

# THE WOMEN WHO THREATENED THE ROMAN EMPIRE

They were supposed to be  
But instead they grew into  
feared - figures in the empire  
how a cohort of powerful  
imperial dynasty

# ROMAN BULLET ROMAN PIRIE

chaste, dutiful and submissive.  
some of the most dominant - and  
**Guy de la Bédoyère** reveals  
women sustained Rome's greatest  
in the first century AD

**“W**hat business has a woman with a public meeting?” asked writer Valerius

Maximus in the early first century AD. He answered his own question: “None – if ancestral customs are observed.” Yet this was a time when Roman women were taking more power than ever before – by the back door.

Of all the Roman imperial dynasties, the Julio-Claudian was the first and the longest, lasting from 27 BC to AD 68. It was ruled over by five male emperors, but a little known fact is that the bloodline was passed down the female line. And that female line contained some of the most dominant of all Romans – women without whom the dynasty could scarcely have existed.

The emperors Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero may have wielded absolute power but the intelligence, ambition and ruthlessness of women such as Livia, Octavia and Agrippina the Younger (Augustus’s empress and sister and Nero’s mother respectively) is absolutely integral to the story. And what makes their achievements all the more remarkable is that these women were operating in a society in which the cards were stacked firmly against them.

### Male hypocrisy

It’s impossible to talk about Roman women without considering the Romans’ almost religious veneration for traditional female virtues. The most venerated of all these virtues was *pudicitia*, the quality of sexual chastity and purity, and the ability to serve as the *materfamilias*.

An honourable woman of unimpeachable virtue enhanced her reputation and that of her husband and children. Caesar said: “My wife ought not even to be under suspicion.”

But there was hypocrisy at play here. And that meant that male infidelity was acceptable and a wife’s reputation was enhanced by her willingness to overlook her husband’s philandering. Aemilia Tertia, wife of the general Scipio Africanus, was admired for ignoring his dalliance with a slave girl – so, in effect, not questioning his self-control.

Conversely, a bad wife could destroy a man and his family by succumbing to the vices of effeminacy and luxury and thereby destabilising the state. The historian Tacitus said: “A good wife has the greater glory in proportion as a bad wife is the more to blame.”

A bad woman was any woman who stepped outside her station in life, like the notorious Sempronia who was witty, educated and charming, as well as adept at using her sexuality. The historian Sallust was disgusted



A fourth to fifth-century AD Roman mosaic shows a woman spinning. The household was considered a woman’s natural environment; the political arena certainly was not

## A wife’s reputation was enhanced by her willingness to overlook her husband’s philandering

by the way she lied and pursued men. “There was nothing she held so cheap as her virtue and chastity,” he moralised.

Women were considered by definition untrustworthy because of their susceptibility to ‘luxury’ and inclination to squander money on frivolities. There was a special derogatory word for a talkative woman, a *lingulaca*. An educated woman was treading into dangerous territory – she was intruding into a man’s world, especially if she opened her mouth.

### Illicit affairs

Roman attitudes to women are perhaps best captured by the poet Juvenal’s famous line: “Who will guard the guardians?” This is usually regarded as a warning to people in supreme power about their bodyguards or security services. The original context of the quote was, however, very different.

Juvenal was concerned with the intractable ‘problem’ of keeping women under control. His friends said a wife should be locked

indoors. He replied that a woman was likely to use those placed in charge of her to help her pursue illicit affairs.

One woman who became a source of particular horror was Mark Antony’s third wife, Fulvia, who participated in her husband’s political and military career and effectively worked alongside him. By 41 BC, they were regarded as operating as joint consuls, an unthinkable arrangement in a world where women were excluded from political office. She even appeared on coins.

The historian Velleius Paterculus blamed Fulvia for causing *tumultus* (‘disorder’). Plutarch said that Fulvia had no interest in spinning or weaving and was so adept at controlling Antony she had softened him up and made the Egyptian ruler Cleopatra’s job easy (Antony and Cleopatra famously had an affair in the 40s and 30s BC).

Cleopatra VII became the embodiment of the female threat to the Roman masculine world. She titillated and horrified Cicero who said: “I hate the queen.” Horace dismissed her as “mad” and surrounded by “shrivelled eunuchs”. Attacking Cleopatra became a way of criticising Antony long after his fall.

After he defeated Antony and Cleopatra in 31 BC, Augustus – Rome’s first emperor – wanted the women of his new order to be models of Roman female propriety. Augustus’s sister Octavia (formerly Antony’s fourth wife) and his wife, Livia, became fundamental props of the regime’s image.

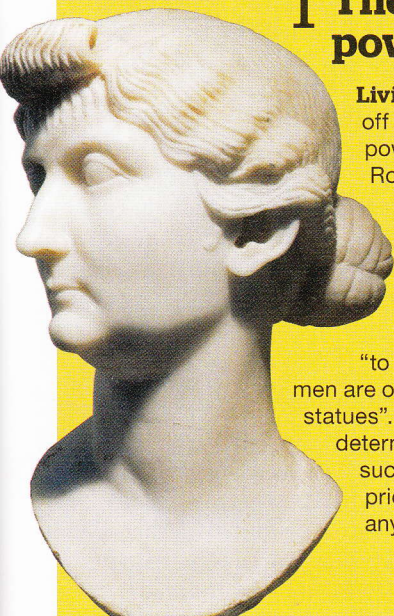
Octavia and Livia were associated with divine virtues, commissioned public works, and symbolised Augustus’s moral reforms. Not all the other female members of the dynasty were quite so obliging.

Augustus’s big crisis was how to organise a

# Lust, lies and lynchpins

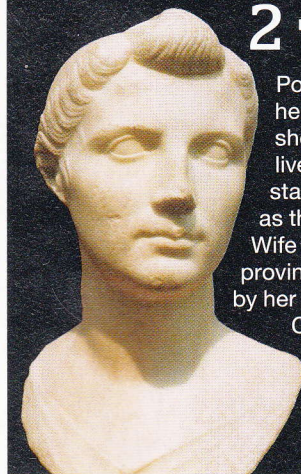
Six women who changed the course of Roman history

## 1 The prim power broker



**Livia** (58 BC–AD 29) somehow pulled off the trick of being enormously powerful while posing as the model of Roman female propriety. Augustus's empress once chanced upon some innocent naked men, who were instantly condemned to death as a result. According to historian Cassius Dio, she saved them by primly announcing that "to a chaste woman of restraint naked men are of no more significance than statues". Tacitus believed Livia was determined to see her son Tiberius succeed Augustus, whatever the price, and blamed her for murdering any rivals.

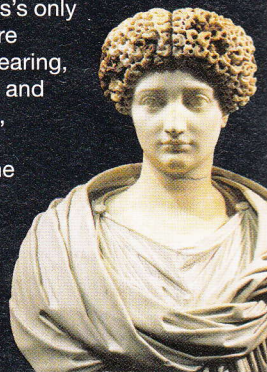
## 2 The dynastic tool



Poor tragic **Octavia** (69–11 BC). Used by her brother Augustus as a dynastic tool, she was expected to produce heirs and live up to the exacting moralising standards of the regime. Octavia behaved as the respectful and compliant Stepford Wife she was supposed to be as well as proving a dynastic lynchpin. Cuckolded by her last husband, Antony, in favour of Cleopatra, she spent much of her life grieving for her dead son Marcellus.

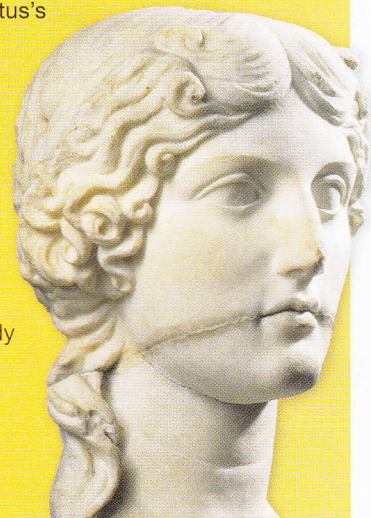
## 3 The notorious wit

**Julia the Elder** (39 BC–AD 14), Augustus's only child and dynastic hope, was a nightmare daughter. Despite her successful childbearing, she shamed her father with her partying and infidelities. She was also a notorious wit, famously announcing that she only had affairs "when the ship is full", ie when she was pregnant. When her father told her off for dressing too showily, she tartly replied that she'd be old one day so she was going to enjoy herself now.



## 4 The pride of Rome

The empress who never was, **Agrippina the Elder** (c14 BC–AD 33), Augustus's granddaughter, was widely admired. Her fertility (the notorious emperor Caligula was among her offspring), popularity with the army and bravery in the face of Tiberius's brutality towards her and her children made her a heroine. Tacitus called her "pre-eminently noble" and "the glory of her fatherland" but he also said she was "impatient for equality, greedy for mastery" and had thrown off "female flaws in preference to men's concerns".



## 5 The reckless bigamist

Thanks to Tacitus, the "ferocious and volatile" **Messalina** (cAD 17–48), Claudius's wife, has gone down in history for her duplicitous and reckless infidelity. After selling her honours and Claudius's family heirlooms, Messalina embarked on a bigamous marriage with her lover Silius and planned to topple Claudius. When Claudius's freedmen spilled the beans, Messalina was finished. She was executed in the Gardens of Lucullus, a place she had greedily stolen from its owner.

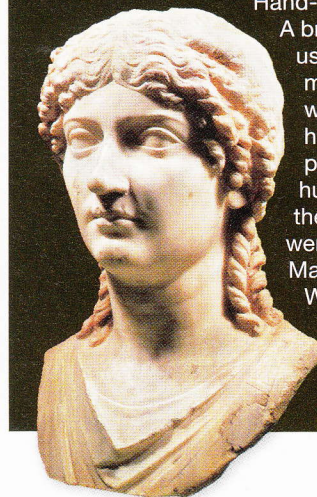


## 6 The ruthless opportunist

The "callous and menacing" **Agrippina the Younger** (AD 16–59), Augustus's great-granddaughter, was a hand-picked empress.

Hand-picked by herself, as it turned out.

A brilliant and ruthless opportunist, she used her lineage and her son Nero to make herself the most powerful woman in Roman history. Roman historians depicted her as greedy, perverted and degenerate, blaming her husband Claudius and son Nero for their negligence. Medieval chroniclers were impressed. Their depictions of Margaret of Anjou and Elizabeth Woodville owe more than a passing nod to Agrippina.



succession in a system that wasn't supposed to exist. He claimed to have restored the Republic, not to have established a hereditary monarchy, but it was a monarchy in all but name.

Augustus floundered around for a way to identify a successor. His first plan was that his sister Octavia's son Marcellus would follow him, but he died in 23 BC. The Julio-Claudian male heirs sometimes seemed to drop like flies.

Augustus only had one child, a wayward daughter called Julia who did everything she could to shame her father with her self-indulgence and her affairs. Except, that is, for having had two sons called Gaius and Lucius by Augustus's general Agrippa. They became their grandfather's greatest hopes.

Lucius and Gaius's deaths in AD 2 and 4 respectively ended that plan and Augustus resorted to Tiberius, Livia's son by her first husband. The Julio-Claudian succession in AD 14 embarked down its first female transmission. Meanwhile, Julia died in exile, sent there by Augustus, who could not cope with a daughter with a mind of her own.

### Incest abounds?

Death continued to stalk the Julio-Claudians like a biblical plague. By AD 37, when Tiberius died, the only realistic option left was Caligula. Descended from Augustus through his mother, Agrippina the Elder (Julia's daughter), and from Octavia and Livia, his birthright was solidly via the female line.

Caligula spent much of his reign being mad, but he rehabilitated Agrippina's memory. She had been brutally tormented and killed in AD 33 by Tiberius who believed she and her family threatened his rule. Caligula also flaunted his relationship with his sisters, one of whom was the notorious Agrippina the Younger. Stories of incest abounded but remained unproven.

When Caligula was assassinated in AD 41 the Praetorian Guard placed his uncle Claudius on the throne. Claudius wasn't descended from Augustus. But crucially, he was descended from both Octavia and Livia. That was what made him the only choice left for the loyalist Guard. Claudius's wife, Messalina, was descended from Octavia too. But Messalina was a disaster. She cuckolded her husband and allegedly engaged in orgies, a competition with a prostitute, and finally an attempted coup. It was too much for Claudius, who had her executed in AD 48.

What came next was almost unbelievable. Claudius married his niece Agrippina the Younger, who brought with her a son, Nero, from an earlier marriage. Nero had a stellar pedigree. Through his mother and deceased father he was descended from Octavia.



A profile of Nero on a c55 AD coin. The emperor's mother, Agrippina the Younger, engineered his rise to power. In return, he had her killed

## Agrippina offered her son Nero incestuous sex in a bid to resume control. But it was too late, and he had her murdered

Through his mother he was descended from Augustus via Agrippina the Elder and Julia. He was also descended from Livia.

Agrippina the Younger knew her path to power lay through Nero. But that was the trap for a Roman empress. She persuaded Claudius to displace his own son, Britannicus, and make Nero the heir. In AD 54 she arranged Claudius's death by poisoning. By then she was already posing as a joint ruler, appearing on coins alongside him. She had opponents murdered and also ordered the killing of anyone with a dynastic claim.

When the teenage Nero succeeded Claudius, Agrippina carried on as before, determined to be an empress in her own right. But she hadn't taken account of Nero's mounting resentment at his domineering mother. When Nero took up with the glamorous Poppaea, Agrippina smelled defeat. She offered Nero incestuous sex in an attempt to resume control. It was too late and Nero ordered her murder in AD 59.

Nero went on to marry Poppaea but killed her and her unborn child in AD 65 in a fit of

rage. Apart from some fringe descendants of the Julio-Claudians, the dynasty had been wiped out. But if it had not been for the women there would never have been a dynasty at all. It would not be until AD 180 – over a century later – when a son (Commodus) born during his father's (Marcus Aurelius's) reign would succeed him.

### Bucking trends

Excluded from legal power, each of these women worked in different ways to pursue her interests and those of her children. This exclusion did give women some advantages. For example, it was impossible to prosecute a woman for trying to seize power. That meant women could work outside the legal system in ways that a man could not.

These women understood one thing above all: no one was going to give them power. It would have to be taken. Conversely, a Roman woman of status depended largely on working through her husband or her male children.

Despite all the restrictions of Roman society, they bucked the trends, asserting themselves by using the opportunities open to them as women. They changed the history of the Roman world for good or ill, even if many were made to pay a terrible price.

Agrippina the Elder had been famously "impatient for equality", said Tacitus. But she had been thwarted at every stage. Even her ruthless daughter found in the end that the system was loaded against women.

Today, much of the evidence we have is the skewed record of the Roman historians. They preserved in disparaging detail how the Roman world perceived women and their place in society. In their accounts these women found their greatest challenge. That says so much about the world they lived in, and our own where women are still presented with prejudice and obstacles their Roman forbears would recognise only too well.

Nonetheless, nothing can change one fundamental fact. The female line of descent was critical to the existence of the first, greatest and longest lasting dynasty in Roman history. **H**

Guy de la Bédoyère is a historian and broadcaster, specialising in ancient Rome. His books include *The Real Lives of Roman Britain* (Yale, 2015)

### DISCOVER MORE

#### BOOK

► **Domina: The Women Who Made Imperial Rome** by Guy de la Bédoyère

#### EVENT

► Guy de la Bédoyère will be discussing Roman women at **BBC History Magazine's History Weekend** in Winchester [historyweekend.com](http://historyweekend.com)