
Ancient Rome was a sophisticated culture, specifically its political system. While men were the predominant political force, women also had a role to play. They typically work behind the scenes to further either their own political agendas or those of their husbands. However, there are exceptions to this tradition. One of the best known examples is Agrippina the Younger. Anthony A. Barrett describes the rise and fall of Agrippina’s political influence in his biography, Agrippina: Sex, Power, and Politics in the Early Empire. Barrett presents an accurate depiction of Agrippina and the events that shaped her life.

Agrippina the Younger was born into a politically influential family. As the daughter of Agrippina the Elder and Germanicus, she is descended on both sides from former Roman emperors. Her brother, Caligula, also ruled as emperor. Agrippina later marries her uncle and becomes Empress. All of her political maneuvering is done with the ultimate goal of placing her son, Nero, on the Roman throne. Agrippina achieves her goal, but it comes with consequences. She makes many enemies as she climbs to power, including her own son, who eventually orders her murder.

Barrett portrays Agrippina differently than the sources he uses. As few literary sources from Agrippina’s time period still exist, he is limited to the three main options of Dio, Suetonius, and Tacticus. These works are problematic in and of themselves. Although Dio neither judges people nor events, he also does not provide an analysis of them. His writing is essentially a list of events that fills in the holes left by other authors. Suetonius’s work is not original to him. It is based on the information found in imperial archives, which may be biased. However, all evidence shows that Suetonius himself is not biased. Additionally, he does not place events in chronological order. The last major source is Tacticus. Although Tacticus is critical of the
sources he uses, he is also biased against the imperial system. This bias relates especially toward the ambitious members of the imperial family.

Literary sources are not the only sources available to Barrett. Physical objects such as coins and statues also stand as evidence to the time period in which they were created. However, even nonliterary sources are biased. Sculptures, inscriptions, and coins, could be created by one Roman emperor and destroyed by the next emperor. However, those who withstand the test of time leave a lasting impression of who they represent. For example, just the fact that a statue of Agrippina still exists shows her significant impact on Roman society.

Barrett himself is critical of his sources. For example, he states that “Tacticus, like historians of all periods, is inclined to think in stereotypes.”¹ Barrett makes a distinction between what the sources say happened and what he believes actually happened. For example, when Agrippina’s husband and uncle, Emperor Claudius, dies, tradition attributes Claudius’s death to a poisoned mushroom from Agrippina. However, Barrett later states that Claudius had always been a sickly child. He may have simply fell ill and died. Barrett also mentions that poison is often brought up in connection with the deaths of those in powerful political positions.

Barrett’s critical evaluation of sources is done to present a historically accurate portrayal of Agrippina. He states, “That kind of sober reappraisal of the evidence is the objective of this book.”² Barrett achieves his objective. His depiction of Agrippina dismisses the rumors and exaggerations that exist, and instead focuses on the actual woman. He interprets the evidence without the biases that his sources held.

Although history about Agrippina results from biased information, Barrett does an exemplary job in drawing a distinction between the realities and exaggerations that occur within the sources. Overall, Barrett’s *Agrippina* strives and succeeds in giving a factual representation of Agrippina. It impresses upon the reader the significance of Agrippina in a time when women held no legitimate political power.