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"SHE IS A MASS OF RIDDLES": JULIA AUGUSTA AGRIPPINA AND THE SOURCES

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Introduction

Agrippina the Younger fascinated ancient writers, and modern scholars continue to tell her story with relish. From the time of Tacitus to the present, her forceful personality and extensive influence captured the imagination of historians.

The literary tradition depicts her as a woman of authority, in all but name head of Rome's body politic. As a consequence, Agrippina's portrait is universally hostile. Because women in Roman society were excluded from gaining or exercising such power, acquiring it must have come through sharp practice, chicanery, deception, sexual artifice, and even murder. As Gruen observes,

> [Agrippina] is represented as the consummate schemer, lusting after power, manipulating men and women to her ends, and, when thwarted, retaliating with calculated ruthlessness. Modern treatments, on the whole, follow that lead.[1]

Taking the recent work of the late Judith Ginsberg as a guide,[2] this article will refrain from historical reconstructions, focusing instead on the sources themselves, both literary and material, to examine the depictions of Agrippina. It will briefly explore the rhetorical conventions, the historiographical framework, and the visual representations comprising Agrippina's image. The objective is to outline the patterns of literary and material representation and fabrication, reflecting in turn the ideas and purposes of writers and artists who supported or opposed Julio-Claudian rule.

Historiography of the 20th century: Mommsen, Salmon, Scullard

In the winter semester of his lecture series on the *History of Rome under the Emperors* (1882/3), Theodor Mommsen (1818-1903), one of the greatest of Roman historians and the only one ever to be awarded the Nobel Prize for

1 E. Gruen, 'Introduction', in J. Ginsberg, *Representing Agrippina: Constructions of Female Power in the Early Roman Empire* (Oxford 2000) 4-6. For a selection of citations illustrating the representative trend in modern scholarship, see the appendix.

2 Ginsberg (n 1).

Literature, described Agrippina as "a mass of riddles".[3] Despite this assertion, Mommsen was still able to characterize Agrippina with a substantial degree of certitude. "The morals of Agrippina", he said, "were little better than those of Messalina, *and* she was madly ambitious."[4] This assessment—the only one that Mommsen provided to his students in the winter of 1882—may seem less than satisfying, until one considers what he said about Messalina:

> Messalina was not merely unprincipled; she was also utterly heartless and brainless. Her depravity and whorelike vulgarity were bywords. She was *without* ambition: carnality and greed were the two sole motors of her being.[5]

For Mommsen, then, Agrippina should be viewed from a very particular standpoint: not only as a morally bankrupt woman of the *domus Augusta*; but also as a Julio-Claudian woman with ambition. In this regard, Tom Hillard's study[6] of the rhetorical construction of politically active women in the late Republic as scheming concubines and domineering dowagers shows that the construction of such a standpoint had a history. These rhetorical stereotypes, in which the Agrippina of the literary tradition participates, did not arise for the first time in the Julio-Claudian principate but go back to the period of Roman history for which there is clear evidence of politically active women: the late Republic.

Much of what Hillard ascribes to the rhetorical stereotypes with which politically active women of the late Republic were fashioned may be true of the rhetorical construction of Agrippina and her predecessors. We can agree that the allegations against imperial women that have made their way into the historical tradition probably had their origin in contemporary political polemic and that at least two motivations underlie these negative portrayals: to cast opprobrium on the men with whom these women were associated and to discourage aristocratic and imperial women from challenging the male monopoly of the Roman political system.

Our understanding of any personality in the ancient world depends ultimately on the extent, accuracy and bias of the source materials available. In the case of Agrippina *minor*—great-granddaughter of Caesar Augustus and Livia Drusilla, granddaughter of Tiberius and Vipsania, daughter of Germanicus and Agrippina *maior*, sister of Gaius Caligula, wife of Claudius, mother of

3 Th. Mommsen, *A History of Rome Under the Emperors* (London and New York 1996) 175.

4 Mommsen (n 3) 167.

5 Mommsen (n 3) 165.

6 T. W. Hillard, 'On the stage, behind the curtain: images of politically active women in the Late Roman Republic', in B. Garlick, S. Dixon and P. Allen (eds), *Stereotypes of Women in Power: Historical Perspectives and Revisionist Views* (New York 1992) 37-64.

Nero—we must rely heavily upon literary evidence: not contemporary historical writing, much of which is lost—the memoirs (or *commentarii*) of Agrippina herself; the writings of the emperors themselves; the *Acta Senatus* (including the original texts of imperial speeches); the contemporaneous history of the writers M. Cluvius Rufus and Fabius Rusticus; the annalistic history in thirty-one volumes of Pliny the Elder. Instead, we depend on later extant authorities.

1. the major narrative sources:
   the *Annals* of Tacitus (primarily Books XI to XVI);
   Suetonius' *Lives* (primarily those of *Caligula*, *Claudius* and *Nero*); and
   the *Roman History* of Cassius Dio (primarily Books LIX to LXI); as well as

2. the minor literary citations in:
   the tragedy *Octavia*, attributed to L. Annaeus Seneca;
   the *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder;
   the *Jewish Antiquities* of Flavius Josephus;
   the *Satires* of Juvenal; and
   individual references in Phlegon, Plutarch, Philostratus, Boethius, Orosius, Eutropius, Jerome, Aurelius Victor, and the anonymous *Lives of the Caesars* [7]

The depiction in the major narrative sources of Agrippina's relationship to the principates of Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero has been followed closely by modern scholarship. The Professor of Ancient History at King's College London until 1970, Howard Hayes Scullard, for example, tells us that, in the principate of Claudius,

> Agrippina, daughter of Germanicus and great-granddaughter of Augustus, this dominating woman had already had two husbands . . She married Claudius in 48, was greeted as Augusta, and began to play the role of empress in the grand manner . . Ambitious and unscrupulous, Agrippina struck down a series of victims: no man or woman was safe if she suspected rivalry or desired their wealth. Her weapons were poison or a trumped-up charge, often of magic; delation and treason-trials revived, but the trials were held in the privacy of the palace [8]

[7] For a partial list of the literary record, see the Bibliography; for a complete annotated list of the tradition, see A.A. Barrett, *Agrippina: Sex, Power, and Politics in the Early Roman Empire* (London 1996) 208-214

[8] H.H. Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero: A History of Rome from 133 BC to AD 68* (London 1970) 313-314

In a similar vein, the Professor of History at McMaster University (Canada), Edward Togo Salmon, observes that

> Claudius could not have been ignorant of her character. While not as promiscuous with her favours as Messalina—outwardly indeed she was a model of decorum—she was no paragon of female virtue . . From her mother, the wife of Germanicus, she inherited an imperious and ambitious temperament; she was prepared, if necessary, to wade through slaughter to a throne [9]

And, in the principate of Nero, Scullard notes that

> Agrippina with unscrupulous skill had so prepared the way for her sixteen-year-old son that the transference of power from Claudius to Nero was smooth . . Agrippina now meant to rule through her son. She murdered or drove to suicide potential foes. Her power was advertised on the coinage which bore confronting busts of herself and Nero on the obverse with the legend 'Agripp(ina) Aug(usta) divi Claud(ii uxor) Neronis Caes(aris) mater'; Nero's name and titles were banished to the reverse. Seneca and Burrus, however, although they owed their positions to her, had little love for petticoat government, while Nero himself would be glad to free himself from the role of puppet-king [10]

Salmon confirms that "Agrippina now thought that her day had arrived". He reiterates Agrippina's consolidation of her position through the elimination of possible family rivals and refers to the same coin issues. However,

> Agrippina had the mortification of seeing her dreams of empire fade. Her obvious eagerness to be invested with the trappings of authority played into the hands of Seneca and Burrus. In the competition to indulge the youthful prince's vanity she was at a disadvantage from the start. Her head returns to the reverse side of the coins, and then disappears entirely. Agrippina accordingly resorted to intrigue. But hers was the kiss of death . . Her new-found interest in Britannicus and Octavia precipitated their doom. [11]

Historiography of the 1st and 2nd centuries: Tacitus, Dio, Suetonius

Tacitus

Juxtaposing the major narrative sources for Agrippina's biographical details—namely Tacitus and Cassius Dio—with reconstructions of mid-twentieth century historiography is instructive. To begin with Tacitus'

[9] E.T. Salmon, *A History of the Roman World 30 BC to AD 138* (London and New York 1991) 171-172.

[10] Scullard (n.8) 315-316

[11] Salmon (n.9) 175-176

portrait, in Book XII of the *Annals*, Tacitus concludes his account of the captured Briton king Caratacus' address with these words:

> Released from their chains [Caratacus and his wife and brothers] also gave to Agrippina, conspicuous as she was on another platform nearby, the same honour in terms of praise and thanks as the Emperor. That a woman should preside before the Roman standards was clearly something new and without precedent in ancient customs, but Agrippina was conducting herself as a partner in an empire acquired by her ancestors. (*Annals* 12.37)

Tacitus' treatment of Agrippina is characteristically terse, oblique, and withering. Tacitus portrays Agrippina as filled with ambitious purpose.[12] His criticisms of Agrippina's position of authority "before the Roman standards" (*feminam signis Romanis praesidere*) and of her acting as a partner (*socia*) in the display of imperial protection are trenchant and explicitly gendered. "That a woman" should dare to transcend the boundaries of customary law in these ways is, for him (and, by implication, for his audience) unprecedented, and not a little disturbing.[13] Tacitus contextualizes this transgression as exceptionally visible—to the city of Rome, and to the people of Italy, the Mediterranean and the provinces. Agrippina is accorded the "same honour in terms of praise and thanks" as Claudius (*isdem quibus principem laudibus gratibusque uenerati sunt*) before a representative multitude of the people, the praetorian cohorts and other vassal-kings (*Ann.* 12.36). Tacitus figures Agrippina's desire for power as a physical performance, an exhibition of female influence and "almost masculine" ambition traced on the *scena* of the imperial platform.[14]

A measure of how seriously Tacitus, the Roman male elite, and mid-twentieth century European and American scholarship viewed Agrippina's power can be located in a strikingly similar scenario: an account of ceremonies marking the visit of a provincial embassy to Rome in 54

12 G. Vidén *Women in Roman Literature: Attitudes of Authors under the Early Empire* (Ekblads, Västervik 1993) 24 notes that "no other woman plays such a prominent part in [Tacitus'] narrative ... Agrippina is openly present and dominates the scene". For the view that Agrippina entertained manifest ambition, see Tac. *Ann.* 12.65.2, 13.2.2, 14.2.1, 14.9.3.

13 Barrett (n.7) 124 suggests that Tacitus is particularly upset to think that, by appearing to claim a near-equal status with Claudius, Agrippina may have been arrogating authority over members of the praetorian guard attending the ceremony. For the possible influence of the life-course and relationships of Berenice [daughter of M. Iulius Agrippa (Herod in Acts of the Apostles), supporter of the Flavian cause, and cohabitant with the future emperor Titus] on Tacitus' view towards women in/with power, see D. Braund, 'Berenice in Rome', *Historia* 23 (1983) 120-123; *Ruling Roman Britain: Kings, queens, governors and emperors from Julius Caesar to Agricola* (London 1996) 126.

14 Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 12.7.

According to the historical tradition, after Parthia invaded Armenia early in Nero's reign, many in Rome believed that imperial foreign policy towards the threat would find itself under the direction of Agrippina.[15] When an embassy comprising pro-Roman Armenian interests came to Rome for clarification, Tacitus reports that Agrippina intended to join Nero on his tribunal to hear the representatives

> When envoys from Armenia were pleading their nation's cause before Nero, she actually was preparing to mount the emperor's platform and to preside at the same time; but Seneca, when others were struck motionless with alarm, urged [Nero] to go to meet his approaching mother. Thus, by the appearance of dutiful conduct, a disgraceful act was prevented. (*Annals* 13.5.3)[16]

Seneca intervenes, advising Nero to descend from the dais and greet his mother, as if paying her special respect. Whether or not the gesture was intended to diminish her position and jurisdiction, it is clear that Tacitus considers her authority and status subject to specific limitations. More than this, he labels Agrippina's attempt to share in imperial command (*praesidere simul*) in explicitly moral terms. What she intends to do is a cause of shame and dishonour (*dedecus*).[17]

Dio Cassius

Dio Cassius's treatment of Agrippina is unremittingly negative and displays a striking degree of similarity to his representation of Messalina. Indeed, Dio claims at one point, and Mommsen, Salmon and (implicitly) Scullard concur, that Agrippina "quickly became a second Messalina".[18]

According to Dio, early on in his account of her marriage to Claudius, Agrippina, like Messalina, "destroyed" an undisclosed number of important women "out of jealousy".[19]

Dio represents Agrippina from the beginning as a transgressor of customary and civil codes of behaviour. Even before her marriage, Agrippina is "more effeminate in speaking" to Claudius "than [should] a niece". After she comes

15 Sen. *Apoc.* 4; Tac. *Ann.* 13.6.2; Suet. *Nero* 34.1.

16 Cf. Dio 61.3.3-4.

17 For one of Tacitus' most striking uses of gendered rhetoric, which occurs in relation to his account of the rivalry between Agrippina and Messalina's mother, Domitia Lepida, dating to the year 54, I direct you to P. Keegan, 'Boudica, Cartimandua, Messalina and Agrippina the Younger: Independent Women of Power and the Gendered Rhetoric of Roman History', *Ancient History: Resources for Teachers* 34.2 (2005) 99-148.

18 Dio 60.33.2.1.

19 Dio 60.32.4.

to live in the imperial household as wife to her uncle, she begins to amass wealth and property on behalf of her son (the future emperor Nero), "murdering many" in her quest for every possible source of revenue.[20] Dio registers his subject from the outset as a distortion of the ideal of the elite Roman woman. The intentions and actions of Agrippina reflect an inverted image of female unchastity, immoderation, cupidity and criminality

Dio renders concrete the un-Romanness of Agrippina by ascribing to her a ferocity usually assigned to the barbarian. He essentializes the depth of Agrippina's depravity by dwelling briefly on the aftermath of the banishment and subsequent suicide of one of her first victims, Lollia Paulina (wife of Caligula and candidate for marriage to Claudius after Messalina's death). Paulina's head was brought to her, and Agrippina "opened the mouth with her own hands and inspected the teeth which had certain peculiarities".[21] Dio instantiates Agrippina as uncivilized and unnatural through his representation of her extremity: her insensitivity to customary boundaries of taste and her detachment from expected female sensibilities.

Mommsen, Salmon and Scullard transmit much of this on face value. However, there is one preeminent aspect of Dio's characterization of Agrippina: his portrayal of ultimate motivation. Significantly, judgement in this regard corresponds neatly with Tacitus' more critical assessment. For Dio (and his modern epitomators), what drives Agrippina is desire for money and power. According to Dio's account, Agrippina accumulates wealth, "neglecting ... not even [the money] of the most humble and despised". That she is amassing a small fortune on her son's behalf does not deflect the primitive zeal with which Agrippina pursues it, to the extent that she "flatters everyone who is in any way whatever well off and murders many for this very reason".[22]

As soon as Agrippina comes to live in the imperial household, she gains complete control over Claudius. From the Senate, she obtains the right to use the *carpentum* at festivals; from the *princeps*, the title of Augusta.[23] Dio is at pains to emphasize the extent of Agrippina's power and influence: she

20 Dio 60 31 6; 60 32 3
21 Dio 60 32 4
22 Dio 60 32 3
23 Dio 60 33 2[1] 2a

> possessed everything, holding sway over Claudius and claiming as her own Narcissus and Pallas ... [A]ll the things that Livia possessed [Agrippina] had been given also, and some other things of more importance had been voted.[24]

More than this, however, Dio credits Agrippina with an overweaning desire for more:

> nothing seemed to be enough for Agrippina ... [A]lthough she exercised the same power as Claudius, she desired to have his title outright.[25]

Directly implicated by Dio in Claudius' death, Agrippina oversees the management of imperial business on Nero's behalf. Her position in the state is, in all but name, equivalent to that of her son. Only when Agrippina attempts to join Nero with the Armenian ambassadors on the imperial platform[26] does her display of power become untenable. From that time on, Seneca and Burrus—identified by Dio as the "most prudent and powerful of men about Nero"—labour to prevent Agrippina from engaging in public affairs,[27] and her position in the imperial household is shown to steadily diminish due to the influence of other women (Claudia Acte and Poppaea Sabina).[28]

Shown divesting herself of the traditional limitations to which her sex is subject, Agrippina attracts a markedly pejorative judgement from Dio. What is most confronting for the historian—and vital, therefore, for him to represent—is the manner in which Agrippina appears to have taken on the dominant, active role reserved in affairs of state and the imperial household for men. Agrippina exerts substantial influence over the senate, the military, and the people; her position is officially recognized by the state; she prepares the way for and precipitates the imperial succession; and she participates significantly in the public administration of the empire. The adoption by an imperial woman of attitudes and actions characteristic of masculine agency can only be represented negatively. Agrippina, in emulation of the military cloak worn by Roman *imperatores*, wears a *chlamys* woven with golden thread.[29] Dio marks Agrippina as morally corrupt(ing) and socially

24 Dio 60 33 3a. 12
25 Dio 60.33 12
26 Until this occasion, Agrippina had 'often attended the emperor in public, when he was transacting ordinary business or when he was giving an audience to ambassadors, though she sat upon a separate tribunal' (Dio 60 33 7)
27 Dio 61 3 3-4
28 Dio 61 7 1-3 (Acte); 61 11 2-4 (Sabina)
29 Dio 61 33 3. For comment on Agrippina displaying her desire to be an *imperator* by choosing to wear the *chlamys*, see M. Kaplan, *Agrippina semper atrox*: A Study of

transgressive: by indulging openly and without apparent limit in the gratification of her immoderate and excessive desires (for sex, money and power), Agrippina assumes and subverts the roles and privileges reserved in Roman society for men

If you were wondering why there has been no direct mention of the biographical writer Suetonius to this point, and why no attempt has been made to draw out any correspondence between his material on the family background and life of Agrippina and that of the other major literary sources, it is instructive to refer to Barrett's assessment:

> Suetonius tends not to follow a chronological scheme but to group issues in a loose thematical framework . he shows no evidence of a broad sense of history or of great political questions Unfortunately most of his material is not original and where it is not he is quite willing to give an ear to any story that has come down in the tradition. no matter how implausible it might appear This is especially true when he has the opportunity to pass on lively anecdotes As a source for Agrippina . his information tends to be scattered and selective, and is intended essentially to illustrate anecdotes about others, namely the emperors . Suetonius' picture of Agrippina is inconsistent and probably reflects his sources or even his use of anecdote to create effect [30]

Iconography of the Material Sources

The images of Agrippina *minor* offer us voluminous material for study Following Susan Wood's study of the public images of imperial Roman women,[31] Agrippina's visual representations can be usefully categorized under three headings: numismatic, sculptural, and glyptic (which refers to images on highly luxurious carved objects, notably cameos)

Numismatic images

During Caligula's principate, Agrippina *minor*, along with her two sisters, became one of the first living women to be represented on coins of the Roman mint by image *and* name. As Claudius' wife she was depicted both with an identifying inscription *and* an identifiable portrait profile. On the famous Caligulan coin (the *sestertius* with reverse figures of Agrippina,

30 Tacitus' Characterization of Women . in C Deroux (ed.). *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History* I Collection Latomus 164 (Bruxelles 1979) 413-414.

31 Barrett (n 7) 204

S L Wood, *Imperial Women A Study in Public Images 40 BC – AD 68* (Leiden Boston and Koln 2000)

Drusilla and Julia Livilla), we see her depicted as the goddess *Securitas* (freedom, security, stability) with an ideal rather than contemporary coiffure, but on the gold and silver issues of her husband's imperial mints at Rome and Lyons, she appears in deliberately precise likenesses that delineate strikingly Claudian features: square jaw, overbite, and small but sharply jutting chin This distinctive portrayal of mouth and chin in all Agrippina's portraits strongly suggests that she had a supernumerary canine tooth on the upper right jaw. As this feature was known to foreshadow good fortune, its depiction may have held a specific meaning for a Roman audience.[32] As Wood notes, "[a]n emperor as intrigued with religious lore as Claudius, and a woman as shrewd about manipulating public opinion as Agrippina *minor*, could hardly have failed to publicize this happy information, and artists in all media who were aware of the trait would naturally have called attention to it." [33]

These issues of Roman coins also make Agrippina the first living woman to wear the corn-ear crown of Ceres. This association of divine attributes with a woman's recognizable portrait face and a clear identifying inscription was previously made explicit only on gold and silver coinage of Antonia *minor* after her death. Ceres is not only a goddess of fertility but the Roman equivalent of Demeter, the archetypal good mother. Claudius, a scholar of religious history who had considered moving the Eleusinian rites to Rome. would have known the significance of the relationships expressed in these coin portraits, as would many Roman citizens who had been initiated in the Eleusinian mysteries.[34] Evoking the maternal nature of Ceres and the memory of the emperor's mother Antonia, a respected and beloved figure, may also have helped to redefine the impact of Agrippina's probably illegal marriage to her uncle In these issues, Agrippina is shown as the new Augusta, associated with chthonian goddesses, and connected through Antonia with the divine Augustus

Throughout her marriage to Claudius, therefore, the coins confirm the information of the historians that Agrippina not only exerted a considerable level of influence over the *princeps* but was eminently recognizable in the public eye The Roman coins of Nero's principate reveal the extent of Agrippina's influence and notoriety in the representative process In the *aurei* and *denarii* of AD 54, the portraits of Nero and Agrippina both appear on the

32 Pliny *NH* 7 71: Barrett (n 7) 41: M T Griffin. *Nero The End of a Dynasty* (London 1984) 23

33 Wood (n 31) 290

34 Suet *Claud.* 25 5; K Clinton The Eleusinian Mysteries. Roman Initiates and Benefactors Second Century B C to A D 267'. *ANRW* 2 18 2 (1989) 1513-1514

obverse, facing one another so that neither is seen to be inferior to the other. Through names, titles, and senatorial decrees, both imperial figures receive honours on this coin, but there is an obvious effort to balance them as equally as possible.

In the following year, AD 55, Agrippina still appears on the obverses of gold and silver coins, but this time in portraits that are side-by-side (jugate). According to this arrangement, Agrippina appears in the position behind Nero. Her titles now appear on the reverse, while Nero's occupy the obverse. The reverse type, however, still emphasizes Agrippina's greatest source of official prestige: her role as priestess of the deified Claudius. Claudius and another male figure, probably Divus Augustus, the only other deified *princeps* at the time of the coin issue, stand next to each other in a chariot drawn by four elephants. This is precisely the type of vehicle that was used to carry the portrait of the deified Augustus and later, those of Drusilla and of Livia, into the Circus Maximus during the ceremonies that preceded public games.[35] The inscription that encircles the scene of imperial procession identifies Agrippina as "Agrippina Augusta the wife of the Deified Claudius and mother of Nero Caesar". Taken together, inscription and image provide textual and visual corroboration of the integral relationship between the elaborate nature of ritual worship relating to consecrated emperors in Julio-Claudian Rome and Agrippina's special connection to Claudius' cult. As Wood observes, "[t]his issue didn't replace the previous one, which was probably still in circulation, but provided a more artistically successful solution to the problem of representing the emperor and his mother as partners in power."[36]

By the following year, Agrippina's portrait and name vanish from the coins of the Roman mint.

Sculptural portraits

While there is much to say about the material evidence pertaining to representations of this important woman, for the purposes of this article I will focus here on two particular sculptural portraits of Agrippina the Younger—as Ceres and Fortuna in relief panels of the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias.[37]

35 Suet. *Claud.* 11.2; H.H. Scullard, *The Elephant in the Greek and Roman World* (Cambridge 1979) 254-256.

36 Wood (n.31) 294.

37 For photographs and discussion of these sculptured panels, see C.B. Rose, *Dynastic Commemoration and Imperial Portraiture in the Julio-Claudian Period* (Cambridge 1997) 164-169, no. 105, pl. 204; R.R.R. Smith, "The Imperial Reliefs from the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias", *JRS* 77 (1987) 90, 127-132, plates 24-26; Wood (n.31) 298, 301-2, plates 141-142.

Consider the first representation of Agrippina as she appears in this relief panel at Aphrodisias probably dating to the reign of Claudius. Agrippina grasps the right hand of the emperor with her own, and holds above her a bouquet of corn ears with her left. Simultaneously, Claudius is crowned with an oak wreath by a togate personification of the Roman senate or people.[38] According to Smith, the basic meaning of the handshaking motif in Greek and Roman art is "the equality of rank between the figures involved".[39] As the gesture is used in Roman art to indicate the concept of *fides* or *concordia*, we may readily assign to the relationship expressed between Agrippina and Claudius a meaning of Roman marital harmony.[40] Given Tacitus' portrayal in *Annals* 12.37 of Agrippina's position in relation to Claudius on the imperial *suggestus* or platform, it is interesting to speculate about a more specific meaning for the act in the context of this relief. Since *fides* or *concordia* explicitly comprise notions of reliance, agreement and union, the act of shaking hands can also symbolize an alliance in political terms. Whether this meaning was intended by the composer of the panel or produced in the minds of those who viewed it, we cannot avoid the importance that the local patrons of Aphrodisias invested in Agrippina. Wood argues that the bouquet of corn ears held by—as well as the drapery and pose of—the figure type associate her directly with the goddess Ceres.[41] This suggests recognition on the part of those who paid for a portrait sculptor to carve her figure of Agrippina's growing significance in the imperial family, and may be used as a measure of her developing relationship with the Roman emperor.

The problem of a woman adopting the vocabulary and trappings of hegemonic masculinity and employing the dominating protocols of male power is expressly reflected in the second of the relief portraits at Aphrodisias depicting Agrippina the Younger and her son.[42] This panel may be dated to a few years after Nero's accession, during the limited period of reputedly good government known as the *quinquennium Neronis*.[43] The significance of the relief lies in the representation of the relationship between

38 Smith (n.37) 110, with n.70 suggests that the oak wreath may have been used to associate Claudius with the *corona ciuica*, awarded for the saving of citizens' lives, or the prize in the imperial games (Sebasta Romaia) at Pergamon.

39 Smith (n.37) 107.

40 G. Davies, "The significance of the handshake in classical funerary art", *AJA* 89 (1985) 632-640.

41 Wood (n.31) 301.

42 Rose (n.37) pl. 207; Smith (n.37) 127-132, plates 24-26; Wood (n.31) 301-2, pl. 142.

43 For this allegedly Trajanic assessment of the first five years of Nero's reign, see Aurelius Victor, *liber de Caesaribus* 5.2 and the anonymous *epitome de Caesaribus* 5.2; on this period in relation to Agrippina, see the discussion in Barrett (n.7) 238-40.

Agrippina and Nero. Agrippina is shown, with the attributes of the goddess Fortuna, placing an imperial oak crown on the young Nero's head. Although Nero appears in a general's armour, the gesture should be seen as alluding to Agrippina's precedence and pre-eminent status.[44]

Glyptic representations

One of the earliest raised relief portraits of Agrippina *minor* as Claudius' wife is a cameo now in the Bibliotheque Nationale, in which her portrait bust rests on a cornucopia from which the figure of a child, likely to be Nero, emerges. In the background is a small bust of Minerva. As Agrippina appears here with a child of the imperial family, we can see that the gem represents specifically her fruitful nature.

The great Gemma Claudia, most probably a wedding gift from some elite patron eager to express his approval for the official line of propaganda, depicts the living Claudius and Agrippina and the dead Germanicus and Agrippina *maior* facing each other in pairs of jugate busts, each of which emerges from a cornucopia that join at the tips. Between the two pairs the imperial eagle of Rome looks up toward the living Claudius but turns its body toward Germanicus. The whole composition rests on a pile of captured armour, representing the spoils of victory of Germanicus' campaigns and those of Britain that had taken place under Claudius as emperor. Agrippina *minor* wears a turret crown and corn-ear garland. These attributes would have indicated to an educated viewer that Agrippina should be seen as the Asiatic goddess Cybele, Rome's protectress against foreign enemies, or possibly a cultural blend of Cybele and Ceres. Wood argues that through these associations Agrippina may have signified the well-being of the entire Roman empire.[45]

The most remarkable glyptic representation of Agrippina *minor* appears on the Grande Camee de France, the largest extant work of Roman cameo carving, and probably, like the Gemma Claudia, a lavish gift to the imperial family, possibly this time on the occasion of Claudius' adoption of Nero. The Grande Camee de France depicts the elevation of mortal Germanicus to the ranks of the gods and celebrates the importance of his descendants. It is also the most prominent representation of Julio-Claudian women in propagandistic art. Three of them appear together here—Livia, Agrippina

[44] Wood (n 31) 301 suggests that the increased financial output invested in depicting Agrippina may reflect that "local patrons had gained an increased respect for the status of the Augusta".

[45] Wood (n 31) 307

maior, and Agrippina *minor*—demonstrating along with the men—Augustus, Germanicus and the younger Drusus; Tiberius, Claudius and the elder Nero (son of Agrippina *maior*)—the bloodlines that justify the position of the most recent heir—the younger Nero, son of Agrippina *minor*.

Conclusion

The literary and material record on Agrippina the Younger is shaped with calculation to produce an amalgam of portraits. The product may intersect or overlap with history, but it is not to be confused with history. This entangled relationship between report and design clings to the accounts of Dio Cassius and Suetonius and to the interlocking narratives generated by those authors, but it arises most conspicuously and powerfully in the written record of Tacitus and the material record of imperial portraiture. The representations of Agrippina in the visual sources are conspicuously different from those in the literary tradition. The literary constructs of the ruthless power-seeker, the wicked stepmother, the seducer turned poisoner of husbands, the mother who commits incest with her son are replaced in the material record by much more flattering ones, the products of the culture of the imperial dynasty itself, its supporters, or those wishing to obtain its favour. But, lest we forget where this article began, the hostile tradition of the literary sources continues to leave its mark on even the most respected scholars as they confront the Agrippina of coins, sculpture, and cameos.[46]

[46] Ginsberg (n 1) 55

APPENDIX: Select Portraits of Agrippina in Modern Scholarship

1. R. Syme, *Tacitus* (Oxford 1958) 437
"Agrippina ... avows a more robust criminality. All for power, yet all for her son, Agrippina deserves her reputation, worthy of the answer she gave to the astrologers who revealed Nero's destiny and her own—'occidat dum imperet'."

2. D R. Dudley, *The World of Tacitus* (London 1968) 95
"This Clytemnestra of a woman pursued three objectives with relentless vigour to gather political power in her own hands, to strike down her enemies, and to advance her own son Nero."

3. R H. Martin, *Tacitus* (London 1981) 152
"Agrippina employed a steely resolve, worthy of a man; there was no sexual looseness—unless it helped to advance her political control."

4. M.T. Griffin, *Nero. The End of a Dynasty* (London 1984) 73
"Agrippina was a formidable adversary. She had political allies at all levels, acquired during Claudius' reign, and she knew how to exploit her Augustan lineage and descent from Germanicus to the full ... She intended to follow up the success of these efforts by eliminating any new rivals to herself or her son."

5. R. Mellor, *Tacitus* (London 1994) 44, 53
"The younger Agrippina ... slept her way to the pinnacle of power"; "the deranged malice of an Agrippina."

6. R. Holland, *Nero. The Man Behind the Myth* (Stroud 2000) 45, 63
"Nero's mother was driven almost exlusively by the will to power"; "record as a ruthless murderer."

7. A.A. Barrett, *Agrippina. Sex, Power, and Politics in the Early Roman Empire* (London 1996) xiii; cf. 130-131, 136, 146, 159
"Agrippina inverted the normal progression of a monarchical regime, changing it from a repressive dictatorship marked by continuous judicial executions to a relatively benign partnership between the ruler and the ruled. Also, the ascendancy she enjoyed after her son Nero's accession coincided with the finest period of his administration."

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a. *extant*
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- Tacitus, *Annals* 2.42.4; 3.2.4; 4.53.3, 75.1; 11.12.1; 12.1.3-14.57.1; 15.50.4, 67.3; 16.14.3, 21.1.

b. *lost*
- the memoirs (*commentarii*) of Agrippina;
- the writings of the emperors themselves;
- the *Acta Senatus* (including the original texts of imperial speeches);
- the historical writings of M. Cluvius Rufus and Fabius Rusticus;
- the annalistic history in thirty-one volumes of Pliny the Elder.

2. *Minor literary citations*
Anonymous, *On the Caesars* (*Epit. De Caes.*) 3.10, 12;
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Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy* (*Cons.*) 2.6.4;
Eutropius, *Abridgement of Roman History* 7.12.3;
Jerome, *To Eustochium* (*ap. Eus.*) 178 (Helm);
Juvenal, *Satires* 5.147-8; 6.620-4; Scholiast on Juvenal, *Satires* 1.155; 2.29; 4.81; 5.109; 6.124, 620, 628;
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Phlegon, *On Marvels* (*Mir.*) *FGH* 2.1179, VII;
Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 7 pref.; 7.45, 46, 71; 33.63; 35.201;
Plutarch, *Life of Antony* (*Ant.*) 7.4;
[Seneca], *Octavia* 21; 44-5; 93-6; 102; 125-9; 141-2; 150-67; 170-1; 310-76; 593-617; 634; 952.

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