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History Honors Thesis Proposal

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### Representing Agrippina Major: Power and Public Image in the Early Principate

Vipsania Agrippina, commonly referred to as Agrippina Major, is often overshadowed by her daughter, Agrippina Minor. Although Agrippina Major (14 BC-33AD) was not accused of poisoning her husband or targeted in complex assassination attempts by her son, her life was anything but ordinary. Agrippina Major was one of the leading women of her era, perhaps only surpassed in fame by her grandfather's wife, Livia. She accompanied her husband Germanicus on his military campaigns; moreover, she gave birth to nine children, including a future Roman emperor, Gaius Caesar Caligula. Yet, despite her numeral achievements, Agrippina Minor dominates history books and public memory.

My thesis will trace public perception of Agrippina Major. After outlining basic biographical information, I will study her almost celebrated status as a Roman matron and then highlight the shift in her public perception. Like many Roman authorities, Agrippina Major's image was manipulated to convey certain characteristics. While Germanicus was alive, Agrippina was perceived as an exemplum of virtue. Her many children adorned her virtuous persona. However, after Germanicus died, Tiberius began to distrust Agrippina Major's power and popularity. Physical iconography of Agrippina was no longer propagated throughout Rome, and she was banished to Pandataria. After she died from malnourishment, her son Caligula became emperor and reinstated her image as a Roman mother. My thesis will utilize the

remaining physical statues, coins, and general representations to analyze these shifting power struggles and Agrippina Major's subsequent public image.

In a final chapter, I would like to reflect on how Agrippina Major's image was revised and used in later history. Agrippina Major seemingly remained an exemplum of womanhood, and painters including Benjamin West, William Turner, and Gavin Hamilton reimagined her journey to Brundisium carrying Germanicus's ashes. Agrippina Major's revival was not only artistic but political, and she became associated with the Dowager Princess of Wales. My thesis will attempt to trace the power and purpose of Agrippina Major's image in the early principate and beyond to discover what lasting effect, if any, lingers from these portrayals.

My thesis will use Tacitus's *Annals*, Suetonius's *Lives of the Caesars*, and Cassius Dio's *Roman History* to provide primary source accounts. However, I will also study remaining physical iconography of Agrippina Major to assist my studies.