

# ANCIENT HISTORY

## Agrippina II Essay

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Distinguished directors and members of the History Channel, I stand before you with a proposition of great virtue. Not only would this assessment of the role and changing relationship of Agrippina the Younger with Nero during his reign be successful for educational purposes, it would also be profitable in entertaining your demanding modern audience. So I ask you, ladies and gentlemen, to sincerely consider this segment to be included in your upcoming documentary.

From the beginning, it was always Agrippina's desire to see her son Nero ascend to the throne even if he would kill her – “so long as he reigns.” However, Agrippina's exertion of power as a mother made the manipulation of Nero simple because of his youthful naivety and inexperience upon his accession as emperor. She could now “exercise real power in the empire through her influence over her son,” as Warmington suggests. Soon after Nero's accession, Agrippina's late husband, Claudius, was deified. Agrippina began building a temple to the ‘Divine Claudius’ and became a priestess of his cult. As such, she held a title and ceremonial role that allowed her to interfere directly in politics, thus promoting her own political and religious career. In fact, nothing better symbolises Agrippina's dominance of Nero at this time than a relief from the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias. Agrippina carries a cornucopia – reflecting her traditional association with the goddess Demeter – and crowns her son with a laurel wreath. Nero is in military attire, carrying a spear, and the relief seems to portray his promotion to emperor as the crowning of a significant presence whose political opinions and thoughts guided and protected Nero.

In this initial stage of Nero's reign, the pair's relationship functioned successfully, as Cassius Dio records that Agrippina “managed for him all imperial business: negotiating with embassies, and corresponding with communities, foreign magistrates and kings.” However, this claim is difficult to document and is probably exaggerated, as even Tacitus records few specific details of direct political power exercised by Agrippina. Nevertheless, it would have been natural for Nero to have been heavily dependent on her until he could ‘find his own feet,’ so to speak. Certainly, there were many signs of Nero's deference, where Suetonius suggests a sexual reason for this. “The lecherous passion he felt for his mother was notorious. Some say that he did in fact commit incest with Agrippina every time they rode in the same litter – the stains on his clothes when he emerged proved it.” We must be wary, however, when analysing these events. The instability of sexual gossip and sensationalism of Suetonius' writing forces us to question his reliability as a source. Even still, this superior domination is indeed evident by the first password that Nero gave to the Praetorian Guard, being *Optima Mater* – the best of mothers.

Agrippina's privileges had clear political connotations. Tacitus reports that meetings of the senate were convened at her palace for her convenience, which enabled her to follow the proceedings. Agrippina was able to enter discreetly through the rear door and would stay concealed behind a curtain, listening to the debates of the assembly, making sure they knew she was there. Agrippina received further unprecedented honours, such as the title *Augusta*, which only Augustus' wife Livia had prior borne. She drove around the city in a litter, drawn by two horses that were otherwise the prerogative of the Vestal Virgins. Furthermore, surrounding Agrippina would be her personal military guard, with Nero often seen walking respectfully beside her. In front of her, to clear a way through the crowded streets, two lictors bore the *fasces*, the traditional bundle of rods signifying the power of a Roman magistrate – which she was not. Thus, Agrippina's privilege would have served to elevate her promotion of her own career to the status of a woman who had equal share in the administration of the principate.

However, Michael Grant asserts that “her dominant influence lasted only a very short time,” deteriorating with the arrival of an embassy from Armenia. Intending to listen to the delegation, Agrippina approached towards Nero on the tribunal podium, illustrating her desire for equal

supremacy. Both of Nero's advisers believed that if the Armenians saw Agrippina sharing Nero's dais, they would suspect the empire of weakness and take advantage of it. Seneca thus told Nero to rise from his seat and refuse her right to sit on equal terms on the tribunal, and ultimately interfere in Rome's foreign policy. This was disastrous for Agrippina, who had always used special occasions to build her status and public prestige. Certainly, as Tacitus describes, Agrippina was "someone who knew how to hand over the ruler ship to her son, but was unable to endure his ruling." With the continual interference of Agrippina, she was no longer the close confidante of her son, but she was still, a powerful figure, too powerful for Nero to provoke directly. Instead, he attempted an indirect challenge, namely the attack of Agrippina's financial secretary, Pallas. Pallas' control of finance gave him, along with Agrippina, virtual control over government. Thus with the deterioration of the relationship between mother and son, came synonymously the dispossession of Pallas' position, being forced into retirement. This was an insult to Agrippina, and heightened her growing resentment for Nero.

Not to be outdone by Nero, Agrippina decided that she would take a belated interest in, and support the claims of, her stepson Britannicus. This appears to have been an act of political desperation by Agrippina, who, according to Tacitus, started claiming that he was "the true and worthy heir of his father's supreme position – now held by an adopted intruder, who used it to maltreat his mother." However, Agrippina's renewed concern of Britannicus was, as Edward Salmon suggests, the "kiss of death." Terrified that Agrippina might be serious of her claims, Nero apparently had Britannicus poisoned. His death severely shook Agrippina, and she began to fear for her own safety. She understood that Nero would stop at nothing, and the fact that she was his mother would afford her no protection. However, she did not give up her efforts to secure allies against Nero within the imperial family, notably her surviving stepchild, also Nero's neglected wife, Claudia Octavia, whom she now took as her protégé. When he heard of this, Nero withdrew her military bodyguard and terminated her great receptions by giving her a separate residence in Rome, banishing her from the palace in accordance with the disappearance of her influence entirely. Cutting off all of Agrippina's avenues of power and letting her experience the isolation of the powerless was an astute move. A. J. Koutsoukis agrees that "from this time on, her power was utterly broken." Nero had successfully manoeuvred her out of the palace, out of favour, and ultimately out of support and protection.

The emancipation of Nero from his mother and her gradual decrease in influence began to occur in 55 AD. A study of Roman gold and silver coins shows graphically how Agrippina's influence quickly deteriorated during this time: her equality with Nero where the coins show Agrippina on the dominant obverse, her decline as she appears on the reverse in 55AD, to her downfall as her portrait is excluded entirely. In the coin issued from 54 AD, she and Nero face each other, accompanied by the oak-wreath, suggesting an equal partnership in power between the two. Whereas in the coins issued in AD 55, the emperor's bust was now placed in front of Agrippina's, as if she had been eclipsed by him. His titles were also shown on the "heads" of the coin, while hers were relegated to the reverse, evidently displaying her downfall.

Since the marriage of Octavia and Nero had been instrumental in establishing Nero as the heir and eventual successor of Claudius, Agrippina had an interest in preserving the union. She therefore antagonised Nero by criticising his extramarital affair with a freedwoman named Acte. Agrippina, according to Tacitus, behaved "as women do" and lashed out against Acte, using abusive expressions like "her freedwoman rival" or "her daughter-in-law the maid." She could not tolerate any form of power sharing with Nero, indeed anything that might challenge her complete dominance and control of him. Nor could she tolerate the thought of having the Julio-Claudian union with Octavia dislocated. Predictably, her vigorous opposition served to drive Nero into disobedience. When Agrippina finally realised that Nero was determined to keep Acte, she tried to reverse the situation. According to Tacitus, she "counter-attacked him with blandishments," offering him access to her personal wealth and even the use of her own bedroom for him and Acte. However, Nero was not fooled. He may have guessed that someone who could murder her aristocratic opponents while in pursuit of power, would scarcely hesitate to maintain her position by disposing of a lowly freedwoman.

As such, the next crisis was inevitable and shortly arrived when Nero became passionately enraptured by a noble lady, Poppaea Sabina, the wife of Salvius Otho. Poppaea aimed at becoming Nero's wife, in which Agrippina's disapproval of this proved to be "more than Nero could stand," according to Suetonius. Further, Poppaea also succeeded in convincing Nero that the only obstacle to the divorce of Octavia and their own marriage was Agrippina, thus Nero endeavoured to free himself from his mother as matricide was decided upon early in 59. As Edward Salmon states, "he certainly came to conceive the liveliest hatred for her so that he determined to put an end to her ambitions forever."

In the words of Dio Cassius, "thus was Agrippina, slain by the very son to whom she had given the sovereignty and for whose sake she had killed her uncle and others." To conclude, the significance of Agrippina's political, religious and social career is evident throughout the city of Rome, through imperial coinage, reliefs and written sources from ancient authors. The subject of Agrippina's promotion of her and Nero's career would provide a wealth of value to your upcoming documentary, therefore it would be wise to thoughtfully consider this segments as an economic breakthrough.