

Practicing What We Teach: Agrippina Minor as a Case Study
for Contextualizing Primary Sources

One of the most basic skills that we ask our students to develop is the appropriate evaluation and use of primary and secondary evidence or sources. At the same time, the majority of survey texts involving Roman history present narratives constructed from ancient authors with little, if any, acknowledgment of the problems with those sources. If we are going to ask our students to be conscientious consumers of information and teach information literacy starting in elementary school, then we certainly need to model the behaviors we are asking of them whether we are exploring contemporary or ancient sources with them. Briefly examining one member of the Julio-Claudian imperial family, Agrippina Minor, illustrates the importance of questioning the literary sources and interweaving them with other available primary evidence.

The representation of the Roman Empress Agrippina Minor presented in texts (and film/television) has been based in evidence provided largely by male biographers and historians both ancient and modern. Art Historians have also studied Agrippina, but have tended to focus on the details of her portrait typology concerned mainly with the organization of her portraits into chronologically progressing groups or “types” based upon similar features and hairstyles. Both approaches yield much useful information, but both also provide separate and incomplete accounts.

The fact that the core of our picture of Agrippina has been based largely in literary and historical texts is problematic because the writers of history in the Roman world were generally elite males intent upon perpetuating the *status quo*. As violators of their expected roles in society, powerful women wielding influence and/or actual political power were often perceived as dangerous and subversive to the Roman state because they threatened to undermine a male-

dominated society. As a result, authors use a series of known literary *topoi* such as accusations of adultery and sexual misconduct (including incest) for denigrating women involved in plots against an emperor.

The literary picture of Agrippina Minor which is still dominant today is based mostly on the writing of three authors: Tacitus, who was hostile to the principate; Suetonius, who sought to present data about previous rulers which would put his own imperial employers in a superior position; and Dio, who sought to explain why the current imperial women were so dangerous by exposing the dangers of past imperial females. In short, the overwhelming picture of Agrippina has been one based in literature—a literature hostile to her and other politically powerful or ambitious women. These authors are the source of her negative characterization and have, in turn, largely shaped the modern opinions of her.

The visual record, however, dramatically contrasts with the writers' description of Agrippina as vicious manipulator. The widespread use of Agrippina's image by her brother Gaius, her husband and uncle Claudius, and her son Nero indicate that she had enormously positive propaganda value for promoting the Julio-Claudian dynasty throughout the Empire. If only visual images remained, we would have a distinctly different picture of Agrippina than that presented by the literary sources which were hostile to her. This is because the aims of the literary and artistic traditions in regard to Agrippina are diametrically opposed.

Considering the context of the literary sources that shape the modern picture of Agrippina in texts alongside examples of the visual evidence and its contrasting messages illustrate the need for all of us as scholars and teachers to model for our students the practice of carefully evaluating and contextualizing primary and secondary sources as we teach. If we are going to ask our

students to increase their critical thinking and research skills and develop their information literacy, then we should also try to model those behaviors in our own teaching and scholarship.