

## XI.—The Death of Agrippa Postumus

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Although much of Tacitus' narrative of the events surrounding the death of Augustus and the accession of Tiberius has been discredited, the murder of Agrippa Postumus is accepted. It seems more a literary than an historical coincidence that Sallustius Crispus figures so largely in Tacitus' description of the deaths of both Agrippa and his impostor Clemens, for both deaths were cloaked in official secrecy. This paper suggests that Agrippa may have died a natural death and that the story of his murder may have arisen from the capital which anti-Tiberian elements could have made of the death of the impostor Clemens in A.D. 16 by saying that his executioner, Sallustius, "killed Agrippa."

Accounts of the death of Agrippa Postumus are found, with varying details and at greater or less length, in the several sources which treat of the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius,<sup>1</sup> but that of Tacitus is the longest and the most circumstantial. The most striking point about the Tacitean narrative is the prominence given to the name and actions of Sallustius Crispus, who is mentioned as the instrument of the deaths of both Agrippa Postumus and the false Agrippa, the slave Clemens. The impression is conveyed that Crispus was a sort of official "Agrippa-slayer," and there is, of course, the possibility that Tiberius, the military man, had told his unofficial minister that he had best finish the task of disposing of Agrippa by disposing of the false Agrippa as well. This whole portion of the *Annals*, however, is so problematical and so open to historians' suspicions that it perhaps deserves renewed attention.

<sup>1</sup> The principal authors who treat the death of Agrippa Postumus are Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio Cassius, with a less useful passage in Velleius Paterculus: Vell. Pat. 2.112.7; Tac. *Ann.* 1.6, 1.53, 3.19 (although not by name), 3.30; Suet. *Tib.* 22; Dio Cass. 57.3.5 f. (Zonar. 11.1); plus confused remarks in *Schol. in Iuvenal. vetust.* 6.158 [p. 84, Wessner].

Details which have more or less bearing on the death are found in: Pliny, *Nat. hist.* 7.150; Plutarch, *De garrulitate* 11; Tac. *Ann.* 1.5, 2.39 f.; Suet. *Aug.* 65, *Tib.* 15.2; Dio Cass. 56.30.1-3 (Zonar. 10.38); Ps.-Aur. Vict. *Epit.* 1.27.

The false Agrippa, the slave Clemens, is discussed in: Tac. *Ann.* 2.39 f.; Suet. *Tib.* 25.3; Dio Cass. 57.16.3 f. (Zonar. 11.2).

Sallustius Crispus' connection with the deaths of Agrippa and Clemens is found in: Tac. *Ann.* 1.6, 2.39 f., 3.30.

The discrepancies in detail between the accounts of Tacitus and Dio are so marked that Marsh believed that they used different sources,<sup>2</sup> and that Tacitus had a separate authority for the secret machinations in the palace. The evidence, on the other hand, seems to indicate that Suetonius and Tacitus had the same source.<sup>3</sup> Actually the accounts of the deaths of Agrippa Postumus and the impostor Clemens, as told in Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio, differ most significantly in one point, in the rôle ascribed to Sallustius Crispus by Tacitus, and it is on his rôle that this paper is based.

Let us begin by quoting in full the relevant portions of the two passages in Tacitus:

Primum facinus novi principatus fuit Postumi Agrippae caedes, quem ignarum inermumque quamvis firmatus animo centurio aegre confecit. Nihil de ea re Tiberius apud senatum disseruit: patris iussa simulabat, quibus praescripsisset tribuno custodiae adposito ne cunctaretur Agrippam morte adficere, quandoque ipse supremum diem explevisset . . . Nuntianti centurioni, ut mos militiae, factum esse quod imperasset, neque imperasse sese et rationem facti reddendam apud senatum respondit. Quod postquam Sallustius Crispus particeps secretorum (is ad tribunum miserat codicillos) comperit, metuens ne reus subderetur, iuxta periculoso ficta seu vera promeret, monuit Liviam ne arcana domus, ne consilia amicorum, ministeria militum vulgarentur, neve Tiberius vim principatus resolveret cuncta ad senatum vocando: eam condicionem esse imperandi, ut non aliter ratio constet quam si uni reddatur (*Ann.* 1.6).

After describing the arts by which Clemens was gathering influence and the hesitation which Tiberius exhibited in selecting a course of action (*Ann.* 2.39 f.), Tacitus goes on thus:

Postremo [sc. Tiberius] dat negotium Sallustio Crispo. Ille e clientibus duos (quidam milites fuisse tradunt) deligit atque hortatur, simulata conscientia adeant, offerant pecuniam, fidem atque pericula polliceantur. Exsequuntur ut iussum erat. Dein speculati noctem incustoditam, accepta idonea manu, vinctum clauso ore in Palatium traxere. Percunctanti Tiberio, quo modo Agrippa factus esset, respondisse fertur "quo modo tu Caesar." Ut ederet socios subigi non potuit. Nec Tiberius poenam eius palam ausus, in secreta Palatii parte interfici iussit corpusque clam auferri. Et quamquam multi e domo principis equitesque ac senatores sustentasse opibus, iuvisse consiliis dicerentur, haud quaesitum (*Ann.* 2.40).

<sup>2</sup> F. B. Marsh, *The Reign of Tiberius* (Oxford, 1931) 278.

<sup>3</sup> See footnotes 4 and 5.

Sallustius Crispus' name is not mentioned in this connection by the other authorities,<sup>4</sup> and we may believe that it is mentioned here because rumor would naturally assign the performance of secret duties to Sallustius, who served Augustus and Tiberius in the capacity of a personal executive assistant.

The sheer absurdity of these two passages is patent. In the first one Tacitus says very clearly that Tiberius did not bring the matter up in the senate,<sup>5</sup> and hence Tacitus could have had no official source of information. Yet Tacitus goes on to narrate the workings of the episode with all the detail to be expected of an eyewitness. He says that Tiberius pretended that all this was done by the orders of Augustus, but to whom did Tiberius offer this pretence? And how does Tacitus know what Sallustius Crispus said to Livia?<sup>6</sup> The same sort of objection is valid against the second passage also, for Tacitus carefully specifies that everything was done in secrecy and with discretion. Since the two quotations have the flavor of court gossip, we might well take as our attitude what Tacitus himself says in connection with the death of Germanicus: *Adeo maxima quaeque ambigua sunt, dum alii quoquo modo audita pro compertis habent, alii vera in contrarium vertunt, et gliscit utrumque posteritate* (*Ann.* 3.19), or his remark in regard

<sup>4</sup> Suet. *Tib.* 25.3, although Suetonius in the *Lives* nowhere mentions Sallustius Crispus, may reflect the same source: *Clementem quoque fraude deceptum redegit in potestatem. On the similarities in Tacitus and Suetonius, cp. footnote 5. Dio Cassius, in 57.16.3 f. (Zonar. 11.2), tells the story of the false Agrippa, ascribing his capture to a trick, but stating only that some unnamed persons helped to capture him by pretending sympathy.*

<sup>5</sup> This fact is confirmed by Suet. *Tib.* 22, which has such striking verbal resemblances to Tac. *Ann.* 1.6 that a common source must be suspected:

Suet.: *tribunus militum custos appositus* — Tac.: *tribuno custodiae adposito*;  
Suet.: *Tiberius renuntianti tribuno, factum esse quod imperasset, neque imperasse se et redditurum eum senatui rationem respondit* — Tac.: *Nuntianti centurioni, ut mos militiae, factum esse quod imperasset, neque imperasse sese et rationem facti reddendam apud senatum respondit.*

Suetonius' account, however, lacks the Tacitean embroidery, especially the part about Sallustius Crispus. [I confess myself intrigued by the tribune or centurion who goes from Planasia to Rome to report that he has done the deed, for it is apparently the actual executioner who makes the report. If Tacitus is not merely referring to the wording of the report when he says *ut mos militiae*, a military practice of personal reports must have made for heavy travel on the highways.]

<sup>6</sup> Marsh, *op. cit.* (above, note 2) 280: ". . . and the account of the part played by Sallustius Crispus in the death of Agrippa, a part which must have been very carefully concealed, is certainly open to some legitimate scepticism." Cp. H. Furneaux, *The Annals of Tacitus*<sup>2</sup> (Oxford, 1896), 1.21, footnote 1: "Possibly Sallustius Crispus was authority for the matters in 1.6; 2.39-40."

to the various stories about the death of Drusus: atrociore semper fama erga dominantium exitus (*Ann.* 4.11).

Three able historians have recently tried their hands at solving the problem of the death of Agrippa Postumus, two of whom were concerned with it as one of the principal events of the beginning of the reign of Tiberius,<sup>7</sup> and one who wrote a complete biography of the prince whose life thus dramatically ended.<sup>8</sup> It may now be generally agreed, on the basis of Charlesworth's article, that most of the lurid details about the death of Augustus can be discarded as arising from sources opposed to Tiberius and Livia,<sup>9</sup> whether invented by them or merely spread by them. The color of the derogatory stories, it seems, is predicated on the supposition that Agrippa Postumus should have had the throne, so that the most likely candidates as the source of the stories are the two Julias, together with the elder Agrippina; and the younger Agrippina would not have been loth to help later.<sup>10</sup> Charlesworth is willing to reject, with excellent cause shown, not only the nonsense about Livia's poisoning Augustus, but likewise "the voyage to Planasia, the reconciliation with and possible recall of Agrippa, the murder of Fabius, the plot of Livia, the holding back of the news of Augustus' death."<sup>11</sup> It is therefore remarkable that historians so generally assume that Agrippa Postumus died a violent death, and that they trouble themselves with the question of who ordered his murder. I wish to present the hypothesis that Agrippa died a natural death and that the story of his murder may have arisen from a not entirely innocent confusion in the sources; and I shall also make a suggestion as to how that confusion arose.

Although Robert Graves in *I, Claudius* attractively proposes that Agrippa did not die in A.D. 14 and that the so-called "false Agrippa" was not false at all, I think we must assume that the real Agrippa did die in A.D. 14 and that such an item would have

<sup>7</sup> M. P. Charlesworth, "Tiberius and the Death of Augustus," *AJPh* 44 (1923) 145-157; E. Hohl, "Primum facinus novi principatus," *Hermes* 70 (1935) 350-355.

<sup>8</sup> A. E. Pappano, "Agrippa Postumus," *CPh* 36 (1941) 30-45.

<sup>9</sup> Cp. G. A. Harrer, "Tacitus and Tiberius," *AJPh* 41 (1920) 57-68, who shows that Tacitus, in his portrait of Tiberius, is following an established unfavorable opinion; F. B. Marsh, "Tacitus and Aristocratic Tradition," *CPh* 21 (1926) 289-310.

<sup>10</sup> Charlesworth, *op. cit.* (above, note 7) 153 f.; cp. R. S. Rogers, "The Conspiracy of Agrippina," *TAPhA* 62 (1931) 141-168, particularly 147-149. Although I name only the four women, naturally their partisans also would be active.

<sup>11</sup> Charlesworth, *op. cit.* (above, note 7) 157.

been gazetted,<sup>12</sup> probably just as a simple statement. Perhaps the only fact in which we can feel confidence is that the real Agrippa actually died at the time Tacitus says, and we may assume that his death was so coincidentally opportune with Tiberius' accession that it would naturally excite malicious comment.<sup>13</sup> Whether or not Agrippa was a real danger, his permanent absence from the scene relieved Tiberius of a potential embarrassment, which was revived by the appearance of an impostor on the scene.

In this connection the death of the false Agrippa is perhaps of more significance than has been generally recognized. As Tacitus recounts it in the passage quoted above (*Ann.* 2.40), many people of importance helped Clemens, and Tiberius thought it advisable not to press inquiry on that point. It is possible that they were backing him as a source of annoyance to Tiberius, without expectation of serious result; certainly such political maneuvers were well known at Rome, as in the case of the false Marius in the time of Cicero,<sup>14</sup> and the false Drusus<sup>15</sup> and the false Neros<sup>16</sup> in the Empire, all of whom seem to have been dispatched summarily. It is, however, also possible that some of them believed him to be the real Agrippa, in which case their remarks on his death would have been misleading. There is the third possibility that some of them, once they realized that Tiberius did not intend to conduct an investigation, might have been willing to pretend that he was the true Agrippa. In either of the latter two cases, they would then have said that Sallustius Crispus, who was a sort of cabinet official to Augustus and whose influence had continued into the reign of Tiberius,<sup>17</sup> had killed Agrippa, meaning to imply that he had killed the real Agrippa Postumus. If that statement was once written down, it could easily have found its way into a work like the memoirs

<sup>12</sup> P. Fabia, *Les sources de Tacite* (Paris, 1893) 320 f.; G. Boissier, *Tacitus and other Roman Studies*, translated by W. G. Hutchison (New York and London, 1906) 219–221; Kubitschek in *RE* s.v. "Acta" col. 293.

<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in *Ann.* 4.21, Tacitus says of L. Piso: receptus est reus neque peractus ob mortem opportunam. The sneering tone of the last three words has led [or misled?] some scholars to think that Piso's death was not natural, e.g., Furneaux (above, note 6) in the note on that passage; C. E. Smith, *Tiberius and the Roman Empire* (Baton Rouge, 1942) 175.

<sup>14</sup> A. E. Pappano, "The Pseudo-Marius," *CPh* 30 (1935) 58–65.

<sup>15</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 5.10; Dio Cass. 58.25.1 (Zonar. 11.3).

<sup>16</sup> Tac. *Hist.* 1.2, 2.8 f.; Suet. *Nero* 57; Zonar. 11.15, 11.18; Stein in *RE* s.v. "Terentius" no. 59.

<sup>17</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 3.30.

of the younger Agrippina<sup>18</sup> (which must have been a bulky volume to contain all the material which modern historians ascribe to it); and we can see how the story may have fastened itself to the account of the death of the real Agrippa in some such way as this: Someone wrote that Sallustius Crispus was responsible for the death of Agrippa Postumus, and, without a specific indication as to whether the date was A.D. 14 or 16, it could readily have been believed that the real Agrippa Postumus was meant. Consequently the name of Sallustius Crispus, as the minister responsible for the death of the false Agrippa, would be transferred back to the death of the real Agrippa in A.D. 14. Upon such a slender foundation the story could easily have been amplified by malice to embrace an account of Crispus' advice to Livia. We can gather from Tacitus' description (*Ann.* 3.30) of Sallustius Crispus at the time of his death that not many would be anxious to spare the reputation of that minister, who was disliked as a power behind the throne; in this obituary Tacitus was careful to include the phrase *et interficiendi Postumi Agrippae conscius*, and to remark upon the decline of Sallustius' influence in his old age.

The hypothesis and the suggestion are undemonstrable, of course, but we have been ready to discard an equally detailed and circumstantial narrative in the matter of Augustus' secret visit to Agrippa Postumus, and in the wailings of Marcia at the funeral of her husband Fabius because she felt her inclination to gossip had been responsible for his death.<sup>19</sup> If all those circumstances can be traced back to sources unfavorable to Tiberius and can be disregarded as historically improbable or even chronologically impossible, the rest of the story of the murder would likewise seem to be dubious. I would therefore propose the possibility that Agrippa died a natural death, which would be possible in spite of his youth for he may have suffered from some malignant mental ailment,

<sup>18</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 4.53: in commentariis Agrippinae filiae, quae Neronis principis mater vitam suam et casus suorum posteris memoravit. From Smith, *op. cit.* (above, note 13) 16, footnote 23, I learn that it has been suggested by Motzo that the memoirs of the younger Agrippina contained the story of Agrippa: B. R. Motzo, "I commentari di Agrippina madre di Nerone," *Studi di Storia e Filologia*, 1 (1927) 28, 31. *CAH* 10.980 cites this work as vol. 1 of *Studi Cagliaritari di Storia e Filologia*. Many scholars overlook the fact that Sallustius was evidently one of the younger Agrippina's fathers-in-law, which might lend substance to the sentence I have quoted from Furneaux (above, note 6).

<sup>19</sup> Plutarch, *loc. cit.* (above, note 1) gives a version which is reminiscent of the story of Arria and Caecina Paetus.

and also that the subsequent removal of the false Agrippa allowed the enemies of Tiberius to say that he had been responsible for "Agrippa's" death by means of Sallustius. That single statement, whether made by Tiberius' enemies or by persons who thought Clemens was Agrippa, would be all that would have been necessary to produce eventually a pathetic narrative of the death of an unfortunate prince. To my mind, the false note is sounded when we are told that Sallustius Crispus was the agent in both murders; to G. P. Baker,<sup>20</sup> however, "it would seem that Sallustius was the head of some kind of special service"!

It may be asked why it was worth anyone's while to create a legend about Agrippa Postumus. In the first place, his brothers had been indicated as Augustus' successors, and he himself, before his banishment, had been granted honors, although evidently without promise of a great place in the world;<sup>21</sup> in the second place, even without great honors he had in one respect a better claim to the principate than had Tiberius or anyone else, for he was the man most closely related by blood to Augustus.<sup>22</sup> Tacitus repeats a tradition that the elder Julia felt her lot to be more hopeless than ever after the death of Agrippa Postumus (*Ann.* 1.53). We can thus discern, as many historians have noted, that some of her hopes may have rested upon Agrippa's prospects. It is therefore easy to recognize at least the elements of the legend of the prince who was robbed of his rightful inheritance, a legend which would be infinitely painful to the conscientious Tiberius, and which would be gleefully fostered by his enemies who would advocate the claims of the impostor. While they could not seriously have expected that Clemens would be anything more than a nuisance to Tiberius, his death would present them with a golden opportunity to portray Tiberius as the murderer of Augustus' rightful successor. Doubt-

<sup>20</sup> G. P. Baker, *Tiberius Caesar* (London, 1929) 212, footnote.

<sup>21</sup> Pappano, *op. cit.* (above, note 8) 32 f., 37 f., 40 f., discusses this matter fully. I am, in the text, following the point of view expressed by Pappano, who concedes that it is impossible to discern Augustus' intention as to Agrippa's future status before he sent him to Planasia. Certainly it is true, according to Tac. *Ann.* 1.4 and Suet. *Tib.* 15, that some people thought Agrippa had been destined for the principate, and the Tacitean passage treats him as a serious candidate even in A.D. 14. This latter trend of thought is expressed by R. S. Rogers, *Criminal Trials and Criminal Legislation under Tiberius* (Middletown, Conn., 1935) 1-4, cp. 21-23.

<sup>22</sup> Cp. J. Gagé, "Divus Augustus: L'idée dynastique chez les empereurs Julio-Claudiens," *RA* 5<sup>e</sup> sér. 34 (1931) 11-41, who does not, however, discuss Agrippa Postumus.

less some of the people who took up with Clemens really believed him to be Agrippa, and they were then the willing dupes of Tiberius' enemies.

Charlesworth has, in a second article,<sup>23</sup> brilliantly commented upon the literary pattern of Tacitus' account of the suspicious death of Augustus and the accession of his stepson Tiberius with the aid of Livia and the destruction of Agrippa Postumus. He has shown how it parallels the murder of Claudius and the accession of his stepson Nero with the aid of Agrippina and the destruction of Junius Silanus.<sup>24</sup> Charlesworth does not comment on a pair of small phrases which may be of some importance. In *Annals* 1.3 Tacitus says that Agrippa Postumus was *nullius tamen flagitii compertum*; in *Annals* 4.11 he says that it was strange that anyone should think that Tiberius would have been taken in by any fiction about the wickedness of his son Drusus, who was *nullius ante flagitii compertum*. There is surely something significant in the repetition of the phrase, and it is possible that Charlesworth might have had a third, but imperfect, parallel of someone aspiring to the throne by doing away with the lawful claimant, in this case Sejanus' disposing of Drusus with the aid of Livilla. The reader can decide for himself whether Tacitus was using the same source in both cases; in *Annals* 4.11 Tacitus expresses disapproval of the reliability of this source. In both cases the source (or sources) was inimical to Tiberius. If the authority for the story of the death of Agrippa Postumus was the memoirs of his niece Agrippina, they would not probably be the source of a sympathetic account of the death of Drusus, unless the intent to malign Tiberius was stronger than the desire to avoid sympathy for Drusus. There certainly, however, is a strong pattern to these stories of the crown prince deprived of his birthright and murdered. In the case of Agrippa we even have some idea of the version promulgated by the supporters of Tiberius, for Velleius

<sup>23</sup> M. P. Charlesworth, "Livia and Tanaquil," *CR* 41 (1927) 55-57, who thinks that Tacitus' picture of the events surrounding the death of Augustus probably took its present form because of Tacitus' fascination with the character of the younger Agrippina and her activity in connection with the death of Claudius and the accession of Nero; H. Willrich, "Augustus bei Tacitus," *Hermes* 62 (1927), of which pages 74-78 ("Der Tod des Augustus") independently, with greater brevity and with some variations, cover much the same ground as Charlesworth's two articles; cp. C. W. Mendell, "Dramatic Construction of Tacitus' *Annals*," *YCLS* 5 (1935) 1-53.

<sup>24</sup> Tacitus even goes so far as to begin Book 13 of the *Annals*: *Prima novo principatu mors Iunii Silani proconsulis Asiae ignaro Nerone per dolum Agrippinae paratur . . .*; and he introduces P. Celer as a confidential assassin (*Ann.* 13.1 and 33), on the style of Sallustius.

(2.112.7) states that: *crescentibus in dies vitiis dignum furore suo habuit exitum*. Velleius' rhetorical phrase appears to maintain that Agrippa died a raving madman; we need not trouble about it, for he could have known no more of the facts than others, in the face of official silence. It is only curious to observe that he feels urged to make such a blunt statement, as if in reply to charges of murder, a fact which might confirm the suspicion that such an accusation was abroad fairly early in Tiberius' reign.

Although somewhat *démodé*, the study of Tacitus' sources and of his use of them remains amusing and important. We might level serious indictment against him for the story he evolves about the absence of Antonia from the funeral ceremonies of her son Germanicus (*Ann.* 3.3). He states that historians do not say why she was absent, and that there is no mention of her on this occasion even in the *diurna actorum scriptura*. Tacitus then goes on to elaborate his suspicions as to the cause of her absence, with reflections which are anything but to the credit of Tiberius and Livia, although he has nothing to go on except the negative evidence of the omission of her name from the formal descriptions of the funeral. It is noteworthy, however, that Tacitus does not insist that any of his suppositions was actual fact. While the stories about the death of Agrippa Postumus very likely arose out of similar gossip,<sup>25</sup> Tacitus feels at liberty to treat them as fact because he has a reputable source upon which he immediately depends;<sup>26</sup> since the gossip had somehow crept into serious history, Tacitus has no qualms about repeating it. Mrs. Ryberg has published a valuable article on "Tacitus' Art of Innuendo,"<sup>27</sup> in which she has demonstrated how Tacitus declined to include as serious history dubious tradition about Tiberius, although he was ready to take advantage of all the implications of such tradition. In regard to the death of Agrippa Postumus, on the other hand, Tacitus evidently had full confidence in the historical veracity of his source, for he blamed Tiberius and Livia for it.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Boissier, *op. cit.* (above, note 12) 63-67, takes up the problem of the extent to which reminiscences and rumors influenced Tacitus' historical methods. Dio Cass. 57.3.6 remarks that Tiberius did not punish Agrippa's murderer ἀλλ' εἰα τοὺς ἀνθρώπους λογοποιεῖν κτλ.

<sup>26</sup> Cp. Marsh, *op. cit.* (above, note 9) especially 302, 310, who proves that in some cases Tacitus was deeply, perhaps too deeply, influenced by the private traditions of great families about historical episodes. Marsh believes that Tacitus regarded aristocratic tradition, for historical purposes, as superior to gossip.

<sup>27</sup> *TAPhA* 73 (1942) 383-404.

<sup>28</sup> Ryberg, *op. cit.* 384 f.