

Augustus' Laudatio of Agrippa

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Epic Threads

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I wish, truly, that this was a skill in which I was not so well versed,¹ that the call for commemoration was heard less often. Though if any man is owed tribute, it is Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa.

We met studying at Apollonia, then both filled with the youthful vigor befitting the city's namesake.² Upon the death of my father, *Divus Julius*,³ I found in Agrippa a reliable and skilled ally. When my heart was filled with the unconquerable strength of just vengeance and my body was weakened by illness, it was he who stood by my side allowing Justitia's⁴ sentence to be brought down upon Brutus and Cassius.⁵ Many we fought alongside at Philippi in time revealed themselves to be traitors to my father and the Roman people for whom we sought retribution.⁶ Agrippa and I together defeated Sextus Pompeius,⁷ who proved himself to be the lesser spawn of a great man. Here, my dear friend showed himself worthy of an honour which no man was bestowed before nor has been since, a golden crown ornamented by ships' beaks.⁸ It is a fool's game to think one can tame Neptune's realm. Agrippa bested the sea not by conquering but by complimenting; where the sea is unreliable and wild, he was loyal and steady. When he clashed with roaring waves, they became a gentle stream whose slow current propelled Agrippa's victory. In the Battle of Actium, we united to defeat the false gods and betrayers of Rome, Mark Antony and his Queen Cleopatra.⁹ Heeding his counsel, I followed a current which led me not merely

¹ Suet. *Aug.* 8: "in [Octavian's] twelfth year he delivered a funeral oration to the assembled people in honour of his grandmother Julia".

² Zanker, *Augustan Program*, 108. Apollonia was named after Apollo. The god was heavily favoured by Augustus and possessed an eternal youthful depiction.

³ Warrior, *Becoming a God*, 106.

⁴ Lott, *Augustan Sculpture*, 267. The goddess of justice, often accredited to Augustus and one of the four virtues carved on the honorific shield in the Curia Julia.

⁵ Suet. *Aug.* 13: "[t]hen, forming a league with Antony and Lepidus, [Augustus] finished the war of Philippi also in two battles, although weakened by illness ... He did not use his victory with moderation, but after sending Brutus's head to Rome, to be cast at the feet of Caesar's statue."

⁶ Said in reference to Mark Antony and his allies.

⁷ Boatwright et al., *The Romans*, 268.

⁸ Cf. Cassius Dio 49.14: "[u]pon his lieutenants he bestowed various gifts and upon Agrippa a golden crown adorned with ships' beaks—a decoration given to nobody before or since".

⁹ Warrior, *Becoming a God*, 112.; Scheid, *Augustus*, 180. The Civil War against Mark Antony operated as a moderating influence on Octavian's divine ambitions. Antony and Cleopatra's pursuit of living and dynastic divinity led Octavian to return to religious traditions, declaring war according to the ritual of the *fetiales* (priest of Jupiter). The desire to win over more conservative members of the senate led him to stress his status as the son of a god, in comparison to the bolder divine ambitions of his enemies.

to triumph in battle, but total victory for Rome.¹⁰

Upon the death of my beloved nephew, Marcus Claudius Marcellus, I once again turned to my friend and colleague, for there could be no better match for Julia, my only and beloved child.¹¹ I was honoured not just to call him my son-in-law, but his sons my own.¹² Rome happily places her fate into the hands of Agrippa's children.¹³

I should stress that my friend was not only a great man of war, but an ingenious partner in my project of peace.¹⁴ If I leave Rome a city of marble, beauty, and splendor, it is due to his aid.¹⁵ He took his prowess on the sea's harsh waves and turned it to the building of aqueducts, reservoirs, and basins.¹⁶ This shows a man with a true fullness of character; in the places he stepped, there flowed either the blood of the unjust or the water of life.

Agrippa will be buried in my Mausoleum, where one day I will have the honour and privilege of joining him.¹⁷ For now, let us all remember a man who proved I was merely first among *equals*.

¹⁰ Cassius Dio 50.31: "[Octavian] was restrained, however, by Agrippa, who feared that they would be too slow for the fugitives, who were going to use sails, and he was also confident himself that he would conquer without difficulty, because in the meantime a violent rainstorm, accompanied by a mighty wind, had struck Antony's fleet, though not his own".

¹¹ Boatwright et al., *The Romans*, 282; Tac. *Ann.* 1.53: There are allegations of adultery taking place before Agrippa's death. For example, Tacitus' account: "Sempronius Gracchus, a man of noble family, of shrewd understanding, and a perverse eloquence, who had seduced this same Julia when she was the wife of Marcus Agrippa". Regardless of their validity, Augustus would have no reason to present his daughter as anything but virtuous until the adultery charges were made public in 2 BCE.

¹² Boatwright et al., *The Romans*, 288. Augustus adopted Julia and Agrippa's sons Lucius and Gaius in 17 BCE.

¹³ Boatwright et al., *The Romans*, 288. Agrippa died in 12 BCE and Lucius and Gaius would not die until 2 CE and 4 CE respectively. At the time of this speech, Augustus could feel some security in a straightforward dynastic succession.

¹⁴ Cf. Aug. *RG* 34: "after I had extinguished civil wars, and at a time when with universal consent I was in complete control of affairs". Augustus' propaganda relied heavily on his promotion of peace and consensus, assigning Agrippa's (and his) accomplishments merely to the realm of warfare would undermine this.

¹⁵ Suet. *Aug.* 29, based on alleged words of Augustus: "[t]he city, which was not built in a manner suitable to the grandeur of the empire ... that [Augustus] boasted... that he had 'found it of brick, but left it of marble.'"

¹⁶ Zanker, *Augustan Program*, 139.

¹⁷ University of Chicago, 'Mausoleum of Augustus'.

Artist's Statement

This piece is a fictionalized funeral oration for Marcus Agrippa, delivered by his friend and colleague, Augustus, upon Agrippa's death in 12 BCE. It serves two main purposes: to highlight Agrippa's vital role in Augustus' rise to power, and to explore what Augustus himself would have chosen to emphasize about his closest allies. As a public *laudatio* by the emperor, the speech reflects not only the legacy of the deceased, but also the values of Augustus and the broader imperial ideology he sought to promote. There was a real funeral oration for Agrippa by Augustus, of which a short fragment was discovered on a Greek papyrus by Ludwig Koenen.¹⁸ The Greek shows clear signs of having been translated from Latin, as an effort was made to follow the Latin idiom at the expense of the Greek.

¹⁸ Badian, *Notes*, 97; Haslam, *Funeral Oration*, 193.

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