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## What Would Agrippina Do?

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DESPITE THE INNUMERABLE LOSSES ASSOCIATED WITH THE COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, this article relates the Presidential Address more or less as I presented it on January 4, 2020 at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Classical Studies and the Archaeological Institute of America.<sup>1</sup> It is a historical piece, reflecting events and changes during my year as the 2019 President of the Society for Classical Studies, my own research, and some thoughts about Classical Studies now and in the future. My recent research has been on Rome's imperial women, and I will soon begin a biography of Agrippina the Younger, who was intimately part of Rome's imperial power during her life from 15 to 59 C.E.<sup>2</sup> Thus when asked some months ago for a title for my Presidential Address I cheekily proposed "What Would Agrippina Do?" By this, I mean not to mock the well-known "What Would Jesus Do?" but rather to signal my fascination with Agrippina and to assert the continuing relevance of Classical Studies today.

What Would Agrippina Do? The title should alike convey that I have never taken myself too seriously, and nod to the exemplary position I have found myself in this last year. I do not consider myself ambitious for power and domination, as was Agrippina the Younger, at least as consistently portrayed. I am happily with my first and only husband; neither of our sons is a Nero; and I aspire to lead by being positive and kind. Yet here I am speaking before you as the 2019 SCS President, an eminent position Agrippina would have

<sup>1</sup> As in previous SCS/APA Presidential Address publications, my text is only lightly edited and footnotes are at a minimum. I have omitted the visuals that accompanied my talk.

<sup>2</sup> Although uncertainty attends the date of her birth, I concur with that of 15 C.E. argued by Barrett 1996: 230–32.

coveted. What would she have done as SCS President? The year saw numerous challenges stemming from the 150<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting in San Diego, at the end of which I assumed my position. Critical issues demanded leadership and decisions,<sup>3</sup> quite a jolt for someone who never expected to be elected and who is generally conflict-averse. Yet despite its bitter beginning, the year has marked steady movement forward for the SCS, attesting to the strength of our organization and the dedication of our colleagues. I am forever grateful to our Executive Director Helen Cullyer; to the *consilium principis* of outgoing President Joe Farrell and President-Elect Bridget Murnaghan; to the SCS Board of Directors and committee members; and to those of you who have steadfastly volunteered your perspectives and help.

The incidents at San Diego, so damaging to individuals and the SCS as a whole, precipitated changes within our organization. Throughout 2019 we expanded earlier initiatives and added others to better answer to our constituency and our mission. Although the changes detailed below (and others not mentioned here) may be in different directions than some might like and certainly fall short of the need, anything that anyone finds praiseworthy is due to our colleagues and the vigor of the SCS overall. Starting with our Annual Meeting and Program, our most recognizable sites, I list some highlights:

- 1) The SCS and AIA now have a joint statement and policy aimed at reducing incidents of harassment, discrimination, and assault at the Annual Meeting. Simply to register for the Meeting participants must agree to adhere to the policy while at the conference.
- 2) In addition to hosting an increased number of meetings of smaller groups representing professional and personal interests alike, the 2020 SCS program specifically includes opportunities for collective thought about vital questions concerning the nature and future of our field, including “White Supremacy and the History and Future of Classics,” “If Classics is for Everybody, Why Isn’t Everybody in My Class? Building Bridges and Opening Doors to the Study of Classics,” “Classics and Civic Activism,” and “Classics Graduate Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” The Annual Meetings of 2021 and 2022 will feature two linked Presidential Panels on race, racism, and the field of classical studies.
- 3) Newly revised guidelines from our Program Committee specifically urge panel organizers to be attentive to diversity and inclusion on their panels. We have also articulated more transparent and fair guidelines for our panel moderators.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://classicalstudies.org/scs-news/letter-president-mary-t-boatwright>.

- 4) We offer more education about implicit bias both at the Annual Meeting and in meetings of SCS committees and the Board of Directors. Our nominating committee is reviewing procedures so as to ensure that committee processes are designed to short circuit or interrupt bias, whether conscious or not. The goal is to make such awareness routine.
- 5) For this year and the foreseeable future, we appointed an experienced Ombuds and a designated group of officers who can respond immediately to complaints *in situ*, and follow up on any complaints made up to 30 days after the conclusion of the Meeting.

I note some other changes. Our leadership has elaborated the SCS Mission Statement as a document declaring that we aim to “advance knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of the ancient Greek and Roman world and its enduring value.”<sup>4</sup> The statement emphasizes Advocacy, Growth, and Inclusion as our strategic priorities, and it will provide guidance to SCS officers and the Board while promoting sound policy and transparency. In a different area, a special issue of *TAPA* on race is underway. Neither last nor least, we have appointed an Equity Advisor for a three-year position to help ensure our initiatives move forward. I hope that by now, the third day of our 151<sup>st</sup> Meeting, the constructive effects of these and other changes are apparent. May this be the start of 151 years of more progress.

All these steps were achieved through community, trust, and collegiality. With this truth I turn to the second part of this talk, my research and thoughts about the definition and relevance of Classical Studies in 2019. I start with the exemplarity suggested by the title, “What Would Agrippina Do?” Exemplarity is a singular concept—we think of an *exemplum*, a single person or event deliberately showcased as a model or deemed typical or appropriate as a model for good or bad. Exemplarity is, of course, one of the original purposes of ancient history and thus essential to Classics. Perhaps Livy said it best in the *praefatio* to his Book I (Livy 1.pr.10):

This is the very thing particularly valuable and productive in studying history, that you consider examples of every type as if set up on a splendid monument; from these you may choose what to imitate for yourself and your state, what you should shun as abhorrent in conception, abhorrent in effect.<sup>5</sup>

In this opening to his 142-book universal history of Rome, Livy also praises the investigation of the past as a way to avert his eyes from the troubles of the

<sup>4</sup> See <https://classicalstudies.org/about/scs-newsletter-february-2020-priorities>.

<sup>5</sup> My translation, with thanks to Rex Crews.

present. But can his thoughts appeal as a modern inducement to Classics? Are not ancient history and Classics, traditionally focused on exemplary individuals, ill-suited to our present that appears ecologically doomed and is riven by contentious politics? Livy's lifetime—no matter how desperate it seemed after years of brutal civil war—did not face the terrifying climate changes we humans now have plainly instigated. And when Livy and other authors forefront widespread changes, particularly degeneration from a “Golden Age,” they often tie those evils to individuals' behavior and choice to indulge in greed, luxury, and other “perversions.”

On the one hand, no one really understood germs and viruses, disease, and ecological harm in ways that would persuade anyone to take uncomfortable steps to protect the future, rather than blandly to dismiss present ills and dream of an idealized, even fetishized past. Further, ancient communications and technology limited the harm wreaked by the ancients, at least in relation to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Nonetheless, to turn only to the Roman world, imperial Rome's military reach, economy, and transport network promoted extraordinary devastation. That destruction was seldom decried, even if it received notice. Plutarch, for example, substantiates his high evaluation of Caesar's military prowess by noting that while conquering Gaul (58–51 B.C.E.) Caesar was responsible for the death of a million Gauls and the enslavement of many more, out of the three million with whom he fought (Plut. *Caes.* 15.5). This is genocide.<sup>6</sup> Among unusual plants catalogued by Pliny the Elder is Cyrene's costly miracle drug silphium, which he notes was extinct by his day thanks to the greed of those who grazed where it was grown (*HN* 19.15, 77 C.E.).<sup>7</sup> Rome's demand for wild-beast fights decimated, or may have hunted to extinction, the North African elephant and other species of animals whose scarcity and exoticism increased their appeal in the arena.<sup>8</sup> Ice cores from Greenland disclose the reach of contaminating lead emissions generated by Rome's mining operations in northern Europe. Rome's elite, however, did not consider that pollution a threat.<sup>9</sup> Working with such scarce and difficult information, remarkable new studies informed by social sciences and data-driven approaches have helped us realize quantitatively that the ancient world was not one solely or even mostly of “truth and beauty, glory and grandeur.”

<sup>6</sup> Stevenson 2015: 105 ventures that Caesar's disastrous effects on Gaul were “perhaps unequalled before the conquest of the Americas.”

<sup>7</sup> See Parejko 2003; in general Hughes 2014.

<sup>8</sup> An aspect of the games Kyle 1998 explores.

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/14/science/ice-core-lead-roman-empire.html>, and <https://www.pnas.org/content/115/22/5726>.

Of course, close readers of Athenian tragedy, the *Aeneid*, or any classical text knew this. Now, however, we can understand scientifically some of the changes caused and perpetuated by the Greeks, Romans, and others whose literature, documents, monuments, and material culture are at the core of what we do.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, the realia of the ancient world, horrific as they were,<sup>11</sup> pale in comparison to the dangers we face today. Our children might ask why we delve into Classics so deeply when most scientists concur that only a few decades separate us from total catastrophe. We might ask ourselves whether it is moral and right to encourage the younger generation to devote their considerable energy and talents to investigating a past so far removed in time and space. Moreover, the past we classicists investigate was only a tiny part of the world at that time, no matter how widely we contextualize the Mediterranean-centered civilizations we study. Should not the young endeavor to produce new knowledge to help save our interconnected and interdependent world?

What would Agrippina do? As I read her, she was so smart that she would have realized climate change portended the destruction of all Julio-Claudians and their way of life. In any case, she would do *something*, not ignore the problem as fake news. Despite condemning her deeds and character, the ancient sources concur that she shrewdly achieved her goals. She was clearly as effective in honeyed speech as in threats and coldblooded manipulation. Understanding Agrippina's powers of persuasion—her best surely not dissimilar to those of Demosthenes or Cicero, even if her usual may have been rougher<sup>12</sup>—can teach us rhetoric, politics, and other forms of inducement still useful today. We have all used some form of that pragmatic argument when advocating for our programs to deans and other academic administrators!

Yet Classics offers much more. It is ineffably nourishing. The pleasure I have always found in studying Classics, the deep human connection I feel even when reading cynical Tacitus, provide strength to counter the paralyzing pessimism so easy to feel these days. Agrippina joins other great figures in Classical Studies, such as Themistocles and Tanaquil, who offer inspiring

<sup>10</sup> Erdkamp 2019 reviews some recent work relating to the “fall of the Roman empire,” and notes the historian’s conflict between human agency and “environmental determinism.”

<sup>11</sup> Although life was infinitely worse for the enslaved and abject poor of Rome, review of the scant data available argues that wealth and power made little difference to overall patterns of Roman mortality: Scheidel 1999.

<sup>12</sup> A habitually hectoring behavior is suggested by the unusual story that at a women’s gathering she drove the mother of Galba’s wife Lepida to actually slap her: Suet. *Galba* 5.1.

models of action. Such characters remind us that we have *agency*, that we ourselves can influence our fates and history.<sup>13</sup>

This is a major reason I decided to write a biography of Agrippina the Younger, diverging from my previous scholarship on institutions and structures. Agrippina has a unique identity. She transcends or subverts her gender, at least as represented in the ancient literary, documentary, and visual sources.<sup>14</sup> She is usually depicted while besting, ignoring, or flouting Rome's laws and customs that barred women from positions of power. For example, we see Agrippina venerated, on a separate dais from that of Claudius, by the British chief Caratacus outside Rome's praetorian camp in 51 (*Tac. Ann.* 12.36–37). A year or so later, conspicuous in a golden military mantle (*chlamys*) she sits next to Claudius while presiding at the astounding (though failed) drainage of central Italy's Fucine Lake (*Tac. Ann.* 12.56; *Cass. Dio* 60.33.3; *Plin. HN* 33.63). In another deplored vignette, she casually attempts to join Nero on a platform while Armenian ambassadors approach the young emperor, her son (*Tac. Ann.* 13.5.3, cf. *Cass. Dio* 61.3.4).<sup>15</sup> This woman—murdered at Nero's behest when she was but 44—controlled her sexuality, reportedly using it only to move towards political domination and never out of lust.<sup>16</sup> When expedient, she broke Rome's social hierarchies, allegedly sleeping with freedmen if that advanced her cause (*Tac. Ann.* 12.65). Even the most entrenched social norms, those regarding incest, were but nothing to this woman notorious for having had sex with her brother Caligula, her uncle Claudius, and her son Nero.<sup>17</sup>

And yet Agrippina could break rules and fashion a unique identity only because of her inherited position and wealth at the very pinnacle of a steeply, obscenely hierarchical system. As Tacitus puts it, she was the unique example of one who was “the daughter of a conquering general [Germanicus], and the sister, the wife, and the mother of men who would control the state” (*Ann.* 12.42).<sup>18</sup> How relevant can Agrippina be to the audience SCS wants and

<sup>13</sup> Agrippina the Younger has perennially fascinated despite her condemnation in the literary sources. For example, she is one of the longest of the 300-some entries in Mary Hays's six-volume *Female Biography*, a collection of the lives of “Illustrious and Celebrated Women, of all Ages and Countries” published in 1803 as the first history in English of women by a named female author.

<sup>14</sup> Here the classic study is Ginsburg 2006.

<sup>15</sup> See also her post-mortem indictment for attempting to enter the senate house: *Tac. Ann.* 14.11.1.

<sup>16</sup> This is markedly distinct from tropes about other women in power, such as Claudius's previous wife Messalina: e.g., *Juv. Sat.* 6.115–32.

<sup>17</sup> Ginsburg 2006: 116–30.

<sup>18</sup> See also *Tac. Ann.* 13.14.3 and *Cassius Dio* 60.33.7.

needs for us to endure and thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Classics cannot be the domain of the privileged, those whose inculcated values may be unthinkingly assumed. Is Agrippina relevant in today's K-12 schools, colleges, and universities? Duke's *Certamen* competitions of the last three years have attracted a remarkably more diverse group of students than those with whom I learned Latin in seventh grade, and Classics must continue to appeal to an increasingly inclusive group.<sup>19</sup> Can students who self-identify with the repressed and marginalized—the formerly enslaved, immigrants, first-generation and others here in North America—look to emulate Agrippina or another prominent Roman or Greek leader foregrounded by Cassius Dio, Plutarch or another author for readers to follow or avoid? We can and must not project unthinkingly the perspectives of an Agrippina or Alcibiades. Their experiences certainly were and are not universal, no matter how brilliantly portrayed by Tacitus, Thucydides, or another.

Newer scholarship in Classics now interrogates ancient understandings and realities of race, class, gender, sexuality, citizen status, state violence, mobility, and the like. Such timely work makes us ever more aware of the discrepant levels of power and privilege in the classical world, and the many ways in which these were manifested in classical cultures and history.<sup>20</sup> The importance of such scholarship is manifold. It helps us face the past honestly so that we do not deceive ourselves or others. It helps counter distortions and exploitations of Greek, Roman, and classical texts and images to promote hate and exclusion. Furthermore, it breaks through or expands the inherited system of Classics, which often seems inscribed with exclusivity. Indeed, when I started teaching back in 1979 I would never have worked on Rome's imperial women, much less a biography of Agrippina. In my *Time Before Tenure*, I felt compelled to demonstrate that I was one of the guys and could make it with traditional subjects. Now, 40 years later, research on women in antiquity is mainstream.

Despite such changes in our field and interests, the struggle for inclusivity continues. The cultures we think of as Greek and Roman, and those of adjacent spaces and times, encompassed much more than elite leaders, politics, wars and other forms of state violence. Cities and landscapes, *poleis* and kingdoms, empires and exile islands included women and the poor, the subaltern and non-conforming, and many others whom authors, artists, and documents

<sup>19</sup> An aim furthered by the SCS Classics in the Community initiatives in New York, Cincinnati, and elsewhere.

<sup>20</sup> Although I may be doing her wrong, I doubt that Agrippina would have cared much for this type of research; to judge from her lost memoirs that included the "misfortunes of her family" (*casus suorum*, Tac. *Ann.* 4.53.3), she may have cast herself as victim.



often ignore or scorn. Giving voice and understanding to such individuals deepens and enhances Classical Studies, and is essential to the survival of our field. Our discipline, which may be justifiably said to explore what should be valued most in human culture,<sup>21</sup> cannot be static. Culture changes, and it should; the world of my SCS presidency in 2019 is vastly different from what I experienced as a new APA member in 1979. I of course have no real idea of what Agrippina would do to meet the challenges we now face. But Classics are “classic” precisely because of their capacity for reinterpretation, and their potential to inspire.<sup>22</sup>

Agrippina’s implacable determination and audacious contravention of restrictive norms can be a positive example for us, even if what we know of her life suggests she would not be sympathetic to the crises of San Diego and to issues we daily face. We have much to do for the present and future of Classical Studies as we embrace and execute our Society’s strategic priorities of advocacy, growth, and inclusion. Our research, teaching, and other professional activities individually furnish us joy and gratification; in turn, we must collaborate, trust one another, and welcome different perspectives. Agrippina might not agree: in my opinion, she was convinced that by her force of will and intelligence, she could achieve all her aims by herself. But she looked no further than her own domination and family, and her precious son killed not only her but also the first imperial dynasty. Let us instead look, with hope and determination, to the future as well as the sustaining Classical past and challenging present.

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<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., König 2016: 303.

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