignity, she would enter the capitol in a chariot, a practice, which being allowed of old only to the priests and sacred images, increased the popular reverence for a woman who up to this time was the only recorded instance of one who, an emperor's daughter, was sister, wife, and mother of a sovereign.[23]

One can see a spark of admiration for Agrippina by Tacitus in this passage. He also adds that Agrippina created a novelty because she was allowed to sit in front of the Roman standards, and that it was "quite alien to ancient manners for a woman" to do so.[24] Her importance has not failed to impress other historians as well. Warmington writes that in the year 49 "Agrippina was given the title Augusta, the first wife of an emperor to bear it in her husband's lifetime."[25] To further acknowledge Agrippina's glory and high station a colony (which is present day Cologne) was named after her. Ferrero remarks that Agrippina "was surrounded by a semi-religious adoration. This is evidence of sincere and profound respect, for though the Romans often showered marks of human adulation upon their potentates, it was not often that they bestowed honors of so sacred a character."[26] What makes Agrippina's tribute so significant is the fact that she was a woman com-

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[23] Tacitus, Annals, XII, 42.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Warmington, p. 17. (See also Dio Cassius, LXI, 50.)

[26] Ferrero, Women, p. 295.

peting in a man's world which did not, as a rule, pander to women. Agrippina apparently possessed many attributes besides the bad characteristics too often pointed out; these qualities enabled her to achieve honors such as those mentioned above.

Dio Cassius is astounded that Agrippina was with Claudius when he transacted business, a circumstance which he considered one of the most remarkable sights of the time[27]--remarkable because of Agrippina's sex. Her power impressed Dio--"no one attempted in any way to check Agrippina; indeed, she had more power than Claudius himself and used to greet in public all who desired it, a fact that was entered into the records."[28] Momigliano disagrees with this point of view, for he holds that Claudius was a very capable ruler and that Agrippina held "a place in the history of Claudius' reign only in virtue of her share in certain isolated events, such as substitution of Nero for Britannicus, which had no influence on the general character of Claudius' government."[29] Momigliano is a highly respected historian and, therefore, his opinions should not be dismissed lightly. However, he does not give Agrippina enough credit. In an attempt to prove Claudius' worth as an emperor, he tries to discredit Agrippina of having any influence within the government, an oversight that none of the other historians used for this work have made.

Tacitus adds further testimony to the power of Agrippina. He relates an incident in which Vitellius, the senator who had been of in-

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[27]Dio Cassius, Roman History, LXI, 25.

[28]Dio Cassius, Roman History, LXI, 21.

[29]Momigliano, p. 76.

valuable help to her, was accused of treason. Agrippina was held in such high esteem that she was able to intercede for him and save his life.[30] Had Agrippina been as unscrupulous as many historians portray her to be, she probably would have left Vitellius' fate up to the senate. This incident is proof that she did possess scruples and was loyal to those who served her well.

Tacitus seems to delight in exposing Agrippina as an unsavory person. For instance, he writes that she prompted Claudius to exhibit the worst cruelty.[31] He then cites several examples of this cruelty. "On the accusation of Tarquitus Priscus, she ruined Statillius Taurus who was famous for his wealth, and at whose gardens she cast a greedy eye."[32] Supposedly after his name had been slandered by Agrippina, Taurus committed suicide. Throughout his Annals, Tacitus makes a point to show Agrippina as a money-hungry glutton. It seems strange, though, that she would make needless accusations against those with large estates, for she was quite wealthy in her own right. Several other sources point out a money-grasping aspect of her, however, "Agrippina was completely unscrupulous. . . in her determination to secure herself and her son, she struck down all those whose rivalry she feared or whose riches she coveted and the pretext was mostly the dreaded one of magic."[33] Jacques Boergas De' Serviez adds that Agrippina preserved her power by cruel and shameful means, that she persecuted

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[30] Tacitus, Annals, XII, 42.

[31] Tacitus, Annals, XII, 59.

[32] Ibid.

[33] C. A. H., X, p. 673.

people she was afraid of and, finally, that her husband became her slave.[34] De' Serviez is intensely antagonistic towards Agrippina, and several of his judgments about her actions are invalid. For example, he accuses her of giving offices to people who served her whether they were of high birth or low. "But the most deplorable circumstance was, that the senate, being chiefly composed of low, servile people, approved (by shameful decrees) of all that the emperors desired.[35] De' Serviez is used as a source not necessarily to give an accurate picture of Agrippina, but to give an example of the bias so many historians have when they write about her. No research of the ancient Roman historians has yielded a reference to the type of persons within the senate during the reign of Claudius. Therefore, it would appear that De' Serviez has made the unpardonable error of twisting events in order to suit his interpretation of Agrippina.

The popular portrayal of Claudius has been that of a weak-willed man, easily dominated by his wives.[36] Agrippina, well equipped with beauty and an excellent comprehension of governmental affairs, in all likelihood guided Claudius at various times during his reign. It is also probable that, because of her indominable will, she was frequently able to have her way. Some sources have indicated that Agrippina was responsible for the execution of various people whom she felt hindered her in her thirst for power. During her marriage with Claudius,

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[34] J. B. De' Serviez, The Roman Empresses. (The American Anthropological Society Inc., 1924), Vol. I, p. 186.

[35] De' Serviez, p. 187.

[36] Suetonius, Life of Claudius, translated by J. C. Rolfe. (Loeb Classical Library: William Heinemann Ltd.), XXIX, 59.

Agrippina did cause the deaths of a few people; however, it is a gross error to think she embarked on a policy of execution for a large number of people. She was popular and well respected, and it is doubtful that her popularity could have withstood large scale persecutions of her enemies. There were several people Agrippina felt compelled to either banish or have executed. One of these was Lepida, the cousin of Agrippina and aunt of Nero. Tacitus contends that she destroyed Lepida from motives of feminine jealousy, and that "both were shameless, infamous, and intractable, and were rivals in vice as much as in the advantages they had derived from fortune."[37] Lepida had been charged with the care of Nero when Agrippina had been banished from Rome by Caligula. She was deeply attached to him and proved to be an obstacle in the way of Agrippina, for each wanted the love and allegiance of Nero. Lepida was sentenced to death on the charge that "she had made attempts on the emperor's consort by magical incantations, and was disturbing the peace of Italy by an imperfect control of her troops of slaves in Cabria."[38]

According to Tacitus, Agrippina was responsible for the deaths of several other women whom she felt rivaled her either in power or in the eyes of Claudius. Some of these accounts are probably valid, for they are to be found in the writings of other historians. It is difficult to believe that all the accusations could be true. Agrippina was not unaware of her popularity and was astute enough to see the hazards to herself if she should jeopardize it. Further, few women

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[37]Tacitus, Annals, XII, 64.

[38]Tacitus, Annals, XII, 65.

had ever been in her position, and it would have been foolish for Agrippina to have earned the enmity of Rome's most prestigious group, the senate, with indiscriminant persecutions of her enemies.

Tacitus writes that in the year 54 there were many evil omens--"births of monsters, half men, half beast, and a pig with a hawks talons, were reported." Agrippina's terror was evident to Tacitus because she became "alarmed by some words dropped by Claudius when half intoxicated, that it was his destiny to have to endure his wives' infamy and at last punish it."[39] According to Tacitus, it is this statement made by Claudius that induced Agrippina to poison him. Another incident which further aggravated the situation is again related by Tacitus. The most trusted confidant of Claudius, Narcissus, disliked Agrippina and had tried to intercede on behalf of Lepida when she had been brought to trial. After his failure to save her life, Narcissus began telling his associates that Agrippina's:

> treacherous schemes were convulsing the whole house, with far greater disgrace than would have resulted from his concealment of the profligacy of the emperor's former wife. Even as it was, there was shamelessness enough, seeing that Pallas was her paramour, so that no one could doubt that she held honour, modesty and her very person, everything, in short, cheaper than sovereignty.[40]

After a short time, Narcissus became ill and was forced to leave Rome to recuperate. It is at this time, Tacitus writes, that Agrippina chose to have Claudius murdered. She was fearful of the influence Narcissus would have on Claudius when he returned to Rome, and she was determined to kill Claudius before Narcissus could return.

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[39]Tacitus, Annals, XII, 64.

[40]Tacitus, Annals, XII, 65.

Dio Cassius gives a different reason for Agrippina's motive to murder Claudius. "Claudius was angered by Agrippina's actions. . . and sought for his son Britannicus who had purposely been kept out of his sight by her most of the time." As he was preparing to put an end to her power, Agrippina learned of this and decided to poison Claudius.[41] Suetonius also mentions this motive for Agrippina's decision to poison Claudius. "Towards the end of his life he (Claudius) had shown some plain signs of repentence for his marriage with Agrippina and his adoption of Nero."[42] He points out that Claudius was considering that Britannicus be declared a man, presenting him with the toga Virilis and declaring him as his heir.[43]

There are several accounts of the death of Claudius in 54 and the part Agrippina may or may not have had in his demise; today it still remains shrouded in mystery. Tacitus has provided two different versions of Claudius' death; one, of course, deals with the departure of Narcissus. "Agrippina, who had long decided on the crime and eagerly grasped at the opportunity thus offered. . . deliberated on the nature of poison to be used. ... She decided on some rare compound which might derange his mind and delay death."[44] Locusta, an accomplished poisoner, was selected for preparing the poison and Claudius' taster, Halotus, for administering it. Mushrooms, the favorite dish of Claudius, was selected as the vehicle. After Claudius had eaten the

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[41]Dio Cassius, Roman History, LXI, p. 29.

[42]Suetonius, Life of Claudius, XLIII, 1.

[43]Ibid.

[44]Tacitus, Annals, XII, 66.

dish of mushrooms, he suffered no immediate effect except discomfort. Agrippina became worried and called in the physician Xenophon, who was to aid Claudius' apparent indigestion by sticking a feather down his throat to induce vomiting. Xenophon had brushed the feather with "some rapid poison," and Claudius died soon after.[45]

Another version Tacitus gives of the death of Claudius is that Agrippina had nothing whatsoever to do with it, and that Claudius died a natural death due to gastroenteritis.[46] Tacitus mentions both of these methods by which Claudius could have died but never takes a definite stand on either. One does get the impression, though, that he would be more likely to believe Claudius died by poison at the hand of Agrippina. However, the fact that he might have died of gastroenteritis cannot be overlooked. It is an interesting problem and one that, in all probability, can never be solved.

Suetonius relates, as mentioned above, the motive Agrippina might have had for the death of Claudius. However, he makes a strange statement in regard to Claudius' death. "When it was done and by whom is disputed."[47] In other words, Suetonius wants to prove that Agrippina did have a motive for murdering Claudius, but the historian remains unsure as to whether or not she was responsible for it. Once again, doubt is cast on the prospect that Agrippina was the murderess of her husband. This doubt further confuses the modern historian in an analysis of Agrippina.

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[45] Tacitus, Annals, XII, 67.

[46] Tacitus, Annals, XII, 68.

[47] Suetonius, Life of Claudius, XLIV, 1-2.

Ferrero approaches the death of Claudius in a completely different light than the rest of the authorities. He does not believe Agrippina had sufficient motive to cause or profit from Claudius' death. Further, he interjects that Agrippina's position in Rome was too secure and, therefore, she had nothing to fear from Claudius. He writes that Nero was too young to inherit the throne and that Agrippina would have preferred to wait eight to ten years for Claudius to die a natural death.[48] As if to dispute Dio Cassius and Suetonius, Ferrero adds that "Britannicus was no longer a competitor to be feared. There was only one danger for Nero, if Claudius should die too soon, the Senate might refuse to entrust the empire to a child."[49] Consequently, Ferrero holds the view, which Tacitus introduced, that Claudius died of gastroenteritus and not through the instigation of Agrippina.

With Claudius dead, Agrippina was confronted with a problem that had long perplexed her. There were two possible claimants to the Roman throne--Britannicus and Nero; both were too young to make powerful demands for the title of emperor. However, Agrippina could be assured of continual power in governmental affairs only if Nero was selected to rule. She had only one choice; to make sure that Nero's claim to be emperor was realized.

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[48]Guglielmo Ferrero, Characters & Events in Roman History. (New York & London: Knickerbocker Press, 1909), p. 104.

[49]Ferrero, Characters, p. 104.

CHAPTER IV

AGRIPPINA AND NERO

With Claudius dead, Agrippina was confronted with the serious problem of informing the Roman public of his death and securing the throne for Nero. It was essential to her plans to make the Roman populace believe that Claudius was still alive while she instigated a way by which Nero could be declared emperor with the least possible difficulty. To achieve this, she had reports issued for several days in regard to the dead emperor's health, and had Britannicus and his sisters kept under constant survellience within the palace.[1] In keeping with his hypothesis that Agrippina was surprised by Claudius' death, Ferrero writes that the whole incident was surrounded by hurry and confusion. Because both Britannicus and Nero were so young, Agrippina had to devise a method to secure the imperial office for one because the senate would probably refuse to acknowledge either. "The only means of avoiding this danger was to bring pressure to bear upon the senate through the praetorian cohorts, which were as friendly to the family of Augustus as the senate was hostile."[2] She would have to present one of the boys to the guards and have him acclaimed "not

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[1] Tacitus, Annals of Tacitus, translated by Alfred J. Church & William J. Brodribb. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1891), XII, 68.

[2] Guglielmo Ferrero, The Women of the Caesars. (New York: The Century Company, 1911), p. 299.

only head of the empire but also head of the armies." Only in this way would the senate be forced to acquiesce.[3]

Ferrero rightly surmises that Agrippina took the only avenue open to her. First, it was only natural that she should desire her own son to be ruler; and second, the fact that he was older was an important factor, because it is unlikely that Britannicus, a 13 year old, would have been accepted as leader of the armies and the Roman state.[4] On October 13, 54, Nero was put before the Roman soldiers and hailed as emperor. Shortly after this the senate was forced to follow suit.[5]

There was literally no opposition to Nero's ascension to the throne, probably because the will of Claudius was never read. Warmington contends from information produced by Dio Cassius and Suetonius that the will had favored Britannicus to be emperor after Claudius' death.[6] However, Tacitus writes that Nero was the favored successor.[7] As with other problems confronted in regard to Agrippina and her times, this question is one which historians probably will never solve.

Tacitus and other historians write that in order to make sure Nero had the least amount of trouble in succeeding Claudius, Agrippina had Britannicus locked in the palace and kept unaware of his father's demise. Only in this way could she be assured that Britannicus would be unable to win support and be declared emperor. Most historians

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[3]Ferrero, Women, pp. 299-300.

[4]Ferrero, Women, p. 300.

[5]Tacitus, Annals, XII, 68.

[6]B. H. Warmington, Nero: Reality & Legend. (New York: Norton & Co. Inc., 1969), p. 20.

[7]Tacitus, Annals, XII, 68.

say little more about this necessary imprisonment of Britannicus. One, however, Ivar Lissner, has committed an unscholarly error in speculation about this incident. He asks if Britannicus' detainment could have been an effort to lure and win him over sexually.[8] His axiom for such a question is his belief that Agrippina was sexually depraved and lusted after anyone who would benefit her cause. It is an historian like Lissner that has given Agrippina a dark place in history and, hopefully, mistakes of this kind will be rectified in future.

Agrippina, in procuring the throne for Nero, had to have had help, and she received it from two men who had been of great aid to her during the reign of Claudius--Seneca and Burrus.[9] After Agrippina had married Claudius, she had Seneca brought back from exile to become the tutor of Nero. Seneca was not only an able teacher but an astute philosopher as well. Burrus was head of the praetorian guard and as loyal as Seneca to Agrippina and Nero. Without the help of Burrus and the guidance of Seneca, Agrippina's plans for Nero might not have been realized, for both men commanded respect in Rome.

With Nero safely on the Roman throne, Agrippina could give Claudius a funeral befitting an emperor. "His funeral rites were solemnized on the same scale as those of Augustus; for Agrippina strove to emulate the magnificence of her great-grandmother, Livia."[10] Showing the foresight and aptness she had displayed so often before, Agrippina

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[8]Ivar Lissner, The Caesars, Might and Madness. (New York: Capricorn Books, 1965), p. 110.

[9]Ferrero, Women, p. 300.

[10]Tacitus, Annals, XII, 69.

also had Claudius proclaimed a god, an act which further endeared her and Nero to the Roman populace.

At the outset of his reign, Nero "left his mother the management of all public and private business. . . He gave the tribunes the watchword, 'The Best of Mothers,' further proving his reliance and respect of her."[11] In a sense, then, Agrippina was virtual ruler of Rome.[12] According to Ferrero, she had the old Republican constitution restored, an act which marked the zenith of her power.[13] The restoration of the constitution was an apt move on the part of Agrippina, for it helped continue the ideals of the Republic and also helped smooth over the fact that a 17 year old was emperor. Ferrero adds that "most historians, hallucinated by Tacitus," have not noticed, because of Agrippina's rule and re-introduction of the constitution, that the empire had never been so close to that of the ancient Republic as under the early government of Nero. This restoration was "an act of political sagacity planned by a woman whose knowledge of the art of government had been received in the school of Augustus. . . The move was entirely successful."[14]

Ferrero is credible in regard to the early part of Nero's reign. Most historians agree that in the early years the rule of Nero was quite respectable. It was only when Agrippina's power over him began to wane that one can comprehend the beginnings of corruption and deceit

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

[12]Dio Cassius, LXI, 37, provides further testimony to Agrippina's power.

[13]Ferrero, Women, p. 305.

[14]Ferrero, Women, pp. 305-306.

that marked the rest of Nero's emperorship. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that Agrippina was the motivating factor in the earliest years of his reign and, for this reason, the government of Nero was good. It seems strange that only Ferrero expounds on Agrippina's ability as a ruler. Most historians agree almost unanimously that Agrippina did control the government from 54 to early 56. However, they fail to give her credit for the smoothenss with which the government worked during this time.

Evidence of Agrippina's unofficial authority during the first years of Nero's rule can be found in the coins of the period. Michael Grant writes that at first Agrippina was more important than Nero, and bases his proof on coins distributed during 54 to 55. Her profile was larger than that of Nero and appeared on the sovereign side of the coins, while the profile of Nero appeared on the reverse side.[15] Her importance was carried even further in the eastern provinces of the empire. "Eastern coins hailed her as a goddess and parent of a god."[16] Warmington also testifies that Agrippina was powerful and, like Grant, relies on coins as proof.[17] These coins are concrete evidence of Agrippina's influence in the Roman empire at this time. Although accounts by historians have been disputed in relation to the power of Agrippina, it is unlikely that one could doubt the credibility of the coins; they are a true testament of the unofficial authority of Agrippina.

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[15]Michael Grant, Nero. (New York: American Heritage Press, 1970), p. 36.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Warmington, p. 44.

Charlesworth acknowledges Agrippina as having been co-regent with Nero, but contends that her power "rested merely on the prestige of a daughter of Germanicus and on the gratitude of her son and his immediate helpers for the share that she had taken in securing for Nero the succession to the throne."[18] This statement implies that Agrippina had no real power other than that which her son's advisors relegated her. However, this argument lacks feasibility for ancient sources and, more conclusively, the coinage of the period shows that Agrippina was a definite power in the state. Moreover, it has been proven that she was a decisive factor during the reign of Claudius. Although her power depended to some extent on her lineage, it would be unfair to assume that it was her only claim. Agrippina needed more than her ancestry to obtain a place in Roman government. She also had to have cunning and ambition--qualities she had long possessed.

Tacitus argues that in 54 Agrippina, as nominal head of the empire had several persons she feared executed. One of the first was Junius Silanus, the proconsul of Asia. He was put to death without Nero's knowledge because Agrippina, "having contrived the murder of his brother Lucius Silanus, dreaded his vengence. . . Silanus. . . was the son of a great-grandson of Augustus. This was the cause of his destruction."[19] Agrippina's action in this incident was, perhaps, warranted. Silanus did possess a claim to the throne and could present a threat to Nero were he to gather support for his claim. In procuring his death, she was insuring the throne for Nero and ridding

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[18] C. A. H., X, p. 708.

[19] Tacitus, Annals, XIII, 2.

the empire of a possible reactionary force.

Tacitus also charges Agrippina with driving Claudius' loyal freedman, Narcissus, to suicide against the wishes of Nero.[20] Although such an action seems beastly to the modern mind, it should be remembered that such occurrences were fairly commonplace at this time in history. Tiberius had rid himself of those he considered undesirable elements in Roman society. Caligula had followed suit, and even Claudius was wont to eliminate certain people. Agrippina had taken the only possible course open to her in driving Narcissus to suicide. He long had been opposed to her and in all likelihood considered Britannicus to be the rightful heir to the throne. In forcing Narcissus' death, Agrippina rid herself of an enemy whose only possible recourse would have been to advance the cause of Britannicus.

Agrippina had always desired to be present at most governmental functions. The senate was one institution which strictly forbade the presence of women. Therefore, Agrippina hid behind a curtain, a method by which she could watch the senatorial proceedings without being observed. Tacitus relates that once when "envoys from Armenia were pleading their nation's cause before Nero, she actually was on the point of mounting the emperor's tribunal and of presiding with him," when Seneca had the prince rise and meet her and "a scandalous scene was prevented."[21] Incidents such as this earned Agrippina the hatred of many Roman statesmen. A woman's place was in the home and not in the government; and when confronted by a female at their own

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[20] Ibid.

[21] Tacitus, Annals, XIII, 5.

level, the Roman officials must have felt somewhat threatened.

It is entirely possible that Agrippina's help in running the empire during Nero's minority has been misconstrued by many historians because Italy was struggling "between the old Roman military society and the intellectual civilization of the Orient."[22] It was a period of turmoil, and Agrippina may have suffered in history because of it. Ferrero writes that there was a psychological disorder in Rome at this time because of changing ideas. Women were enjoying more freedom than ever before, but Rome was still adverse to the idea of women in government:

> The public began to feel shocked by the attention Agrippina gave to State affairs, as by a new and this time intolerable scandal of feminism. Agrippina was not a feminist. . . but a traditionalist, proud of the glory of her family, attached to the ancient Roman ideas, desirous only of seeing her son develop into a new Germanicus, a second Drusus. Solely the necessity of helping Nero had led her to meddle with politics.[23]

Rome was ill prepared to accept a woman as its head either in name or in fact. Once again, however, Ferrero has underrated Agrippina. She was not interested in politics for just her son's sake. True, she wanted Nero to be an able ruler and, if possible, rival Augustus in glory. However, she also desired a role in government herself and in the early years of Nero's reign considered herself to be virtual ruler. She had schemed a long time to realize her ambition for power and was not likely to surrender it willingly when the time came to do so.

Towards the end of 55 Agrippina's power began to wane. Several

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[22]Guglielmo Ferrero. Characters & Events in Roman History. (New York & London: Knickerbocker Press, 1909), p. 107.

[23]Ferrero, Characters, p. 110.

historians have interpreted her decline in different ways, and all have valid arguments. The predominant reason cited by most historians for Agrippina's weakening influence over Nero was his love for a freedwoman, Acte.[24] Nero was unhappy with his marriage to Octavia and desired a divorce so that he might marry Acte. Agrippina was understandably opposed to such a match, but instead of letting Nero's passion for Acte wear itself out she continued to heckle and push Nero away from Acte. There are several different interpretations as to why Agrippina reacted so violently to this woman. Tacitus contends that she was insensed at having a rival,[25] but Ferrero argues her opposition was based on principles. If Nero did marry Acte, the match would go against family prestige.[26] It was an established custom for emperors to marry only within the most noble families. If Nero were to marry Acte, a mere freedwoman, the emperorship might lose some of its mystique and acceptability to the Roman people.

There are also psychological implications which have been noted by some historians in regard to Nero's passion for Acte. Several have asserted that Nero's dogged refusals to obey Agrippina's orders and send Acte away were a result of too strict a survellience on his mother's part.[27] Ferrero writes that Agrippina had made the mistake of continuing to treat Nero like a child and that he "shook off maternal

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[24]See Tacitus, Annals, XIII, 12.

[25]Tacitus, Annals, XIII, 13.

[26]Ferrero, Women, p. 312.

[27]See Suetonius, Life of Nero, XXXIV, 2 and C. A. H., X, p. 707.

authority, which up to that time he had accepted with docility."[28] Tacitus remarks that "the fouler her reproaches the more powerfully did they inflame him, till completely mastered by the strength of his desire, he threw off all respect for his mother," and put himself under the guidance of those who opposed Agrippina. ". . . then Agrippina, changing her tactics, plied the lad with various blandishments and even offered the seclusion of her chamber" for his affair. Further, "she pleaded guilty to all ill-timed strictness, and handed over to him the abundance of her wealth . . . and became lax to excess." Nero's best friends "begged him to beware of the arts of a woman, who was always daring and was now false."[29] Agrippina, realizing her antagonism towards Acte had merely inflamed Nero, used reverse psychology to quell Nero's desire for the freedwoman.

Although Nero no longer wanted Acte in marriage, the incident lessened the authority Agrippina had once wielded over him. Her decline, in fact, can be detected from this incident. Shortly afterwards, towards the close of 55, a new set of coins was issued throughout the empire, and on them Agrippina's profile appears on the reverse side and is smaller than that of Nero.[30] As the coins issued during the earlier part of Nero's reign had been indicative of Agrippina's supremacy, so the coins issued in late 55 were an indication of her decline.

It has long been acknowledged that Nero was more interested in

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[28]Ferrero, Women, p. 312.

[29]Tacitus, Annals, XIII, 13.

[30]See Grant, p. 37 and Warmington, p. 44.

music and the arts than in running the empire. Because Nero was uninterested in the practical aspects of operating his empire, Agrippina attempted to persuade him from his self-indulgences and to learn how to rule. Nero had no desire to change his life-style and it was inevitable that a struggle should develop between him and his mother. Ferrero indicates that as the clash between them developed, people began choosing sides in the conflict; and most chose Nero's, partly because the rule of a female was both abhorent and untraditional to the Romans.[31]

Further:

> Contrary to Agrippina's ideas, it was (Nero's) frivolity that pleased the great masses, because this frivolity corresponded to the slow but progressive decay of the old Roman Virtues in them. . . they expected from Nero. . . a government which, instead of glory and wisdom, meant pleasure and vise.[32]

Nero found many men, who had grown tired of Agrippina's strict ways, to join him in his discontent. She was rapidly becoming unpopular and, of course, had many enemies as a woman in her position would naturally have. The people desired the luxury and good times that had been prevalent during Messalina's hegemony. Therefore, the party of the new nobility, which had lain dormant for eight years, was again beginning to surface.[33] All of these factors were eventually to doom Agrippina.

Tacitus cites an incident in which Nero sent Agrippina a beautiful

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[31]Ferrero, Characters & Events, p. 1113.

[32]Ferrero, Characters, p. 115.

[33]Ferrero, Women, p. 316.

robe that had been worn by a previous empress. Agrippina stated publicly that Nero was "merely dividing with her what he derived wholly from herself."[34] Tacitus is the only historian who mentions this occurrence and one cannot help but wonder at its accuracy. If it were true, it would certainly not help Agrippina's already tenuous position. Tacitus writes that in retaliation to his humiliation, Nero dismissed Pallas from court. Dio Cassius remarks that "Pallas in his association with Agrippina was altogether vulgar and objectionable,"[35] and most historians acknowledge that he was Agrippina's lover. Agrippina thought highly of Pallas not only because of their close association within the government, but also because of help he had so often rendered her. Moreover, he was one of the few people who remained loyal to her, and his dismissal was an act she could not take lightly.

Because of the dismissal of Pallas, Tacitus argues, Agrippina began praising Britannicus; this praise greatly aggravated Nero.[36] Ferrero disagrees with Tacitus, and writes that because Agrippina felt Nero was unfit to rule the empire, she began looking favorably towards Britannicus.[37] Regardless of Agrippina's reasons for turning away from Nero to Britannicus, it was an event which greatly angered Nero, and he was quickly revenged. One evening as the entire royal family was dining together, Britannicus was taken ill and soon died. Nero,

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[34]Tacitus, Annals, XIII, 13.

[35]Dio Cassius, Roman History, translated by Earnest Cary. (Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Mass., 1968), LXI, 39.

[36]Tacitus, Annals, XIII, 14.

[37]Ferrero, Women, p. 318.

so fearful of being overthrown, had poisoned him.[38] With Britannicus dead, Agrippina "was robbed of her only remaining refuge."[39] His death was, in a sense, a fatal blow to Agrippina and her followers, plus "the new nobility. . . now rapidly gained strength, and the influence of Agrippina declined proportionately."[40] Nilsson writes that after the murder of Britannicus, Nero and Agrippina were never close and that Nero seemed to fear his mother more than anyone else.[41]

In turning from Agrippina for advice, Nero began to rely on Seneca and Burrus, Agrippina's former allies. They had been dismayed at the authority she possessed and were instrumental in driving a wedge between mother and son. Through the instigation of Seneca and Burrus and several of his friends, Nero began to consider Agrippina a real obstacle to his happiness and future. As a result, she was forced to leave the palace.[42] After this, Seneca and Burrus had virtual control over the impressionable Nero. One cannot help but feel pity for Agrippina at this point, for it is clear that she was attempting to make Nero face up to his governmental responsibilities. Unfortunately for Rome and herself, she was stymied in the attempt because of the fear others felt because of her influence on her son.

Suetonius writes that Nero, in exiling Agrippina from the palace, deprived her "of all her honors and of her guard of Roman and German

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[38] Tacitus, Annals, XIII, 15.

[39] Tacitus, Annals, XIII, 17.

[40] Ferrero, Women, p. 318.

[41] Martin L. Nilsson, Imperial Rome. (London: G. Bell & Sons Ltd., 1926), p. 29.

[42] C. A. H., X, p. 710.

soldiers. . ., then he had people abuse and mock her."[43] Though she was banished from the palace, Agrippina was able to "check the progress of the government in its new direction" for two years.[44] An example of Agrippina's power in exile is given by Tacitus. Agrippina had moved to a palace in Rome and, though rapidly losing popularity, was still important enough to warrant visitors of high distinction. One such person was Junia Silana, a woman who "had long been a special favorite of Agrippina."[45] According to Tacitus, despite the warm friendship that existed between the two, Agrippina began speaking ill of her and prevented Junia Silana from marrying the man she loved. Silana, in retaliation, charged Agrippina with treason against Nero. Nero wanted Agrippina put to death but was persuaded by Burrus to listen to her defense. Agrippina, of course, proved her innocence and her power was great enough that she had her accusers punished.[46] Agrippina was victorious over her enemies in this instance. However, it foreshadowed her eventual demise, for this incident made it apparent that Nero desired his mother's death.

In 58, the death knell began to sound for Agrippina. Nero fell in love with Sabina Poppae, a woman from one of Rome's most noble families. Like Agrippina, she was ambitious, and realized the one obstacle to her desire to become Nero's empress was his mother. Poppae was well aware that as long as Agrippina lived, Nero would not divorce

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[43] Suetonius, Life of Nero, XXXIV, 2.

[44] Ferrero, Women, p. 319.

[45] Tacitus, Annals, XIII, 20.

[46] Tacitus, Annals, XIII, 20-22.

Octavia. It is with the advent of Poppae's influence that Nero began to consider definite plans for Agrippina's death.[47] His eventual decision to have Agrippina murdered did not rest solely on his amorous inclinations, for the crime was equally as political in origin. By 58, Agrippina was hated and feared by so many because of her influence on Nero and the government that the deed was easily executed. Ferrero claims that:

> It was chiefly the party that wanted to sack the imperial budget, to introduce the finance of great expenditure, which could not tolerate this clever and energetic woman, who was so faithful to the great traditions of Augustus and Tiberius, who could neither be frightened nor corrupted.[48]

Agrippina, as astute as ever, must have been aware of the intrigue against her, but there was little she could do to stave off the inevitable. Unfortunately, even her last year is sullied by the ancient historians. Tacitus relates that Agrippina, in a last desperate attempt to save herself, "presented herself attractively attired to her half intoxicated son and offered him her person."[49] Tacitus acknowledges the information was related to him by a certain Cluvius, about whom no information is given. Later he relates that a Fabius Rusticus claimed that it was Nero, and not Agrippina, "who lusted for the crime."[50] Therefore, modern historians are given two different interpretations of the event and must choose for themselves which account they feel is more accurate. Tacitus chose to believe the account of

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[47] Tacitus, Annals, XIV, 1.

[48] Ferrero, Characters & Events, p. 118.

[49] Tacitus, Annals, XIV, 2.

[50] Ibid.

Clunius, which is not surprising, as he felt a great deal of antipathy towards Agrippina. It is likely that Agrippina probably displayed an uncertain mother's affection for Nero by kissing and carressing him, but one must seriously doubt Tacitus' claim that they were "wanton." Agrippina was a cunning woman and had, in the course of her lifetime, committed many errors, but it is doubtful that she would have done anything of such magnitude as have an incestuous relationship with her son.

"At last convinced that she would be too formidable wherever she might dwell," Nero resolved to destroy Agrippina.[51] Several alternatives were considered and tried. Suetonius relates two attempts on Agrippina's life, both of which failed. The first was poison, however Agrippina had taken so many drugs during her lifetime in order to negate such an attempt that she was immune to the poison and the attempt failed. Nero then tried to have her killed by having panels dropped from her ceiling on her as she slept, but for various reasons this attempt also failed.[52] Nero finally enlisted the aid of Anicetus, a freedman and commander of the naval fleet, who bitterly hated Agrippina. Anicetus convinced Nero that the perfect murder could take place at sea, for boating accidents were quite common. Nero approved the idea and had Anicetus construct a collapsible ship in which a trap was concealed that would drop Agrippina into the ocean. Above the trap was to be a weight that would be released in conjunction with the trap door, and its purpose would be to crush whoever sat there so that there

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[51] Tacitus, Annals, XIV, 3.

[52] Suetonius, Life of Nero, XXXIV, 3.

would be no chance for escape. After the trap was released, the entire vessel was to collapse in order to make the murder look like an accident.[53]

In order to make Agrippina think all was well between them and to catch her when least prepared, Nero invited her to the Festival of Minerva at Baiae, on the gulf of Naples. There, Agrippina spent a great deal of time with Nero, who was more affectionate than usual, and seemed to show signs of maturing. In fact, things went so well between them that Agrippina's fears were abated.[54] After the festival Nero placed his mother on board the vessel and went to wait for news of her death. He was disappointed, however, because the plan failed. Agrippina had been placed on a strong couch with one of her ladies-in-waiting beside her. The couch failed to fall through the trap as planned; the weight crushed the woman beside her and Agrippina, when the ship began to sink, swam to safety. Through a miraculous turn of events, Agrippina had been spared her life. She was astute enough to realize the whole affair at Baiae and that the ship had been Nero's plot to murder her. Knowing her life hung in the balance, Agrippina sent a message to Nero assuring him of her safety. Knowing the odds were overwhelmingly against her, Agrippina hoped that if she ignored the attempt on her life, Nero would allow her her life in return.[55]

Agrippina's servant reached Nero, who became alarmed at his mother's escape. He was frightened that she would take recourse in

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[53]Tacitus, Annals, XIV, 4 and Ferrero, Characters & Events, p. 19.

[54]Tacitus, Annals, XIV, 6.

[55]Tacitus, Annals, XIV, 8. Ferrero, Characters & Events, p. 121.

informing the Roman public of his attempt at matricide. Seneca and Burrus devised a means by which Nero could still have Agrippina murdered and have it appear as if it were a necessary death. A story was fabricated in which the servant Agrippina had sent was said to have been the assigned the assassinator of Nero, and on discovering the plot against him, Nero was forced to have his mother killed for treason. To carry out the deed, Nero sent Anicetus and several sailors to Agrippina's palace and, in the dead of night, she was stabbed to death.[56]

In 59 Agrippina, at the age of 44, met a violent end. Events shortly after her death are shrouded in mystery. For instance, Suetonius writes that Nero "hurried off to view the corpse, handled her limbs, criticizing some and commending others."[57] He admits that Tacitus said some denied such an occurrence, so it is a point left open to conjecture. Tacitus relates that Agrippina's body "was burnt that same night on a dining couch, with a mean funeral; nor, as long as Nero was in power was the earth raised into a mound or even decently closed."[58]

At first Agrippina's death was viewed with horror by the Roman public. Few believed Nero's account of her attempt on his life. However, with the passage of time and because of Nero's popularity, the matricide was accepted and Nero able to lead the type of life he had long desired. Even in death, though, Agrippina still retained

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[56] Tacitus, Annals, XIV, 9.

[57] Suetonius, Life of Nero, XXXIV, 4.

[58] Tacitus, Annals, XIV, 9.

marked influence on Nero, and it is thought that her murder caused his mind to weaken and his behavior to become more erratic than before. Almost ironically it is recorded that:

> Many years before Agrippina had anticipated this end for herself and spurned the thought. For when she consulted the astrologers about Nero, they replied that he would be emperor and kill his mother. "Let him kill her," she said, "provided he is emperor."[59]

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[59]Tacitus, Annals, XIV, 9.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Agrippina was more than just a product of her times as she rose to power under almost insurmountable odds. Some historians have argued that her influence on Roman politics during her lifetime was negligible.[1] However, this would appear to be an over-simplification of the facts. That she was able to establish her son in a position strong enough to take the title of emperor away from the son of Claudius is proof of her power. The titles and honors bestowed on her by the people and senate, and her ability to elicit support from all branches of the Roman political system are further testimonies to her influence during Claudius' reign. Probably the most cogent example of Agrippina's power is related by Tacitus. "Rome was as if transformed. From now on everything went according to Agrippina's wishes. She did not merely toy with the state like the frivolous Messalina. Hers was a rigid and utterly masculine regime."[2] This statement is plausible, for it was not until Claudius' marriage to

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[1] See Arnaldo Momigliano, Claudius, The Emperor & His Achivements. (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1930), and J. B. Bury, A History of the Roman Empire. (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1893). Momigliano assertains that Claudius was an adept ruler and Agrippina had little or no influence on him. Bury mentions her only in an overview of Roman history and, like Momigliano, leaves the impression that Agrippina was not too important.

[2] Tacitus, Annals of Tacitus, translated by Alfred J. Church & William J. Brodribb. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1891), XII, 9.

Agrippina that we find the empire being well run. With the advent of her presence, a large part of the frivolity indicative of Messalina's hegemony disappeared, and it is likely that this disappearance was the work of Agrippina.

Antonia and Livia had enjoyed the prestige and respect usually given to women of high standing in the Roman Empire; but neither received the adulation or power Agrippina commanded. The reasons for Agrippina's strength at court are varied. Antonia and Livia lived at a time when the Republic was dying and the Empire being born. More than this, though, they were eclipsed by the powerful character of Augustus. Both believed that woman was always subordinant to man. This was Roman custom. Not insignificant, too, were the moral issues at stake during the lifetime of these two women. Augustus made his immediate family live by and obey the laws of morality. Adultery was punishable by banishment, a punishment given to the first wife of Augustus, Julia, and later to their daughter. The law was applicable to all, including the royal family.

After the death of Augustus, Tiberius sought to keep the empire in the same frame as his predecessor. However, he was opposed by several factions, the predominant one led by Agrippina the Elder. The internal strife during his reign could not help but undermine some of the old customs of Rome and, after his death, they all but disappeared under the degenerate rule of Caligula. Therefore, by the time Agrippina was reintroduced to Roman life, the old customs of the Republic were undergoing drastic revisions, and Rome was in a state of moral flux.

With the advent of the reign of Caligula, Oriental customs were

rapidly introduced to Roman society.[3] These various customs greatly influenced the mad emperor and, after him, Messalina, the wife of Claudius. It is feasible that the introduction of such customs facilitated the rise of Agrippina, for the rule of women was an accepted practice in both the ancient Near and Far East. But the breakdown of ancient customs was not the sole reason for Agrippina's ascendancy to a powerful position. She possessed the necessary attributes a woman with high ambition needed: intelligence, cunning and beauty. Without these assets, she could never have achieved power or the changes Rome so desperately needed after the havoc-filled years of Caligula's rule and Messalina's yeara as empress.

Only grudging acknowledgement of Agrippina's ability to rule well has been introduced by the ancient writers. They would have the modern historian believe that she was a vile, ludicrous and sexually perverted woman. This slanted viewpoint has greatly influenced most modern historians who are equally as biased against Agrippina as the ancients.[4] With the odds against Agrippina in the eyes of most historians, how is it possible to disprove the harsh accusations? Hopefully such proof can be found throughout this thesis. Perhaps the hypothesis most persuasive in clearing the name of this most maligned person is that Agrippina was a woman trying to achieve power in a society dominated by men. She was able to cross barriers that had never before been challenged, a

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[3]Guglielmo Ferrero, The Women of the Caesars. (New York: The Century Company, 1911), p. 234.

[4]The degree of bias is varied. Ferrero and Grace Macurdy are the only two historians in this research who were unprejudiced against Agrippina. Those historians, like De' Serviez and Lissner, who use Dio Cassius as their main source, are the most antagonistic to Agrippina.

feat that earned her the hatred and condemnation of many who feared the presence of women in governmental affairs. Women like Octavia and Antonia had always remained discretely in the background of Roman politics. They gave their opinion of public affairs only when consulted, and though this was frequently done, it was always in private. Women were, for the most part, to represent all that was pure and good. Furthermore, women like Antonia had been sheltered from things unsavory at an early age; they were used to a life of acquiescence, for they had never known differently.

In contrast to the pure life of her ancestors, Agrippina was forced to endure humiliation, poverty,[5] and witness the degredation and deaths of her mother and two brothers. In essence, then, Agrippina grew up under the influence of hardships unusual to a Roman of her stature. This, coupled with the insane treatment dealt her by her own brother, molded Agrippina's character into one of determination and shrewdness. These attributes were necessary for her very survival. Later, after her marriage to Claudius was secured, she naturally employed every means possible to ensure her hard won position. Although such measures included execution and banishment of those who opposed her, these practices were by no means as prevalent as ancient historians would have us believe.[6]

Agrippina's sexual behavior has been a source of controversy among historians. In fact, her many alleged affairs have earned her

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[5] I do not mean poverty in the strict sense of the word. Agrippina was certainly never in danger of starving, but she was forced to do without many things (clothes & jewelry) during the reign of Tiberius and after her banishment during Caligula's reign.

[6] See Chapter III of Ferrero, Women.

the bitterest condemnations of historians. The accusation of incest by many writers has caused the greatest furor. The fact remains, however, that none of the ancient historians learned of her alleged degeneracy until years after both her death and the death of Nero. Although Agrippina had grown up under unusual circumstances, she always retained the pride in Rome that her grandmother Antonia instilled in her. This pride included discretion about her personal life and would certainly never have allowed Agrippina to practice incest willingly. She may have been forced by Caligula, who was quite deranged, but that she was ever intimate with Nero is highly improbable. Nero had inherited the strain of insanity that plagued the Julian clan and probably desired an incestuous relationship with his mother, but it is doubtful that this desire was ever realized.

Agrippina affected Roman politics and affairs greatly during her lifetime. Her influence over Claudius produced efficient, respectable and even enviable results. After her marriage to Claudius, Rome had a government based more on honesty of purpose and more fiscal solidarity than it had known since before the death of Tiberius. In the earliest years of Nero, when she was still able to control him, Agrippina also kept close watch over affairs of state. Indeed, it is only when her influence over Nero began to wane that the Roman government and treasury declined.

In retrospect, then, Agrippina was a source of power in the Roman state. Like her predecessors, she possessed many faults, but they should not overshadow her importance. She deserves a more illustrious place in history, for she was not only an administrator and politician of sorts, but one of the first women in Roman history to achieve her goal of power.

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