

ANCIENT HISTORY: *ROME*

Asses the Legacy of Agrippina the Younger

To assess Agrippina the younger's legacy is to make a judgement on Agrippina's impact whilst alive and her lasting influence after her death. Through an exploration of her achievement of power and influence, compared with the impact of her death and her continued influence, one can gain an insight into Agrippina's legacy. Whilst arguably the most powerful woman of her time, Agrippina, despite her power did not herself have a continued influence on Rome after her death, thus Agrippina did not have a long lasting or renowned legacy.

Whilst alive, Agrippina achieved the unthinkable, not only the ascension of her son to the throne, but also power and influence for herself unimaginable for a woman. She achieved these goals and many other astonishing accomplishments through her outstanding ambition and cunning manipulation of events and people. Both ancient and modern sources describe the rise to power of Agrippina and her many achievements throughout her life. After the birth of her son, Lucius it was clear Agrippina had one goal in mind, to place her son, the future emperor Nero on the throne of the Roman Empire. Tacitus recorded that Agrippina once stated 'let him kill me, provided he becomes emperor!' However it soon became apparent that Agrippina also had another goal, ultimate power for herself. The context in which Agrippina lived dictated the amount of power she could hold as a woman, Agrippina stepped outside these boundaries rebelling against the conventions of the time. Agrippina gained social and political power unbeknownst to women in three ways, through her lineage, her sexuality and her manipulation. Agrippina was both a Julian and a Claudian her 'exceptionally illustrious birth' as described by Tacitus made her a desirable wife; one of her greatest achievements was her marriage to the emperor Claudius. Agrippina's lineage and also her seduction attracted her uncle Claudius, historian Ginsburg asserts 'Agrippina's seductiveness was a help... she tempted him (Claudius) into giving her preference', thus showing how Agrippina utilised her sexuality to ensure her marriage to Claudius. Once married to Claudius Agrippina gained immense power for herself and her son through manipulation. Cassius Dio affirms this by stating 'as soon as Agrippina came to live in the palace she gained complete control over Claudius', and thus begins Agrippina's great influence over Rome.

Agrippina's first major influence was over the marriage of her son Nero, to Claudius' daughter Octavia. This saw Agrippina's removal of Silanus, the man to whom Octavia was betrothed and the eventual marriage of Nero and Octavia. Agrippina's next step in securing the position of Nero involved his adoption by Claudius which Dio states caused Claudius' son Britannicus to become forgotten. With Nero's position secure Agrippina set about gaining further power for herself. Whilst under the reign of Claudius Agrippina was granted many honours and titles, giving her further power and thus influence. In AD 50 Agrippina was given the title 'Augusta' making her the first living woman to gain the title. Barrett explains that the title 'conveyed the notion of empress' and Grant maintains that 'Agrippina rapidly became more important than any imperial woman had ever been before'. Agrippina's new power and influence can also be seen archaeologically. She began appearing on coins with Claudius, assimilated with the goddess Ceres who symbolised the ideal Roman woman. Other coins depicted Claudius' and Agrippina's divine union, which is further secured by the relief of Agrippina and Claudius at Aphrodisias assimilating Agrippina to Demeter, goddess of fertility whilst Claudius' oak wreath depicts a new and harmonious beginning. Cassius Dio argues that Claudius 'was angered by Agrippina's actions' in her ruthless path to gain power which he was now becoming aware of and thus began to support his son Britannicus as heir. Upon the death of Claudius Agrippina used her power to suppress Claudius' will as 'Claudius... repented of having married Agrippina and adopted Nero' according to Suetonius. Agrippina's ability to suppress Claudius' will clearly shows her influence over Claudius' administration and the empire. Under the reign of Nero, Agrippina achieved her most unbelievable level of power and influence. She was allowed to listen to meetings of the senate, Tacitus confirms Agrippina 'could stand behind a curtain... and listen'. The coins of Nero's reign also depict Agrippina's heightened power, whilst married to Claudius Agrippina appeared on the reversal of coins, however once Nero became

emperor Agrippina was shown of equal size, face to face with her son, symbolising not only her power over her sons reign but the suggesting a partnership in their ruling. This is maintained by Suetonius comment 'Nero allowed his mother full authority' thus depicting the peak in Agrippina's power. Hence both ancient and modern sources depict Agrippina's accomplishment of power and her influence upon achieving this despite her contextual limits. Thus one is able to explore Agrippina's power and influence in order to assess her legacy.

The death of Agrippina did not have a great impact on her time and her previous influences were quickly forgotten. After her death Agrippina was not portrayed as a revolutionary and brilliant woman, instead she was portrayed as ruthless and blood thirsty, the antithesis of the ideal Roman matron. Upon her death Nero was cautious about how the senate and general population would receive him as acts of matricide were not condoned. However Nero was advised that the death of Agrippina had won him great favour with the people, as people resented the influence of strong and powerful women. Nero had his mother's statues torn down, a traditional fate of disgraced woman and her name hacked from inscriptions. There was little opposition to Nero's murder of his mother however Dio describes an incident in which a baby was left in the forum with a tag that read 'I won't rear you, in case you murder your mother'. Barrett argues that Nero's celebration of Agrippina's death helped people forget about the abuses her power had caused and thus helped people forget about her, hence Agrippina soon ceased to be remembered in politics. Both modern and ancient historians conclude that the main impact of Agrippina's death was the influence over the reign of Nero. After the death of Agrippina, Barrett believes Nero's reign began a descent into erratic tyranny. Sources convey that Nero, always a lover of arts, began to focus solely on his arts and performances which Agrippina had banned. Nero began to neglect the empire and thus began the downfall of his reign. Leadbetter concludes 'In the end Nero could neither rule with her (Agrippina) nor without her'.

The lack of legacy held by Agrippina can be held responsible to a number of causes during the reign of Nero and successive emperors. As Nero had successfully destroyed any physical memory of his mother there is little representation of Agrippina. Nero had attempted to rewrite his own history to have Agrippina written out and portrayed as a distant family member; whilst he was not triumphant in this his actions in destroying Agrippina's supporters were highly successful. As Agrippina was not awarded any political or divine honours there were no supporters to carry on her legacy or worship her thus she quickly disappeared from Roman life. No future emperors made efforts to commemorate or establish a legacy of Agrippina and thus she remained forgotten except by ancient Roman writers such as Dio, Suetonius and Tacitus who did little to help her portrayal. Thus the impact of Agrippina's death caused only an influence over her son Nero who ensured that any memories of Agrippina were destroyed impacting greatly on any potential legacy of Agrippina.

The little legacy that Agrippina did leave is based on her success as a woman in her context ruled by men. Whilst historians such as Syme argue that Agrippina was 'essentially unimportant' arguably Agrippina's legacy could be to act as a warning to future Roman matrons. By failing to break down the conservative attitudes towards power and politics in her time, and subsequently being murdered by her son, Agrippina warned aspiring women that politics in Ancient Rome was no place for women. Agrippina thus provided a slight legacy in expressing the inevitable tragedy that occurs when one breaks conventional boundaries in order to gain power. Agrippina left behind little legacy. After examining her achievement of power and her influence in life and comparing this to the impact of and her influence after death, the evidence clearly shows that her achievements whilst alive, greatly outweigh her influence after death. Thus one can see that despite breaking the traditional boundaries of the Roman matron in order to gain power for both herself and her son, Agrippina the younger did not exert a great nor renowned legacy for the future.