

ANCIENT HISTORY: *ROME*

Agrippina's legacy, although in some cases short lived, was significant in that she was a major player in the politics of her day and challenged and redefined the role of women. She changed the course of the succession and in doing so, caused the destruction of the Julio Claudian dynasty. Her influence was a major contributor to the stability of Nero's reign and her death resulted in the deterioration of his rule. During her career, she influenced several key political changes which she exploited to enhance her own power and status. Finally, she had a dramatic influence on the role and perception of women at the time.

Agrippina's role during the principate of Caligula marked the beginning of her involvement in the Roman political system. Caligula's autocratic power and increasingly strange behaviour prompted Agrippina's involvement in a conspiracy with her sister Livilla, and M. Aemilius Lepidus. Despite its failure and Agrippina's consequential exile, her involvement reveals that she believed she had a significant role to play in the politics of her day. Agrippina's political role within a Roman patriarchal society reached its most powerful and influential state during Claudius' reign. Dependent on patron-client relationships with freedmen including Pallas, Agrippina was able to convince Claudius to break all social customs and marry his niece. Tacitus comments, "indeed it was incestuous, and disregard of this might, it was feared, cause national disaster" this law was significant aspect of her legacy as she (a woman), through the senator Vitellius, had successfully worked to change the law in her favour. Tacitus' exaggeration demonstrates the gender bias evident in all ancient sources in relation to Agrippina and modern readers must always be aware of their inherent hostility towards women of power. Also during Claudius' reign, she removed the joint prefects of the Praetorian Guard; Geta and Crispinus, and replaced them with a single leader, Burrus who was "fully aware whose initiative was behind his appointment" (Tacitus). By doing so Agrippina solidified the support of the Praetorian Guard which was critical as they played a key role in determining the succession. Not only was this important for her but it was always beneficial for the empire as Grant recognises that she stabilized Roman rule by uniting the guard, revealing how politically astute she was during this period. Therefore, Agrippina has a legacy in the many political changes she made effective both during the reign of Claudius and in the later reign of Nero.

Agrippina's powerful influence during the reign of Claudius is evident in the *Sebastien of Aphrodesias* in which Agrippina and Claudius are depicted in equal height and holding hands. Dr. Katherine Welch interprets this as a symbol of *concordia* between the two. In addition, Agrippina was depicted on coins such as the tetradrachm of Ephesus with the emperor. This was unprecedented and clearly indicates Agrippina's extraordinary status and power during the reign of Claudius. Agrippina's treatment of the freedman Narcissus, further demonstrate her influence and ambition. Narcissus had been a supporter of Aelia Paetina's bid for Claudius' hand and transferred his support to Britannicus when this failed. Agrippina accused him of embezzling funds and after the death of Claudius' ordered his execution, but Narcissus committed suicide before this occurred. Thus, Agrippina leaves a legacy of a ruthless and fearsome political enemy. Testimony to the extent of her power was her success in convincing Claudius to adopt Nero over his own son Britannicus. Scullard comments; "Agrippina, with unscrupulous skill had so prepared the way for her 16 year old son that the transference of power from Claudius to Nero was smooth". The ease with which the principate was transferred from Claudius to Nero is further evidence of the great influence she wielded at the time. In changing the course of the succession, Agrippina effectively altered the evolution and development of the entire Roman empire through Nero's reign. Thus, the most significant and lasting aspect of Agrippina's legacy is the rise of Nero to the position of princeps and the subsequent developments in the empire during his reign.

Agrippina's power and influence continued to expand during the early reign of her son. This is revealed through the *Sebastien of Aphrodesias* in which Agrippina is depicted as equal in height to Nero and holds a diadem above his head indicating her role as 'kingmaker'. Further, Agrippina was

depicted on coinage on the obverse side of the coin facing Nero as though she were a partner in power. This was unprecedented and clearly indicates the critical role Agrippina played in the early years of Nero's principate. Under her control, the first five years of Nero's principate were relatively stable and constructive. However, the extent of Agrippina's influence over the principate was only revealed after her death. Cassius Dio claims that "Agrippina managed for him all the business of the empire", however, following her death, Nero's reign deteriorated to such an extent that conspiracies were hatched against him that culminated in his death. Agrippina had not instilled in her son the necessary qualities of leadership required to rule and the empire suffered for this. Tacitus comments "He plunged into the wildest improprieties which vestiges of respect for his mother had impeded" revealing Agrippina to have been a restraining influence on Nero. Barrett states "his conduct was so outrageous that it eventually brought an end to both himself and the Julio-Claudian dynasty". Thus, Agrippina leaves a legacy as a stabilising and restraining influence during the reign of Nero. However, she may also be considered responsible for the deterioration of his principate and the subsequent end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty.

Furthermore, Agrippina revealed the powerful role that women could hold in the male dominated world of the Roman Empire. However, this would not be a sustained impact as no woman later eclipsed her power or influence. It can be argued that the negative interpretation of Agrippina by many of the ancient writers supports the patriarchal society of Rome during this period and the unequalled status given to Agrippina as well as the uniqueness of such a feat. This hostile attitude towards women wielding such extraordinary power can be seen in "that a woman should sit before Roman standards was an unprecedented novelty" (Tacitus). Tacitus describes the incident whereby Caracallus pays homage to Agrippina as well as Claudius, just one of the many episodes which demonstrates her influence. Agrippina was the antithesis of the Roman matron and held many positions of influence and unparalleled honors such as being depicted on the coins with her sister as the Three Graces and being given the title of honorary Vestal Virgin during the reign of Caligula. This stemmed from her ability to "assert her partnership in the empire her ancestors had won in every possible way" (Tacitus) and is evident in the Gemma Claudia, a cameo in which she is depicted with Claudius and her parents Germanicus and Agrippina the Elder, which provides archaeological evidence of her "illustrious" family lineage. Her family background enabled Agrippina to alter the course of politics. Completely aware of the restrictions placed on her, she challenged the social constructs of the period and redefined the position of women in the Roman political sphere. This was demonstrated through her skillful manipulation of powerful men, such as Claudius and Nero, which indirectly determined the outcomes of her male counterparts. Thus, during her time, Agrippina challenged and redefined the role of women in Rome's patriarchal society. Although this had little impact on the role of women in her time, she leaves a legacy as a woman of unprecedented power and influence.

In conclusion, Agrippina's legacy had significant implications for the Empire both during her life and after. Acting through her clients she made several important political changes such as the alterations to the marriage laws to allow a man to marry his brother's daughter and the unification of the Praetorian Guard under a single prefect. She exerted power over the most powerful men of her day including Caligula, Claudius and Nero. Most notably she changed the course of the succession to bring her son to power. Under her influence, his reign was stable. However, following her death, Nero's principate declined considerably indicating the importance of Agrippina to the prosperity of the empire at the time. Finally, Agrippina held unprecedented power and honours during her lifetime and although this has no lasting impact on the role of women her time, it remains an impressive aspect of her legacy as she challenged the role of women in the patriarchal society of imperial Rome.

Leadbetter states; "Nero could neither rule with her nor without her".

Political impact

"when the house next met, he persuaded a group of senators to propose that a union between him and her should be compulsorily arranged, in the public interest and that other uncles should likewise be free to marry their nieces, through this had hitherto countered as incest"- Suetonius

“Agrippina’s seductiveness was a help”

“she tempted him into giving her preference”

“Once sure of her marriage, she enlarged the scope of her plans and devoted herself to scheming for her son”.

“From this moment the country was transformed”