

Coins within the ancient world could represent a great number of things that would have been obvious to the contemporary eye¹. The coin being examined in particular, is one which was struck in 54 AD and depicts both Nero and Agrippina in what seems to be of equal standing². Though of small design, it details a range of messages which would have been obvious to those of the time, with quite a number of them being very telling of just how much power and political influence it appeared Agrippina truly had³.

Agrippina was essential to strengthening Nero's claim to power, as Nero was the great-great-grandson of Augustus through her⁴. As women often did during the time, her presence was used to help stabilize claims⁵. However, her influence didn't stop there, which was controversial as she was a powerful woman who wielded said power more publicly than was considered appropriate. She didn't resign herself to just be utilised for reinforcing Nero's legitimacy, and her appearance on the coin was evidence of her being successful in her endeavour⁶.

Furthermore, being created in 54 AD meant that this coin was released right at the beginning of Nero's reign⁷. This therefore also means that this was released when the influence of others over him was at its highest, one of said influences understandably being his mother due to his young age.⁸ Her influence and high levels of political power were well-known, with both Suetonius and Dio claiming that Nero, at the beginning, left all business to his mother.⁹ Though, as argued by Batsford, this could have been an exaggeration, the coin is clear evidence that these rumours were not baseless, and she did indeed hold a very influential standing- both politically and personally with Nero.¹⁰ It is also unclear as to just how far the claim was exaggerated, as Agrippina's political power was unprecedented, holding a lot of power in her own right, such as when she was granted two lictors (attendants).¹¹ She was a remarkably influential woman and the coin demonstrates that clearly.

For example, without even considering the placement of Agrippina upon the coin itself, the fact that she makes an appearance on the obverse of it at all is extremely significant. This is because the obverse is where the coin most often features the portrait of the current leader and thusly the most important information which needs to be presented.¹² Therefore, with Agrippina making an appearance, the connotations between her and power would not have been lost to a contemporary audience. This is especially the case when adding the consideration of how she is positioned to the overall context. Her bust is placed facing that of Nero, both of similar size and, as a result, importance within the design.¹³

This positioning, to some scholars such as Bedoyere, can also be seen as "clumsy" due to how crowded and cramped the outcome becomes.¹⁴ Though not necessarily the feeling it would give off,

¹ Butcher, 2014, p.1

² Barrett, 1996, p.181

³ Barrett, 1996, p.181

⁴ Mordine, 2013, p.107

⁵ Mordine, 2013, p.107

⁶ Barrett, 1996, p.179

⁷ Bedoyere, 2018, p.233; Malitz, 2005, p.16

⁸ Mordine, 2013, p.106

⁹ Dio, 61.3.2; Suetonius, Nero, 9

¹⁰ Batsford, 1996, p.179

¹¹ Batsford, 1996, p.181; Malitz, 2005, p.16

¹² Bergmann, 2013, p.335; Bedoyere, 2018, p.233

¹³ Bergmann, 2013, p.335

¹⁴ Bedoyere, 2018, p.233

the idea behind the two figures sharing the same space definitely puts into perspective how unusual this type of design would have been. It demonstrates Agrippina's elevated status in such a manner that would have been unmistakeable to their contemporaries- she was shown as something akin to a co-ruler, a position which had no place in Roman law and therefore making her position a remarkable one.¹⁵

Furthermore, the text encircling the designs on both sides are equally, if not more, telling of how prominent whoever commissioned the coin wanted Agrippina to appear. This is due to the fact that it is her own name which is engraved upon the front (identifying her as the wife of Claudius and mother of Nero), whereas Nero's is situated upon the reverse along with the corona civica and 'EX SC' or 'by decree of the senate'¹⁶. The placement of Agrippina's identification upon the obverse could be indicative of the fact that she herself commissioned this coin, and could imply further the idea that she saw herself as having a similar authority to that of her son¹⁷. It could also imply that she was wary of him overshadowing her, which would make sense considering her need to control various political affairs, but there is not enough evidence to posit this as fact¹⁸. Whatever the case may be, she clearly had a lot of power, as the minting of the coin being under her own orders was definitely not out of the question either¹⁹. If this happened, it would prove just how much influence she really held over Nero at the time, for anyone other than the emperor minting coins would have been seen as a challenge to his power²⁰. In the end, the association between mother and son was inescapable, and would further the idea that Nero relied heavily on her in political matters- something which according to Dio was unprecedented²¹.

This is not the only time in which Agrippina appears upon the obverse of a coin either. A coin issued in 55 AD is similar in the sense that both Agrippina and Nero feature upon the obverse of the coin²². In fact, it was not until 55 or 56 AD that Nero started to have solo appearances upon coinage, meaning that his early reign was definitely punctuated by the presence of his mother²³.

However, it is also clear that her prominence did not last too long either. This is because on this other coin, Nero's name is placed upon the obverse of the coin- this, combined with Agrippina being positioned behind the figure of Nero, marks it as being in direct contrast with the earlier make²⁴. This, therefore, could imply that there had been some backlash to her being presented as being someone of equal standing with Nero on the first coin²⁵. This is because whilst the second coin still indicates that Agrippina was someone of huge prominence, she was also now clearly of less significance than Nero²⁶. Whether this change was due to backlash against how 'acceptable' the first coin was or not, the fact that there was anything to change at all emphasises just how large a statement the coin of 54 AD would have made²⁷. Not only was someone other than the emperor shown to have a significant amount of political power, but that someone was also a woman- both

¹⁵ Dio 61.3.2; Barrett, 1996, p.18; Mordine, 2013, p.106

¹⁶ Malitz, 2005, p.19; Bedoyere, 2018, p.233

¹⁷ Malitz, 2005, p.17

¹⁸ Bedoyere, 2018, p.233

¹⁹ Malitz, 2005, p.17

²⁰ Hekster, et al. 2014, p.28

²¹ Dio 61.3.2; Barrett, 1996, p.181

²² Bedoyere, 2018, p.233; Hekster, et al. 2014, p.33

²³ Bedoyere, 2018, p.233

²⁴ Bedoyere, 2018, p.233

²⁵ Bergmann, 2013, p.335

²⁶ Bergmann, 2013, p.335

²⁷ Bedoyere, 2018, p.233

aspects extremely contentious and as a result, having an implication of Nero's submission to his mother, and resultingly lack of complete power over the empire²⁸.

Overall, the coin clearly demonstrates that Agrippina had a lot of political power and that there was no intention of hiding the fact from the Roman populous²⁹. She was presented as someone who had equal standing and prominence as the emperor, and the identifying inscription for her was even on the obverse of the coin³⁰. Every aspect of the coin is indicative of a time in which Agrippina held great influence, including the obverse inscription which could imply that the coin could have been commissioned by Agrippina herself³¹. She held a lot of power during the time in which this coin was produced, and every one who saw the coin would have realised that fact too.

²⁸ Mordine, 2013, p.106

²⁹ Mordine, 2013, p.106

³⁰ Bergmann, 2013, p.335

³¹ Malitz, 2005, p.17

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