## Tricky Vocabulary

- **whodunit** – a story about a murder in which the identity of the murderer is not revealed until the end
- **eunuch** – a man who has been castrated, especially (in the past) one employed to guard women's living areas or to serve a powerful person, such as an emperor
- **poultice** – a soft mass of material, usually moist and warm and infused with herbs – used to reduce soreness or inflammation
- **enema** – a procedure during which liquid or gas is injected into the rectum in order to expel its contents
- **torpid** – inactive, lethargic, sluggish
- **evacuation of the bowels** – what happens when you go to the toilet successfully!

# An Ancient Whodunit

## Did Agrippina Murder Claudius?

| Comparison Points | Tacitus says… yes/no/maybe | Suetonius says… yes/no/maybe | Dio Cassius… yes/no/maybe |
|---|---|---|---|
| ● Agrippina definitely murdered Claudius. | | | |
| ● The food-taster (eunuch) fed the poison to Claudius. | | | |
| ● Agrippina fed Claudius the poison. | | | |
| ● The mushrooms were poisoned. | | | |
| ● Locusta prepared the poison. | | | |
| ● The second poison was on feather. | | | |
| ● The second poison was in enema. | | | |
| ● The doctor was part of the plot. | | | |
| ● State of Claudius (asleep, unconscious, in pain, etc.) | | | |

What do you conclude from the summary of the evidence you have written above? Try to write 2-3 points.

Seneca, the leading thinker and writer in the Roman Empire, as Nero's tutor, to make it seem that Nero had a perfect education.

Agrippina set up a web of useful contacts and supporters. Afranius Burrus, the commander of the Praetorian Guard, was one of these. Finally Agrippina persuaded Claudius that Britannicus was too young to succeed him and to adopt Nero as his heir. To strengthen his position, the 16-year-old Nero married the 12-year-old Octavia, who was Claudius's daughter.

A Roman wedding included the ceremony of *dextrarium iunctio* (the joining of the right hands).

## The death of Claudius, 54 AD

Claudius soon began to regret marrying Agrippina and adopting Nero. It looked as though he were about to go back on his decision and declare his own son Britannicus his successor. Agrippina was worried but Claudius mysteriously died before he could change his mind publicly.

# Did Agrippina murder Claudius?

When Claudius died there were widespread rumours that Agrippina had murdered him. Even Nero thought so, because he joked about it saying, 'Mushrooms are the food of the gods because Claudius was made a god by eating one.' Claudius loved mushrooms and ate them on the night he died. After his death Agrippina persuaded the senate to declare Claudius a god.

## Test your detective skills

### *Was Agrippina a murderer?*

There are three main sources of information about the murder of Claudius. They are:

- Tacitus, who was a small child when Nero ruled and so would have been able to question the survivors of the reign;
- Suetonius, who was about 13 years younger than Tacitus and would also have been able to question people who had lived through the reign;
- Dio Cassius, who lived 100 years after Nero.

**Source A: Tacitus's account**

'Agrippina had long decided on murder. But she wanted advice on poisons . . . An expert in such matters was selected — a woman called Locusta, recently sentenced for poisoning . . . By her talents, a preparation was supplied. It was administered by a eunuch who habitually served the emperor and tasted his food.

'Later, the whole story became known. Contemporary writers stated that the poison was sprinkled on a particularly succulent mushroom. But because Claudius was torpid — or drunk — its effect was not at first apparent; and an evacuation of his bowels seemed to have saved him. Agrippina was horrified . . . She had already secured the [help] of the emperor's doctor Zenophon; and now she called him in. The story is that, while pretending to help Claudius to vomit, he put a feather dipped in a quick poison down his throat . . .

'Consuls and priests offered prayers for the emperor's safety. But meanwhile his already lifeless body was being wrapped in blankets and poultices . . . Agrippina issued frequent encouraging announcements about the emperor's health, to . . . await the [best] moment [to announce Claudius's death and the succession of Nero].'

Source: Swinton, Joyce (1995), *In Search of History*, Melbourne: MacMillan

**Source B: Suetonius's account**

'Most people think that Claudius was poisoned; but when, and by whom, is disputed. Some say that the eunuch Halotus, his official taster, [gave him] the drug while he was dining . . . others, that Agrippina did so herself at a family banquet, poisoning the dish of mushrooms, his favourite food . . . According to many, he lost his power of speech, suffered frightful pain all night long, and died shortly before dawn. [Another story] is that he fell into a coma but vomited up the entire contents of his overloaded stomach and was then poisoned a second time, either by a gruel . . . or by means of an enema, the excuse being that his bowels required relief and must be emptied too.'

**Source C: Dio Cassius's account**

'Agrippina . . . made haste . . . [to poison] Claudius. But since, owing to the great quantity of wine he was forever drinking and his general habits of life, such as all emperors as a rule adopt for their protection, he could not easily be harmed, she sent for a famous dealer in poisons, a woman named Locusta, who had recently been convicted on this very charge; and preparing with her aid a poison whose effect was sure, she put it in one of the vegetables called mushrooms. Then she ate of the others, but made her husband eat of the one which contained the poison; for it was the largest and finest of them. And so the victim of the plot was carried from the banquet apparently quite overcome by strong drink, a thing that had happened many times before; but during the night the poison took effect and he passed away, without having been able to say or hear a word.'

Draw up a table to help you make a judgement.

| Comparison points | *Tacitus* | *Suetonius* | *Dio Cassius* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Agrippina definitely murdered Claudius | Yes | ? | Yes |

Select other points of comparison (food-taster fed the poison to Claudius; Agrippina fed the poison to Claudius; mushrooms poisoned; second poison in gruel; second poison on feather; Locusta prepared poison; doctor part of the plot). The table should show where the three sources agree and disagree. This should help you decide whether Agrippina murdered her husband.

6.5 Compare your judgement with that of a modern historian. See the Answers for this.

## Working with the evidence

This account of a Roman banquet is fiction. However, Petronius, the writer, lived at the court of Nero, and gives a good idea of what banquets of the time were like.

*The Dinner of Trimalchio*

'We sat at our places in the banquet hall. Slaves from Alexandria poured water, cooled by snow, over our hands. Others took our feet and began, with great skill,