

Livia's Putrid Corpse (Suet. *Tib.* 51.2)

In *Tib.* 51.2, Suetonius writes that Tiberius held out hope of his return to Rome from Capri for his mother's funeral (*adventus sui spem facit*). Nevertheless, the emperor delayed for "several" (*complurium*. 51.2) days, during which time Livia's body putrefied (*currupto...et tabido corpore*), necessitating its cremation in her son's absence. As Lindsay observes, the anecdote, recorded only by Suetonius, is historically "unlikely" and "spiced up" (1995, 153). Considering that the biographer seems to have concocted the story of Livia's putrid corpse (or at least to have favored an unconventional tradition not preserved in any extant author), *Tiberius* 51.2 deserves closer scrutiny. Recent scholarship has stressed the importance of death scenes in Suetonius' assessment of his biographical subjects (Wardle 2007; Wallace-Hadrill 1983, 112-14). This paper argues that Livia's funeral is meant to offer insight into character, but the character in question is not so much Livia's as Tiberius'.

While Dio (58.2.1-3) and Tacitus (*Ann.* 5.1-2) make clear that Livia received a public funeral, eulogy from the rostra by Gaius, and interment in the grand Mausoleum of Augustus, Suetonius passes over all these details in the *Tiberius*. Instead, he jumps from Tiberius' false promise about his attendance, to the compulsory cremation of the rotting corpse, to the fact that Tiberius "denied" (*prohibuit*, 51.2) his dead mother divine honors; no mention is made of a proper funeral besides the note that Livia was cremated (*funeratam*, 51.2). In another *Life*, Suetonius reports that Gaius gave Livia's eulogy from the rostra (*Cal.* 10.1), so he is certainly familiar with the event. In the *Tiberius*, however, this information is suppressed in order to keep the focus on Tiberius and his harsh reaction to Livia's passing. Thus, rather than drawing attention to Livia's last rites or recounting her high status and life's achievements (cf. the *elogia*

in Tac. *Ann.* 5.1), Suetonius centers his account on Tiberius' treatment of his mother, especially in the three years since he left Rome for a life of vice on Capri (26-9 CE; *Tib.* 43-4).

The biographer writes that during the emperor's stay on Capri, Tiberius saw his elderly mother only once, on one single day, and even then for a very short time (*semel omnino eam nec amplius quam uno die paucissimis vidit horis*, 51.2), the superlative language stressing Tiberius' inadequacy. When Livia fell ill, Suetonius continues, Tiberius made no effort to visit her (51.2). Accordingly, Tiberius is made to have a history of neglecting his mother. His lack of *pietas* stands in sharp contrast to Augustus' devotion to Livia, his beloved wife (*Aug.* 62, 99). It also differs from Augustus' fidelity to his own mother Atia, whom he honored highly in death (*Aug.* 61). Because Augustus is Suetonius' ideal emperor (Wallace-Hadrill 1983; Bradley 1985, 1991), Tiberius' behavior towards Livia comes across as deviant.

Suetonius' account of Livia's funeral, therefore, underscores two key themes in his *Life of Tiberius*: the emperor's cruelty and lack of *pietas*. In addition, Tiberius' harsh treatment of his mother serves to contrast that emperor even further with Augustus, his stepfather and imperial predecessor. In these ways, even though Suetonius' Livia is a meddling mother in the *Tiberius*, it is her son who comes out badly in her final days. It is not so much Livia's death that interests the biographer, but her son's reaction thereto.

Works Cited

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