

Representing Agrippina: Constructions of Female Power in the Early Roman Empire. By JUDITH GINSBURG. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. Pp. 160. Cloth, \$45.00. ISBN 0-19-518141-7.

Agrippina the Younger has been an intriguing subject for historians of the early Roman Empire from the time of Tacitus to our own. A powerful woman in a world controlled by men, the sister, wife and mother of Caligula, Claudius and Nero respectively, she has generally been viewed as manipulative and ruthless. Yet, as Anthony Barrett¹ noted in his recent biography, "The actual record ... suggests very strongly that both ancient and modern writers offer a lop-sided portrait." Barrett revised that portrait by illuminating Agrippina's accomplishments within the context of the opportunities available to her. In *Representing Agrippina*, Judith Ginsburg has shifted attention to the evidence itself, asking why and how the positive images of the material evidence and Agrippina's contrasting negative characterization in ancient writers developed, and what the implications of these representations might be. To answer these questions, G. examines the literary evidence, the visual portrayals and rhetorical stereotypes in three separate chapters. By the book's end, the reader can see how those writing about Agrippina, especially Tacitus, conflated her actions with the stereotypes of scheming women, partly to denigrate overly-ambitious women and partly to criticize imperial rule. The visual remains, on the other hand, reveal the imperial household's use of Agrippina's links to the Julio-Claudian past and future and her assimilation to Demeter to bolster legitimacy and stability.

Chapter One, "Agrippina in the Literary Tradition," reviews Agrippina's manipulative character in the literature. G. uses the evidence of Tacitus primarily, with occasional pertinent passages from Dio or Suetonius. The exceptional sensitivity with which G. has always analyzed Tacitus' writings, and which continues in this work, allows the reader to gain even greater awareness of the author's careful use of rhetorical and stylistic devices, vocabulary and even elements from comedy. With astute analysis, G. shows that Tacitus depicts Agrippina as a woman whose every action was attributable to political ambition. Actions that involve step-motherly intrigue, hypocrisy, female jealousy and a public display of dominance all expose "her own desire for power" (p. 33). Because of Tacitus' compelling rhetoric, most scholars have accepted this literary image of Agrippina as genuine.

¹ *Agrippina: Sex, Power and Politics in the Early Roman Empire* (New Haven, 1996) xiii.

The emperors themselves utilized Agrippina differently, as G. shows in Chapter Two, "Visualizing Agrippina." Here, G. separates the visual material into three sections: coinage (convincingly subdivided into Roman and provincial), sculpture and cameos. G. first reviews the history and influence of imperial women on Roman coins before focusing on Agrippina herself. She includes both obverse and reverse images of coins that illustrate the messages of the imperial household and support her challenge to those who hold the view that Agrippina's political clout alone explains her extraordinary presence on official coins (p. 57):

(T)he complex roles that Agrippina's image plays on the coinage, while they might well be an accurate reflection of Agrippina's real power in the state, equally served the political interests of the three emperors with whom she was connected.

All three emperors used Agrippina to emphasize *concordia* between Julian and Claudian lines and to add validity to their own reigns. Her designation as Augusta and assimilation to Ceres on Claudian coins also underscored her role as the mother of the future emperor. The gold and silver issues of 54 and 55 CE, where Agrippina appears on the obverse with Nero, provide additional confirmation of her value to the imperial household. G.'s denial that these last two issues illustrate a weakening in Agrippina's political position in 55 and her claim that such an interpretation relies too heavily on Tacitus' *Ann.* 13.12–13, however, require substantiation.

Turning to sculpture, G. makes a strong case for the political significance of Agrippina's presence in statuary groups, especially at the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias, where Agrippina appears twice, first with Claudius and then with Nero (figures of both included). On both panels, although in different ways, Agrippina is assimilated to Demeter and fertility, and as such she represents "the continuation of the dynasty and a secure and orderly succession, the prerequisite for the peace and prosperity of Roman society at large" (p. 71). The more private cameos, especially the Gemma Claudia, illustrate themes and ideological interests similar to those on coinage and sculpture.

Ginsburg's untimely death four years ago did not permit her to finish *Representing Agrippina*. Erich Gruen, Natalie Kampen, Elizabeth Keitel and Beth Severy-Hoven have added clearly marked, insightful introductions, conclusions and occasional references. In the overall introduction, however, Gruen acknowledges that a "somewhat unfinished quality remains" (p. 4). This is most evident in Chapter Three, "Agrippina and the Power of Rhetorical Stereo-

types,” where G. returns to the literary evidence to assess the cultural assumptions that led to the powerful rhetorical stereotypes attached to Agrippina. With more time, G. would likely have edited her claims about step-mothers and the *dux femina* that are repeated from Chapter One (as well as removing repetitive statements there) and more fully developed her arguments to cover evidence beyond Tacitus. Nonetheless, what G. says is important. In fact, the juxtaposition of her detailed analysis of the development of the stereotypes of the *saeva noverca*, *dux femina* and sexual transgressor with her examination of the material evidence about Agrippina in Chapter Two is one of the strongest features of the book and makes her conclusions in both chapters even more convincing. In this chapter, G. shows how these negative stereotypes, developed during the late republic, were used in the imperial period “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” (pp. 106–7). Tacitus masterfully exploited the stereotypes in his criticism of the emperors linked with Agrippina and the political system as a whole: the *dominatio* that Agrippina gained through dubious tactics was a manifestation of a dysfunctional imperial regime.

In her introduction to Chapter Two, Ginsburg wrote that “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” (p. 55). Now we can cast a more critical eye on the evidence of both media because G. has clarified the various agendas, cultural notions and imperial aims of those representing Agrippina.

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