

## Agrippina the Younger Transcript Season 4, Episode 5

Hello, and welcome to the Time Pieces History Podcast. Today, we're looking at Agrippina the Younger, mother of Nero.

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It's hard to say if Julia Agrippina should be celebrated, but she was certainly an impressive woman. Ruthless and determined, she controlled her son and ensured his power, until he decided he'd had enough of being pushed around, and bumped her off.

Agrippina was a sister of the Emperor Caligula, who is infamous for his sadism, cruelty and allegedly making his favourite horse a senator. Tyranny clearly ran in the family, as Caligula's nephew Nero was equally brutal.

In fact, it's fair to say that with the possible exception of Caesar's heir, Octavian (later the Emperor Augustus), the Julio-Claudian dynasty was rife with deviancy, murder and mental illness.

Born in AD15, Agrippina was named after her mother, a granddaughter of Augustus, first Emperor of Rome. Her father, Germanicus, was an army general and at one point had been heir to Tiberius, although he ultimately didn't succeed him.

Described as beautiful and accomplished, Julia Agrippina was destined for great things. She was well-travelled and in her early years was raised by her maternal grandmother.

After the sudden death of her father, Agrippina was placed in the care of her mother, paternal grandmother and a great-grandmother, all strong and powerful women, who no doubt raised her in their likeness. Agrippina, however, was also described as ruthless, domineering and violent, so clearly inherited the less appealing family traits.

She was married first to one of Mark Antony's supporters, Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus, who was the father of Nero. Tellingly, on being congratulated on the birth of his son, Domitius is believed to have responded: "I don't think anything produced by me and Agrippina could possibly be good for the state or the people".

At around the time Nero was born, her brother Caligula had inherited the throne from Tiberius, conferring all kinds of privileges on his family. It was rumoured that the new

Emperor had incestuous relationships with all three of his sisters, and following the death of his favourite, Drusilla, Caligula went mad. Along with Drusilla's widower and her surviving sister, Agrippina plotted to have her brother murdered, in AD39. This attempt failed, and the sisters were exiled. Caligula was killed about 18 months later, and his uncle Claudius succeeded him.

Claudius pardoned his nieces, and Agrippina, now a widow, set her sights on an heir to the Empire, Galba, despite the fact that he was happily married. Galba's mother in law didn't take too kindly to Agrippina's advances, and gave her a public ticking off (and a slap) for her cheek. She was briefly married to Passienus Crispus, who died of suspected poisoning.

Claudius was married to an equally headstrong woman, Valeria Messalina, an adulterer, ambitious for her son and prone to exiling or executing anyone who crossed her. Convinced that the young Nero was competition for the throne, Messalina sent men to kill him in his bed.

The legend says that as the assassins approached, they noticed a snake under Nero's pillow, which they took as a bad omen. Apparently, the snake was in fact a shed skin, which just happened to be lying about beside the sleeping child. An equally superstitious Agrippina had it made into a bracelet for her son.

The power clearly went to Messalina's head, as she started bumping people off with abandon. She also decided, while her husband was out of town, to marry General Gaius Silius, one of her lovers, and host a lavish wedding breakfast.

Claudius did not take this well, especially when he went to the house of Silius and found it full of family heirlooms. Claudius was told the marriage was part of a plot to overthrow him, and refused to see his wife. However, he still had a soft spot for her, and decided to give her another chance.

To prevent that, one of his court rushed off to Messalina, who was hiding at her mother's house. Accompanied by the Praetorian Guard, Narcissus announced that Claudius had sent them to kill his wife. Messalina was given the option of killing herself, but couldn't do it, so a soldier ran her through instead.

Agrippina quickly presented herself as the ideal candidate for a replacement for Messalina, and became Claudius' fourth wife in AD49, despite the fact that such a union was regarded as immoral and incestuous in the eyes of Roman society.

Agrippina soon persuaded Claudius to adopt Nero, effectively making him heir to the throne ahead of Britannicus, Messalina's son. She was allowed to assist her husband in running the country, making her rich and powerful in her own right.

Four years later, Claudius began to regret his actions, and tried to set Britannicus up as his heir in place of Nero. Uncle Claudius died in suspicious circumstances soon

after, in AD54, believed to have been poisoned by a furious Agrippina, although as he was 63 when he died, it is possible that he died of natural causes.

Nero was still named as Claudius' heir, and his mother served as the then 16-year-old's regent, a move that he quickly resented, particularly when his mother expressed her displeasure at his girlfriend. Incredibly, Agrippina then decided to support Britannicus to overthrow her own son, despite the fact that she was effectively running Rome single-handedly.

Increasingly annoyed by his mother, Nero had her exiled, before deciding that he would be better off if she wasn't around at all. The demise of Agrippina is a great story, and reminds me of Rasputin for the number of attempts it took to finally do her in.

Nero considered poisoning or stabbing his mother, or getting someone else to do it for him. One account says that he concluded that neither of these methods were particularly subtle, and he didn't want suspicion to fall on him, but another says that he did in fact attempt to poison his mother three times, but each time she'd already taken an antidote.

Next, Nero decided to loosen ceiling tiles above his mother's bed, with the intention that they would fall and crush her. Agrippina was warned of this plot, and avoided injury. Finally, with the help of one of his former tutors (and possible lovers), Nero had constructed a boat built to sink, and then invited his mother for dinner, sending the boat to collect her from her villa.

Agrippina was aware that her son was plotting against her, but decided to go anyway, which seems like a strange decision. As the boat headed back across the Bay of Baiae, the lead ceiling collapsed, narrowly avoiding Agrippina and killing one of her attendants.

The crew promptly sank the ship, but Agrippina could swim, and escaped to safety by swimming to shore. Her friend, Acceronia, was bludgeoned to death by the sailors – she cried out that she was Agrippina and they believed her. Some accounts claim that she did so to give her friend a chance to survive, but others say she was simply hoping they'd save the emperor's mother.

Agrippina was aware that this was an assassination attempt, but had enough nerve to write to Nero and tell him about it, pretending that she thought he was innocent. Enraged, he sent three men to kill her. A bold Agrippina is reported to have greeted them in her bedroom with the line, "You can report that I am better."

She apparently followed up by saying, "If you're assassins, I know Nero didn't send you," but as they produced knives and surrounded her, she is also described as baring her abdomen and encouraging them to stab her there first, because her womb was responsible for the creation of her ungrateful son. What an ending.