Claudius, Nero, and the Imperial succession*

by Tony Keen

This short article intends to examine some issues relating to the emperor Claudius’ apparently strange decision in AD 49 to marry his niece Agrippina, and subsequently to advance her son Nero towards the imperial throne, at the expense of his own son Britannicus.

The first thing to note is the intrinsic bias in the sources against Claudius. In essence, most sources represent the senatorial tradition. This tradition was hostile to the very idea of the principate, though reluctantly accepting its necessity (the debate in the Senate following the death of Gaius Caligula considered not just the restoration of the Republic, but also, more realistically, the elevation of one of their number to the purple). It was also hostile to Claudius in particular, for two reasons. First, Claudius’ physical disability (sometimes thought to be cerebral palsy) meant that he was believed to be a fool, and senators were unwilling to accept that they had been wrong. Secondly, he took away much of what had previously been the Senate’s responsibility in the running of the empire; like Tiberius, he attempted to co-operate with the Senate, and like Tiberius, often faced stalemate in trying to get them to do what he needed them to do. But where Tiberius had given up in despair, Claudius took the Senate out of the equation. Finally, the tradition was hostile to Claudius’ niece and wife Agrippina, because it was intrinsically hostile to powerful women.

But however appalling [Nero’s] reputation, it paled into insignificance in comparison with the reputation of Nero’s mother, Agrippina. She was universally regarded as the wickedest woman in Rome – a very hotly contested title, but Agrippina won it. There wasn’t any immorality that she hadn’t been involved in, and there was no crime that she hesitated to commit. She’d been born into the imperial family and, to be fair, that might have warped anybody. Her father, Germanicus, was poisoned. Her mother was murdered – so were two of her brothers. Her third brother became the insane emperor, Caligula, who threatened her life. She survived, but I suppose her lack of caution and good sense was down to her background.

This extraordinary woman resolved to make her son Nero emperor of Rome. The existing emperor was her uncle, Claudius. Claudius liked as wives exciting immoral women, and he had a whole string of them. When the last of them went a bit too far and had to be executed, Agrippina resolved to take her place. She had, of course, all the qualities necessary for the job, and the Emperor Claudius enjoyed all the benefits of wedlock well in advance of the ceremony. So the uncle married the niece, which was of course incest, and created a bit of a scandal in the Senate, which had to be bribed a bit and threatened a bit. Once Agrippina was Empress she quickly cleared the remaining obstacles out of Nero’s way to the throne, including Claudius himself.

This quote comes from Brian Walden’s 1999 BBC television programme on Nero, from the series Walden on Villains, and gives a common modern view of Nero’s approach to the throne; Walden presents Nero as a usurper, advanced to the principate by his ambitious mother. This is a picture that goes back to the ancient sources. Cassius Dio (Roman History 61.34) says that Britannicus by rights should have succeeded. Tacitus (Annals 12.1–3) and Suetonius (Claudius 26) present accounts in which Agrippina used her sexual wiles to win over Claudius after the execution of his previous wife, Messalina, for treason.

However, behind this tale of tabloid sleaze lie serious dynastic politics. Cassius Dio’s opinion is based on the empire of his own time, when the son of an emperor would be an obvious candidate to succeed his father (though the truth is that the Roman empire never
formalized the process of succession until the time of Diocletian). Matters were somewhat different in the Julio-Claudian period. If one looks at the family tree a different picture emerges. A biological link can be traced between Nero, through his mother Agrippina the Younger, her mother Agrippina the Elder, and her mother Julia the Elder, to Augustus himself. Nero was Augustus’ great-great-grandson. The importance of this has been noted by Barrett (1996, p. 97), and though Fagan (1998, n. 24) is sceptical, it seems to me that the relationship is key to the promotion of Nero.

Augustus, perhaps aware of the weak position only being Julius Caesar’s testamentary heir had put him in, had pushed the blood relationship to himself as an important qualification for the principate. He first marked out his son-in-law Marcellus as a potential successor, with the intention that the children of his daughter should eventually succeed. For the same reason he adopted his grandsons Gaius and Lucius Caesar. When he adopted Tiberius as his son, he made Tiberius adopt Germanicus; the importance of the adoption was that Germanicus was married to Augustus’ grand-daughter Agrippina, so that the succession, after passing through Tiberius and Germanicus, would revert to Augustus’ blood descendants, as it did with the accession of Gaius.1 As Robert Graves put it (I, Claudius, ch. 13): ‘It was a satisfaction to Augustus that Germanicus … was Tiberius’ natural successor, and that Germanicus’s infant sons … were his own great-grandsons. Though Fate had decreed against his grandsons succeeding him he would surely one day reign again, as it were, in the persons of his great-grandchildren.’ Despite the different attitude of Romans to adoption compared to our own (see Jones and Sidwell, 1997, p. 216), this blood relationship was evidently extremely important to Augustus. Even the descendants of his sister Octavia, often held up as being significant in terms of the succession, were mainly used by Augustus as husbands, wives and guardians for his blood descendants. Hence, Agrippina could view the principate as her son’s birthright.

A similar connection cannot be traced from Claudius or his son Britannicus to Augustus. Claudius did not even have an adoptive link with Augustus, as his uncle Tiberius and his brother Germanicus had. He took the name Caesar on his accession, but had no title to it other than that he gave himself and a tenuous descent from Julius Caesar’s father, through four generations of women. He was descended from Augustus’ sister Octavia; but so was Nero. (It is reported that Claudius revived a rumour that his father, with whom his grandmother Livia was pregnant when she divorced her husband to marry Augustus, was actually Augustus’ illegitimate son, a rumour that would allege the blood relationship that Claudius otherwise could not prove.)

This made Claudius’ position very weak. He came to the throne largely through default, there being nobody better available; only by his promotion had a civil war between rival senatorial candidates for the principate been avoided. As the young Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus (the future Nero) grew up, he would be a potential focus around which opposition to Claudius could gather. That opposition could be side-stepped by bringing the boy into his own family. By promoting a genuine descendant of Augustus as his successor, Claudius could strengthen his own position. Hence he rapidly made Nero his stepson, adopted son, and son-in-law. The dynastic arguments were so strong that Claudius was prepared to countenance a marriage that was, by Roman law, incestuous. From the moment

1 Goodman, 1997, in a caption on p. 53, Plate 3, says that Augustus was Gaius’ great-grandfather by adoption. This is true, but he was also his natural great-grandfather. In contrast on p. 56 he says that Nero’s wife Octavia was descended from Julius Caesar, which is not true; she was descended from his sister.
of his marriage to Agrippina, Britannicus was sidelined. Given the fates of Agrippa Postumus and Tiberius Gemellus (see Goodman, 1997, pp. 48 & 54) he may well have recognized that he was effectively signing his own son’s death warrant; but if so he clearly thought a smooth unchallenged succession, avoiding the possibility of civil war, more important.2

There were other male descendants of Augustus around; the Junii Silani, Marcus, Lucius and Decimus. Their mother was Aemilia Lepida, who was daughter of the younger Julia, the eldest daughter of Marcus Agrippa and Augustus’ daughter Julia.3 A number of these were alive in Claudius’ reign, and older than Ahenobarbus (Nero). Why did Claudius not turn to one of them? Well, in a sense, he had. The second son, Lucius Silanus, was, until Claudius’ marriage to Agrippina, betrothed to Claudius’ daughter, Octavia.

However, there was something about the Junii Silani that made them unsuitable as imperial heirs. Marcus had been born in AD 14, so was an adult at the time of the assassination of Gaius, who was only a couple of years older. Yet he was never considered a serious alternative to the disabled Claudius. Though the Junii Silani were an old Roman patrician family (they belonged to the same gens as the Junii Bruti, who had produced one of the founders of the Republic and, much later, Caesar’s assassin Marcus Junius Brutus), they seem not to have had great standing with the army. Ahenobarbus, on the other hand, as well as being a descendant of Augustus, and also of his sister Octavia, was a grandson of Germanicus, who had been immensely popular with the army. Since Claudius’ own elevation had shown the importance of the army in supporting the emperor, Ahenobarbus was a better-placed candidate.

One might ask why Claudius ever bothered with the Junii Silani at all. It is not very clear, but my own suspicion is that originally Claudius based his hopes for the succession around his son Britannicus. Lucius Silanus would be a suitable husband for his daughter, but would not prove a rival to Britannicus. Ahenobarbus would be a more significant threat to Britannicus’ succession. Yet Claudius seems to have hedged his bets, and not taken permanent action to remove Ahenobarbus. His wife Messalina may have seen things differently. Suetonius certainly says (Nero 6) that she saw Ahenobarbus as a threat to Britannicus, and alleges that she tried to have the child assassinated.

After the crisis of Messalina’s conspiracy in AD 48 (possibly, though this is complete speculation, inspired by Claudius’ failure to eliminate the growing threat from Ahenobarbus), things looked rather different. Claudius’ own vulnerability was apparent, and there was now a cloud over Britannicus as the son of a traitor. In order to strengthen his own position, and improve the chances of a smooth succession, Claudius had to turn to Agrippina and Ahenobarbus. Agrippina subsequently engineered the disgrace of Lucius Silanus, and after Claudius’ death made sure she eliminated his older brother Marcus. (It is notable that Seneca mentions the death of Lucius as one of Claudius’ crimes in Apocolocyntosis 10, passing over the fact that his removal helped Nero’s passage to the throne.)

As an appendix to this, it is worth considering the supposed murder of Claudius by Agrippina. All the ancient sources suggest this. Josephus (Jewish Antiquities 20.148) makes it

2 There is, however, circumstantial evidence that Britannicus may have died not from poison, as alleged, but from an epileptic seizure; see Barrett, 1996, pp. 170–2.

3 Note that Gaius Appius Junius Silanus, who was executed by Claudius in AD 42, belonged to a different branch of the family from that which had married into the descendants of Augustus (Robert Graves got this wrong in I, Claudius and Claudius the God).
a rumour, but Tacitus (Annals 12.65–9) and Suetonius (Claudius 43–6) are quite certain that Claudius was poisoned. The tale, given by Tacitus and as one version by Suetonius, is that Agrippina administered a fatal dose of poisoned mushrooms to her husband. Most scholars accept the murder without question, feeling that Claudius’ death comes too conveniently after the time when Nero was capable of taking the reigns of power himself (yet still young enough that he could be guided by his mother, who hoped to rule through him), but before Britannicus was old enough to do so. However, a number of points need to be considered.

First, this is exactly the sort of story told about powerful imperial women. A similar accusation was made about Livia, who was alleged to have killed Augustus in a very similar fashion (figs instead of mushrooms). Allegations of poison were easy to make and difficult to disprove. Unless any of the individuals involved confessed, which seems unlikely, the details of the murder can only be hearsay, and are contradictory in the sources. Some, indeed, must be invention. An example of this is the poisoned feather that Tacitus says was administered by Claudius’ doctor Xenophon, after Claudius had vomited up the original mushrooms, as no poison known to the Romans was that fast-acting.

Secondly, Agrippina had already achieved her objective. Nero was the clear successor, and Britannicus was not a serious candidate. There might appear to have been no need to kill Claudius to secure Nero’s position.

Thirdly, Claudius was gravely ill in late AD 52 and early AD 53, and some of his acts in his last years (see Suetonius, Claudius 46) look like those of a man aware he had not much longer to live. Agrippina had only to wait.

On the other hand, if Claudius really was expressing intentions to put aside Nero, as Suetonius says he was (Claudius 43), then it is not too surprising that Agrippina acted swiftly. She knew, having seen two of her brothers die in custody, that people could be easily taken out of the line of succession, and the consequences would no doubt have been fatal for her and her son.

The case must remain unproven.


References


