

Models of *fortitudo feminae* in Tacitus' *Annals*: Agrippina the Elder, Epicharis and Boudicca¹

Modelos de *fortitudo feminae* en los Annales de Tácito: Agripina la Mayor, Epícaris y Boudica

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Abstract

This paper analyses three women from the Julio-Claudian period: Agrippina the Great, Epicharis and Boudica, from different social conditions and geographical origins, as paradigms of *fortitudo animi et corporis* in Tacitus' *Annals*. Throughout the passages of this work, the author's admiration and sympathy for the lost causes defended by these women against the power of tyranny can be glimpsed. In his narrative, he introduces elements that lead the reader to take a stand in their favour, although he is sometimes critical of the behaviours that are inappropriate for their *conditiones feminarum*. Despite the extensive bibliography on these women, their figures have not been treated from the perspective discussed here.

Keywords: Julio-Claudian period, women, *virtus animi et corporis*, value defence.

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Resumen

En el presente trabajo, se analizan tres mujeres de época julio-claudia: Agripina la Mayor, Epícaris y Boudica, procedentes de diferentes condiciones sociales y orígenes geográficos distintos como paradigmas de *fortitudo animi et corporis* en los *Anales* de Tácito. A través de los pasajes de esta obra, se entreve la admiración y simpatía del autor por las causas perdidas defendidas por estas mujeres frente al poder de la tiranía. En su narración introduce elementos que atraen al lector para que se postule en favor de ellas, si bien en ocasiones señala comportamientos impropios de sus *conditiones feminarum*. A pesar de la extensa bibliografía existente sobre estas féminas, sus figuras no han sido tratadas bajo la perspectiva que aquí se aborda.

Palabras-clave: época Julio-Claudia, mujeres, *virtus animi et corporis*, defensa de valores.

1. Introduction

Morality, tradition and virtue are intrinsic elements in Roman historiography. The works of Tacitus, as a good representative of the latter, convey the weight of these three fundamental elements of Roman ethics, with particular regard to the traits considered remarkable or deplorable of the male and female behaviour³. These conducts are well defined by the classical author, in accord with the social condition of the individual, who did not hesitate to draw attention to certain attitudes that he viewed as inappropriate for the gender of his characters or atypical for the Roman tradition⁴. In this way, we are presented with villains, heroes and individuals who were not necessarily conditioned by the two previous categories, and may belong to either gender, and who would mark the destinies of the Empire year by year.

In his *Annals*, in which he describes the history of the first dynasty of Rome, Tacitus did not pass over the influence of women, quite the contrary. Thus, since the first half of the 20th century, an extensive body of research has

³ The Roman communitarian ethical sense is well expressed by Balmaceda (2007: 286), whose text I reproduce literally: “Y una de las principales características del sistema ético romano es que los valores morales están profundamente conectados con la comunidad y expresamente orientados a ella: es la comunidad como un todo la que es la última fuente y punto de referencia del valor moral, la generadora de incentivos y sanciones”. In another work (Balmaceda 2011), the same author illustrates the interest of Tacitus in showing not only examples of vices but also of virtues in Roman citizenship under the Julio-Claudians.

⁴ For example, when he recounts the end of Agrippina he says of her: *sed Agrippina aequi impatiens, dominandi avida, virilibus curis feminarum vitia exuerat* (*Ann.* 6.25.3.) and, regarding Boudicca and her command of the battle against the Roman army, he expresses himself in the following terms: *solitum quidem Britannis feminarum ductu bellare testabatur* (*Ann.* 14.35.1).

been dedicated to this author's treatment of the female gender, and the topics and perspectives of analysis on this question have not yet been exhausted⁵. Indeed, a precise reading of his narrative is essential to the study of the history of Roman women.

Although in most cases the women named in Tacitus' *Annals* are members of high society, he did not overlook the remarkable deeds of others, from humble social classes or of foreign origin. A wide range of female characters are presented: the astute Livia, the exemplary matron Octavia, the noble Antonia Minor, the indolent Livilla, the strong Agrippina the Elder, the intriguing Plancina, the impudent Messalina, the shamelessly regal Agrippina the Younger, noteworthy foreigners such as the valiant Zenobia of Armenia and the virtuous Briton queen Boudicca, and countless other women seen and described from information that the author had gathered from his sources, from his own interpretation and the perspective of the era in which he wrote.

As an keynote representative of Roman historiography, in his description of characters, the contrast between the person's faults and qualities has significant weight. According to Syme, the virtues that Tacitus most valued in women were *fides* and *constantia*⁶. In keeping with the assessment of the British scholar is the unconcealed admiration that Tacitus showed for the women of his own political family, Julia Procilla and Domitia Deciana, mother and wife of his father-in-law Agricola⁷, but also the influence of his education and the atmosphere that emanated from the *correctio morum* of Domitian times and which continued into the beginning of the following dynasty⁸.

There is no doubt that in order to uphold these and other virtues, another admirable quality of body and spirit was required: *fortitudo*. In the following pages, and based upon the narrative of Tacitus' *Annals*, we will present the characteristics that make three women, Agrippina the Elder, Epicharis and Boudicca, with different origins, social conditions and geographical origins, paradigms of *fortitudo animi et corporis*. All three have been the subject of individual studies and assessment in relation to Tacitus and the Julio-Claudian period, but have not previously been analysed from the perspective expounded here. To do so, we must first begin by looking for the best classical definition of the *virtus* in question.

⁵ For a historiographical review of 20th century studies on Tacitus and his views on women, see, for example, Gilmartin Wallace 1991 and Posadas 1992. Subsequently, other studies of great interest have been published, including, among others, Santoro L'Hoir 1994; Cid López 1999; Gallego Franco 1999; Hayne 2000; Swindle 2003; Pimentel 2006; Foubert 2010; McHugh 2011; Späth 2012; Milnor 2012; Azevedo 2016; Gillespie 2020; Pavón 2021a.

⁶ Syme 1958: 535.

⁷ Tac. *Agr.* 4.2; 6.1.

⁸ *Vid.* Grelle 1980: 340 ff.; Pavón 2018: 169 ff.

2. *Fortitudo: virtus animi et corporis*

*Quae est enim alia fortitudo nisi animi adfectio cum in adeundo periculo et in labore ac dolore patiens, tum procul ab omni metu?*⁹. By this rhetorical question, formulated in his *Disputationes Tusculanae*, Cicero defined the meaning of the term *fortitudo* or the disposition of the spirit to resist and face up to danger, fatigue, pain and fear. In the same work, the author transcribes Chrysippus' definition: "*fortitudo est*" inquit "*scientia rerum perferendarum vel adfectio animi in patiendo ac perferendo summae legi parens sine timore*"¹⁰. The debt of Ciceronian thought to the Stoicism of the philosopher of Soli is evident.

The author insists on this moral virtue¹¹, typical of that philosophical current, in other passages throughout his works. Thus, in *De officiis*, he points out that fortitude is displayed in the contempt for death and the acceptance of pain¹² and that it is, according to the Stoics, the virtue that fights for justice¹³. However, Cicero's most complete enunciation of *fortitudo* and his most profound reflection thereupon is found in *De inventione*¹⁴. Here, the writer from Arpinum indicates that fortitude is the virtue by which one can face danger and cope with effort. This *virtus* includes other directly related qualities, such as magnificence, confidence, patience and perseverance, without which fortitude cannot be sustained. He goes on to complete the definition of *fortitudo* by defining each of these associated traits¹⁵.

The word itself has two meanings. One refers to the physical capacity of the body, to its strength, robustness and vigour, and the other is linked to the psyche and the spirit, defining the bravery, boldness, courage or energy of a person's character¹⁶. In both senses, it is generally used in the works of the

⁹ Cic. *Tusc.* 5.14.41.

¹⁰ Cic. *Tusc.* 4.24.14.

¹¹ The Greek equivalent, the ἀνδρεία, had been enunciated by Plato (*Rep.* 4.426-435) together with σοφία, δικαιοσύνη, σωφροσύνη, virtues which were to be present in the character of the wise and the good ruler.

¹² Cic. *De off.* 3.33.117: *Fortitudinem quoque aliquo modo expediunt, cum tradunt rationem neglegendae mortis, perpetiendi doloris.*

¹³ Cic. *De off.* 1.19.62: *Probe definitur a stoicis fortitudo, quum eam virtutem esse dicunt, propugnantem pro aequitate.*

¹⁴ Cic. *De inv.* 2.54.163: *Fortitudo est considerata periculorum susceptio et laborum perpessio. Eius partes magnificentia, fidentia, patientia, perseverantia. Magnificentia est rerum magnarum et excelsarum cum animi ampla quadam et splendida propositione cogitatio atque administratio; fidentia est, per quam magnis et honestis in rebus multum ipse animus in se fiduciae certa cum spe conlocavit; patientia est honestatis aut utilitatis causa rerum arduarum ac difficilium voluntaria ac diuturna perpessio; perseverantia est in ratione bene considerata stabilis et perpetua permansio.*

¹⁵ See the nuance made by S. Núñez in his translation of the work *De inventione* in Editorial Gredos (Madrid, 1997: 392, n. 146) regarding the similarities between *virtus* and *fortitudo*, as well as the differences between *fortitudo* and *temeritas* observed in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (3.2.4; 4.25.35).

¹⁶ *Vid.* Forcellini 1864-19264, T. 2: 525, s.v. *fortitudo*; *ThLL*, T. 6.1. col. 1166-1172, s.v. *fortitudo*;

classical authors to describe men¹⁷, armies¹⁸, peoples¹⁹, nations²⁰ and states²¹. *Fortitudo* is by definition the opposite of *fragilitas*, *imbecillitas*, *levitas* and *infirmetas*²², traits by which the character of women in Roman society was delimited and preconceived²³. The qualities associated with the feminine gender have generated an extensive bibliography among researchers, with focus, among other questions, on the analysis of the traditional and moral causes that justified the position of women in Roman society²⁴. However, although the theory characterised women in a certain way, placing them in the *domus* and keeping them away from anything other than the gender appropriate tasks, others realities were possible and the sources duly recorded the decisions, actions and deeds of women who, in some cases and without departing from the traditional model, showed strength of spirit and body, thus rivalling with men in resolution, bravery, boldness and courage, yet without renouncing their femininity.

There are, however, very few occasions in which the authors explicitly use the term *fortitudo* in relation to the female gender, in general, or to specific women, in particular. We may mention some examples in which this virtue is more strongly emphasised, precisely because the subjects are women. This is the case, for instance, in a letter from Cicero addressed to his wife Terentia and their children, in which he mentions that news has reached him regarding her incredible virtue and strength²⁵. Valerius Maximus also devoted the third

Lewis-Short 1958 [1879]: 772, s.v. *fortitudo*; Gaffiot 2016 [1934]: 614, s.v. *fortitudo*; OLD 2016 [1982]: 798, s.v. *fortitudo*.

¹⁷ Suet. *Aug.* 3.2.

¹⁸ Val. Max. 3.1.3; Tac. *Agr.* 33.2.

¹⁹ Caes. *BG.* 1.2; Quintil. 8.4.20.

²⁰ Vitruv. 10.22.

²¹ Flor. 1.18.16.

²² Vid. Forcellini 1864-19264, T. 2: 530, s.v. *fragilitas*; 718, s.v. *imbecillitas*; 827-828, s.v. *infirmetas*; ThLL, T. 6.1. col. 1129-1130, s.v. *fragilitas*; T. 7.1 col. 414-416, s.v. *imbecillitas*; col. 1432-1436, s.v. *infirmetas*; Lewis-Short 1958 [1879]: 775, s.v. *fragilitas*; 888-889, s.v. *imbecillitas*; 946, s.v. *infirmetas*; Gaffiot 2016 [1934]: 616, s.v. *fragilitas*; 687, s.v. *imbecillitas*; 720, s.v. *infirmetas*; OLD 2016 [1982]: 801-802, s.v. *fragilitas*; 913, s.v. *imbecillitas*; 989, s.v. *infirmetas*. Lactantius, in his *Institutiones Divinae* (2.8.28), contrasts the two terms, arguing the creative capacity of man as opposed to that of God. Man is mortal (*mortalis*) and therefore weak (*imbecillus*) and creates from what already exists, while God is eternal (*aeternus*) and strong (*fortis*) and, therefore, creates from what does not exist.

²³ Although not exclusively, Roman juristic sources often use these expressions to define the legal spheres in which women moved: e.g.: *Infirmetas sexus*: D. 22.6.9 pr.; Paul. *sing. de iuris et facti ig.*; D. 27.10.9, Ner. 1 *Memb.*; D. 48.16.1.10, Marc. *sing. ad sc Turp.*; D. 49.14.18 pr., Mod. 2 *de poen.*; Ulp. 11.1; C. 4.29.5; C. 5.35.1; CTh. 12.1.137.1 = C.10.32.44; CTh. 9.14.3.2 = C.8.9.5.3; *Imbecillitas sexus*: D. 16.1.2.2, Ulp. 29 *ad ed.*; C.5.4.23 pr.; *levitas animi*: Gai Inst.1.144; 190; CTh. 9.24.1 *praef.*

²⁴ Among others, see Beaucamp 1976: 485 ff; Dixon 1984: 343 ff; Peppe 1984; Gardner 1986; Beaucamp 1994: 199; Critini 1999; Mercogliano 2000: 597 ff; Quadrato 2001: 155 ff. Evans Grubbs 2002; Quadrato 2010; Rodríguez Montero 2012: 305 ff; Bravo Bosch 2017: 1009 ff; *Eadem* 2018a: 417 ff; *Eadem* 2018b: 139 ff; Pavón 2018: 33 ff; *Eadem* 2021c (in press).

²⁵ Cic. *Ad fam.* 14.1.1.

book of his work *Factorum et dictorum memorabilium* to the virtues, placing in second position the examples collected on *fortitudo*. Among the Roman and foreign women who possessed this quality, he named the legendary Cloelia²⁶, Porcia, daughter of Cato²⁷, the wife of Asdrubal²⁸, the daughter of Gelo of Syracuse, Harmonia and her slave²⁹. In one of his letters, Pliny remarked upon the strength of spirit of Fannia, wife of Gaius Helvidius Priscus and daughter of Thræsea Paetus and Arria³⁰. These women were all recorded as examples of fortitude.

In other situations, the sources describe the strength that emanates from female decisions, actions and behaviour, but without using the word in question. An example of this can be seen in the epigraphic text known as the *Laudatio Turiae*³¹. This well-known document contains the funeral speech of a husband to his wife, thus containing information about the vicissitudes experienced by this marriage, between the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Empire, which ended with the death of the *uxor*.

The author of the *laudatio* praised not only the virtues that adorned his wife (*domestica bona puicitiae, opsequi, comitatis, facilitatis, lanificii studii, religionis sine superstitione, ornatus non conspiciendi, cultus modici*³²) and made her a paradigm of the ideal matron, in line with the Augustan policy of moral regeneration, but also described her strength of character in facing difficult situations such as the assassination of her parents shortly before her wedding (Col. I, ll. 3-4); the punishment of the murderers (ll. 5-6); the defence of her inheritance against unscrupulous relatives (Col. I, ll. 13-20); the defence of her house against bandits who wanted to plunder it (Col. II, ll. 9a-11a); or the indefatigable support she gave her husband during the proscriptions of 43 BC (Col. II, 1a-7a; 11-18)³³. In addition, she had suffered physical mistreatment at

²⁶ Val. Max. 3.2.2.

²⁷ Val. Max. 3.2.15.

²⁸ Val. Max. 3.2. ext.8.

²⁹ Val. Max.3.2. ext.9.

³⁰ Plin. *Ep.* 7.19.7.

³¹ *CIL* VI,1527; 31670; 37053 = *ILS* 8393 = *FIRA* III, 209, n. 69. There is an extensive bibliography on this inscription and the many issues surrounding its content and the names associated with it. For the most recent research on this piece, see, among others, Osgood 2014; Mentxaka Elexpe 2016a.

³² Col. I, ll. 30-31. As Hemelrijk (2004: 188) points out, these are domestic virtues linked to the feminine.

³³ The epigraph is dated around the years 8 and 2 BC; *vid.* Mentxaka Elexpe 2016a: 88-89 and references therein. At that time, the *leges Iuliae de maritandis ordinibus* of 18 BC and *de adulteriis coercendis* of 17 BC, linked to the moral policies of Augustus, were in force. There is an extensive bibliography on this legislation, including Spagnuolo Vigorita 1985; Idem 2002; Astolfi 1996; Mette-Dittmann 1991; McGinn 2002; Mentxaka Elexpe 2016b; Pfeilschifte 2020. Although the extensive text of the epigraph, engraved on a large support arranged on two marble slabs measuring approximately 2.5 x 83 x 9 and with nearly 200 written lines, would not have gone unnoticed by passers-by, nor by those who, knowing how to read, could approach the monument; on this issue, *vid.* Mentxaka Elexpe 2016a: 86, n. 2. As pointed out by Hemelrijk (2004: 187-196), the epitaph was meant to immortalise the memory of the deceased, as well as that of her husband, indirectly. In my opinion, the husband

the hands of the triumvir Lepidus, while she was prostrated before him to plead for the restitution of her husband granted by Octavian. During this episode, she suffered the humiliation of being dragged away and insulted and, despite a bruised body, she remained determined to continue to defend her husband to the end.

Although nowhere in the text is the term *fortitudo* used to describe the actions and decisions of this *mulier fortis*, as characterised by Mentxaka in the title of her study, we can see the reflection of this virtue contained in the words of love, admiration and respect that her husband left engraved in stone for posterity³⁴. Although the sentiments that rise from this funeral eulogy may diminish the objectivity of the allegations made by the widower, there is no doubt that his wife had faced serious circumstances, taking a high risk, yet bravely confronting her fate³⁵.

In a similar light, we may view Tacitus as a historian who, through the use of expressive language and detailed descriptions of the actions of several women, made a record of particular moments in which this fortitude, whether of spirit or body, was observed, albeit without using the specific term in question. Among the many women mentioned in the *Annals*, I have chosen three who, in my opinion and although they are not the only ones, are examples of *fortitudo* by their actions. The first figure upon which we shall focus is Agrippina the Elder.

3. Agrippina the Elder: *uxor et mater fortissima*

In the first hexade of the *Annals*, dedicated to the reign of Tiberius, the presence in the imperial *domus* of the great-niece of Augustus, Agrippina, cannot be overlooked. Wife of the candidate to the throne, Germanicus Julius Caesar, and mother of three caesars, Nero, Drusus and Tiberius (who died at the age of 10), of an emperor, Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, of an imperial wife, Agrippina the Younger, and of Julia Drusilla and Julia Livilla, whose husbands were ennobled by marriage to the imperial house, Agrippina the Elder occupies a pre-eminent place in Tacitus' narration of the events of

may also have intended to adhere to the Augustan propagandistic policy of moral regeneration and to strengthen the ideal model of the Roman matron that would have been portrayed in the figure of his wife. His gratitude to Augustus for having restored her to her pre-proscription status is reflected throughout the text (Col. II, ll. 2-3; 11-12; 19).

³⁴ Mentxaka Elexpe 2016a.

³⁵ For Hemerlijk (2004: 189-190), the role of this woman is not exceptional, bearing in mind that others, such as Terentia, the wife of Cicero, or the third wife of Ovid, also carried out outstanding actions and took unprecedented decisions at critical moments for the defence and protection of their husbands. In any case, the virtues were so to the author of the epigraph, who ensured that the memory of his wife's actions would not be exclusive to him but to anyone able to stop and read its contents.

the early Julio-Claudians. Indeed, she may have been an imperial consort, successor to Livia, had her husband taken his rightful place as intended by Augustus when he adopted Tiberius³⁶. Both spouses shared the divine blood of the Augustan lineage and formed an ideal couple who could have surpassed the success of the first imperial marriage, since they had the fortune of bringing forth several children who could have ensured the future of the dynasty. However, the happiness of the marriage was overshadowed from the very beginning. Indeed, from the very first book of the *Annals*, Tacitus introduces the reader to the tortuous ins and outs of the family relationships within the imperial *domus*. In particular, the author points out the difficulties between Livia and Agrippina, as well as making antagonistic and clearly dichotomous characterisations of Tiberius and his adopted son and nephew Germanicus³⁷.

According to Hallet, Tacitus's portrait of Agrippina is that of "a tragic and victimised figure"³⁸. If, as the author states in some passages, information for these early books was gathered from the memoirs written by her daughter Agrippina the Younger³⁹, it is very likely that the latter described the situations experienced by her parents, who were an imperial couple with dynastic rights, his to exercise and hers to pass on, but who nevertheless fell into misfortune. Tragedy befell them with the suspicious death of Germanicus, and there is no doubt that Agrippina the Elder, aware of her imperial lineage and of Tiberius' rejection of her and her older sons, took a quixotic stance to strive for the return to her heirs of what was rightfully theirs. This tragic image is seen in the way Tacitus described the scene in which Agrippina accompanies the ashes of Germanicus on the sailing across the Mediterranean to Rome. He describes the manner in which it was sad to see her who had been *nobilitate princeps*, who had a *pulcherrimus matrimonius*, always surrounded by veneration and gratitude, and who was now *anxia sui et infelici fecunditate fortunae totiens obnoxia*⁴⁰.

If we follow this account, Agrippina the Elder possessed several of the virtues of the traditional matron, *pudicitia*, *castitas* and *fecunditas*, encouraged by her grandfather's moralistic policy⁴¹. In spite of these virtues, of being loved by her husband and of projecting a grand future for the marriage, she did not enjoy the affection of either Livia or Tiberius; quite to the contrary, Tacitus mentions the hatred and contempt they both displayed towards her⁴².

³⁶ On the dynastic strategy of Augustus initiated in the year 4, *vid.* Birch 1981: 443 ff; Lindsay 1995: 3 ff.

³⁷ Tac. *Ann.* I. 69.5; 4.12.3; 4.53.2-4; On this question *vid.* Pavón 2021a: 103-111 and references cited therein.

³⁸ Hallet 1984: 340.

³⁹ Tacitus (*Ann.* 4.53.1) refers to the memoirs of Agrippina the Younger when mentioning her mother's request to Tiberius in order to remarry, possibly with Asinius Gallus.

⁴⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 2.75.1-2.

⁴¹ Tac. *Ann.* 1.41.2; 4.12. *vid.* Pavón 2021b: 551-553.

⁴² *Vid.* note 36.

With diverse expressions regarding her character and the way in which she coped with the difficult circumstances after her husband's death, although not all of them positive⁴³, Tacitus projected an image of *fortitudo feminae* on Agrippina. He emphasised her loyalty to her husband on several occasions. According to the author, Agrippina had declared the dignity of her lineage by saying that she was *divo Augusto ortam* and that she would not behave as a degenerate in the face of danger (*neque degenerem ad pericula testaretur*)⁴⁴. In the end, however, she had to accept her husband's advice and take her son away from a situation that constituted a threat to his physical integrity. Her strength is manifested in her determination to remain by her husband's side, regardless of the dangers to her own life, that of her unborn baby, and that of her young first-born child in the face of the possible contingencies that could arise *inter furentis et omnis humani iuris violatores*⁴⁵. Agrippina appears to have accepted the advantages and disadvantages of her position as the spouse of the caesar. Another occasion is when, having become the widow of the candidate designated to succeed Tiberius, she took custody of her husband's ashes on the return journey to Rome in order to deposit them in their final cubicle⁴⁶.

There is no doubt that Tacitus, favourable to Germanicus as opposed to the villainous image he gave of Tiberius, had moments of admiration and compassion for Agrippina and the way in which she accepted her adverse *fatum*, although he could be critical of the fierceness of the passion that she demonstrated in certain circumstances⁴⁷. For example, he says of her that she was a *femina ingens animi* in taking on the duties of a consul in battle when she prevented the destruction of a bridge over the Rhine and in attending to the physical and emotional needs of soldiers returning from the Germanic wars⁴⁸. Tacitus also gives a picture of Agrippina's boldness on one occasion in which she confronted Tiberius over the false accusations of impudence, adultery, malice and planning to poison the *princeps* that were levelled against her cousin Claudia Pulchra by the entourage of Sejanus⁴⁹. Without fear, she reproached the emperor for this action, and called him out during the celebration of a sacrifice in honour of the *divus Augustus* over the incoherence evident in the persecution of the descendants of the divinity to whom he was offering the sacrifice. Indeed, as Tacitus recorded, Tiberius was not only persecuting Claudia Pulchra, but had

⁴³ Posadas (1992: 148, n. 14) classifies her among the group of women who have positive and negative characteristics in Tacitus' narrative.

⁴⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 1.40.3-4.

⁴⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 1.40.2.

⁴⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 2.69.3; 71.1; 2.75.1; 3.1.1-4.; 3.4.2. Both occasions are also proofs of loyalty to her husband; *vid.* Pavón 2021b: 553.

⁴⁷ On the antagonistic image offered by Tacitus of Tiberius and Germanicus, *vid.* Pavón 2021b: 100 and references cited in notes 26, 27 and 28.

⁴⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 1.69.1-3. This and other actions characterise her, in my opinion, as a "matrona extravagante"; *vid.* Pavón 2021b: 561-563.

⁴⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 4.52.1-2.

already done so with another friend of hers, Sosia Galla, and was now turning his attention to Agrippina who was *imaginem veram, caelesti sanguine ortam* of Augustus⁵⁰. The risk taken by Agrippina was very great, and, according to Tacitus, these daring actions were due to two motives: firstly, her character, *semper atrox*, and secondly, the threat to her relative, by which she was inflamed⁵¹. The locution used by Tacitus, *periculo propinquae accensa*, may indicate an unconscious recklessness in not seeing the consequences of this action, but it also shows Agrippina's courage, since she did not flinch before the one who had the highest powers and was mercilessly besieging her.

Tacitus employed very strong adjectives and expressions to define the character of Agrippina, which resonate in the reader's conscience: *paulo commotior, nisi quod castitate et mariti amore quamvis indomitum animum in bonum vertebat*⁵²; *puđicitia impenetrabili*⁵³; *pervicax irae*⁵⁴; *illa simulationum nescia*⁵⁵. It is impossible to describe in any other terms the woman who made such a vindication of having divine blood in her veins. And not only did she carry that of Augustus, but also, although to a lesser extent, that of the *divus Iulius*. Agrippina must have been very aware that the consolidation of the Julio-Claudian dynastic foundations, which Augustus had tried to strengthen through his descendants, passed through herself, *imago Augusti*, and her offspring⁵⁶. And this meant that she had to stand firm and strong within the imperial house and court in which she had the most powerful enemies: Tiberius, Livia and Sejanus⁵⁷.

In the ten years between the death of Germanicus and that of Livia, Tacitus shows an Agrippina full of strength, without forgetting her grief, acting decisively and strategically in defence of the dynastic rights of her sons. During this time, her sons grew into young men with a thirst for power, aware of their origins and birthrights. One of the angles attempted by Agrippina, unsuccessfully, was to obtain permission from Tiberius to remarry, presumably to Asinius Gallus⁵⁸. The request was very significant since, had the marriage gone ahead, it would have introduced an external candidate to Tiberius' line of

⁵⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 4.52.2-4. Sosia Galla was a personal friend of Agrippina. She was married to Gaius Silius, a friend of Germanicus and a successful general in Germania. Both made themselves uncomfortable to Tiberius and fell into disgrace (Tac. *Ann.* 4.18-20).

⁵¹ On the rudeness of Agrippina's character and the advantages and disadvantages it brought to the development of her life, *vid.* Kaplan 1979: 410; McDougall 1981: 104; McHugh 2011: 73.

⁵² Tac. *Ann.* 1.33.3.

⁵³ Tac. *Ann.* 4.12.3.

⁵⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 4.53.1.

⁵⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 4.54.1.

⁵⁶ In this sense, Shotter (1992: 13) points out that Augustus supported his succession with what the author calls the *Julian faction*, that is, his living relatives who carried his blood. On Agrippina as an image of Augustus, *vid.* Gillespie 2020: 72 ff.

⁵⁷ On multiple occasions, Tacitus conveys the dislike and enmity that the three felt towards Agrippina and the house of Germanicus; thus, for example, *Ann.* 3.2.3; 4.2; 4.12.3; 4.54.1.

⁵⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 4.53.1-2; Shotter 2000: 351; Hidalgo de la Vega 2012: 31.

succession, before his own sons came of age. Tiberius did not give an answer to her request, which was therefore rejected. Agrippina was not unaware of the support that her husband still had among the people and some members of the elite⁵⁹, and from which she and her sons could benefit. This was also a source of fear for Tiberius. Tacitus, however, showed himself opposed to such prominence on the part of Agrippina, and of what he came to describe as *dominandi avida* and *virilibus curis*⁶⁰. Both terms show the rejection by Tacitus of the Roman matron's interference in political affairs and, at the same time, Agrippina's ability to survive in a man's world⁶¹. She was also the victim of a trap set for her by Sejanus, who gave her to believe, through supposed friends, that Tiberius wanted to poison her, thus leading her to refuse to eat in his presence on one occasion⁶².

After the death of Livia, Tacitus narrates the end of Agrippina and her son Nero, candidate for succession by primogeniture, showing his support for both of them in the face of the injustice and outrages of Tiberius. For the author, the emperor's mother had had an important influence, which had served as a counterweight to control the emperor's unleashed character. After the death of Augusta, Tiberius showed his true nature, according to Tacitus, through the exercise of a *praerupta iam et urgens dominatio*⁶³. The first effects of this change are manifested in the hasty pursuit of Agrippina and her two eldest sons, Nero and Drusus. Although part of this ending coincides with the lost chapters of Book V, Tacitus does not show any further action by Agrippina. He merely enhances the cruel image of Tiberius in a way that is directly proportional to the misfortune of Agrippina. Tacitus himself expressed his impressions of the woman's strength in the last days of her life. Thus, the author says that he had the impression that after the fall and death of Sejanus, another of her bitter enemies, Agrippina still held the hope of going on with her life, but that when she saw that cruelty (*saevitia*) continued, she let herself starve to death⁶⁴. This viciousness is seen, according to the author, in that Tiberius accused her of being impudent and of having had an adulterous relationship with Asinius Gallus, these accusations aimed, of course, at damaging her image as a chaste and faithful wife to Germanicus⁶⁵.

⁵⁹ An example, among others, is that of Titius Sabinus, a Roman equestrian, friend of Germanicus, who paid with his life for the affection that he felt for his friend's unfortunate family; *vid.* Tac. *Ann.* 4. 68-71.

⁶⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 6.25.3.

⁶¹ On both aspects, *vid.*, for example, McDougall 1981: 104 ff; Santoro L'Hoir 1994: 6 ff; Shotter 2000: 341 ff; McHugh 2011: 73 ff.

⁶² Tac. *Ann.* 4.54.1.

⁶³ Tac. *Ann.* 5.3.1.

⁶⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 6.25.1.

⁶⁵ Asinius Gallus had been imprisoned by Tiberius and died of starvation; thus Tac. *Ann.* 6.23.1; D.C. 58.3. The latter also accused Agrippina, without any proof, of having taken her own life after the death of Gallus; *vid.* Tac. *Ann.* 6.25.2.

To the moral pain of knowing that she had been abandoned and cruelly treated by the people who may have protected her and her family, she added the physical pain of losing an eye after being mistreated by a soldier⁶⁶. Before she died of starvation, banished to the island of Pandateria, she learned of the death of her son Nero, who was also exiled⁶⁷. Her son Drusus died shortly afterwards, also from starvation and deprived of his freedom on the Palatine Hill⁶⁸. The rest of her household, that of Germanicus, was left in the hands of Tiberius and to its fate, although fate and the ability to choose their moment placed two of her descendants, Gaius Caesar and Agrippina the Younger, in the positions that would have corresponded to herself and her husband.

Through this account, the longest preserved account of Agrippina's life, we are shown the strength of a woman who, knowing her place in the imperial *domus*, took the risk of her position and defended to the end the legacy that she had inherited from the *primus princeps*. Another woman, belonging to a very humble social background, nobly demonstrated that loyalty to her word was more important than life itself.

4. Epicharis: *liberta fidelissima*

We have much less information in Tacitus' account about this second figure of exemplary fortitude. Epicharis is mentioned in the *Annals* during the trial of the Pisonian conspiracy in 65⁶⁹. According to Polyaeus, she was a *ἑταίρα* of Lucius Junius Gallio Annaeus, brother of Seneca, suspected of involvement in the conspiracy⁷⁰. If we follow Tacitus, Epicharis appears to have had a great interest in the carrying out of the conspiracy, which involved the leaders of the Miseno fleet, including Volusius Proculus, one of the individuals who had participated in the death of Agrippina the Younger⁷¹. This interest is noteworthy, as is her active participation in the conspiracy, demonstrated by her ability to attract Proculus to the cause, and to promote that his implication of other military men in the plan⁷². She even offered the assurance of a reward for these actions.

In this story, we see a strong woman, directly involved in a political matter of great importance, since the elimination of the tyrant was sought for the benefit of the State itself. Perhaps her condition as a lover and friend of several of the conspirators, but above all, her commitment to a cause that seemed to

⁶⁶ Suet. *Tib.* 53.

⁶⁷ Suet. *Tib.* 53-54; *Calig.* 15.

⁶⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 6.23.2.

⁶⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 15.51; 57; *Vid.* Griffin 1984: 90-94; Roldán 2008: 411-412.

⁷⁰ Polyaeus. 7. 62; Tac. *Ann.* 15.56.2.

⁷¹ Tac. *Ann.* 15.51.1-4

⁷² Tac. *Ann.* 15.

her to be entirely just, made her a useful element in the development of the conspiracy. Tacitus made no particular comment on the female condition of Epicharis and her participation in this political affair, which also involved two other women and a large group of men including senators, equestrians, soldiers and civilians⁷³. Her humble background and her activity as a courtesan did not prevent her from participating in an affair of the highest political stakes.

The radical change of mind of Proculus, who went from being involved in the conspiracy to denouncing Epicharis to Nero and reporting everything that she had told him, led to her arrest and imprisonment. Although there were no witnesses to support the testimony provided by Proculus, his account had some semblance of credibility that alerted the emperor. Epicharis had not, however, given away the names of her fellow conspirators, thus they were not identified and were able to proceed with their objective.

The passage concerned with the heroic act of Epicharis is well inserted into the story of the conspiracy, since Tacitus mentions earlier the denunciations made by several of those implicated, namely Lucanus, Quincianus and Senetion⁷⁴. These men, having been offered impunity if they denounced others, had had no compunction in informing, respectively, on their own mother and two close friends⁷⁵. Neither family ties nor friendships were sufficient for them to remain loyal. As Gillespie points out, the noble gesture of Epicharis' silence and loyalty to the conspirators serves as the basis for Tacitus to emphasise the lack of character and honour of the men⁷⁶.

The fact that they chose to save themselves at the expense of their loved ones further highlighted the moral standing of Epicharis. Tacitus used this, in turn, to call attention to the corruption and pressing immorality usual at the time of Nero's reign. Thus, Tacitus stated that her *exemplum* was *clarius* in not revealing the identity of persons which whom she was not even a close friend, although subjected to an extreme situation⁷⁷. Inversely proportional to the capacity of resistance of a *libertine mulier* is the lack of dignity of the *ingenui et viri et equites Romani senatoresque* who easily denounced relatives and close friends while under no torture. Having given the reader this background, Tacitus underlines the cruelty of Nero in subjecting her to vicious torture, including whipping and fire, assuming that Epicharis' female body would not withstand the physical pain.

Epicharis faced the first day without betraying her cause. The next day, with her body disjointed, and about to be tortured again on a chair, she used

⁷³ On the suicide of Epicharis, *vid.* Gris  1982: 153; on the conspiracy, among others, Griffin 1984: 90-94.

⁷⁴ *Tac. Ann.* 15.58.1. Two of them, Lucanus and Senetion were members of the group of intellectuals who surrounded Nero, the so-called "Aula Neroniana", *vid.* Fern ndez Uriel, Palop 2000: 71-73.

⁷⁵ *Tac. Ann.* 15.51.2; 56.4.

⁷⁶ Gillespie 2019: 148.

⁷⁷ *Tac. Ann.* 15.57.2.

the band on her chest to strangle herself, tying it to the seat that supported her. According to Polyaeus, there were not two days of torture but three, and the element used to strangle herself was her belt⁷⁸. Cassius Dio also highlighted Epicharis' resistance, and considered her to be a woman worthy of mention, for she knew all of the details of the conspiracy and did not reveal any of them despite being subjected to all kinds of torture⁷⁹.

The physical resistance of Epicharis was sustained by her courageous spirit and her loyalty to a cause that was more than justified. She became a paradigm of an exemplary woman for her *fortitudo* of body and spirit, and her ordeal, which was also enhanced by her humble origins and unshakable morals, was not forgotten⁸⁰. She may well have been mentioned in the work of Valerius Maximus had it been written after the reign of Nero. Her firm and unwavering attitude in the face of torture, which would have ended in certain death had she not taken her own life first, and her conviction not to give in to such extortion, recalls the attitude of the Christian martyrs, among which were many women, who served as exemplary role models for the spread of Christianity⁸¹. For Rudich, the suicide of Epicharis is practical evidence of the Stoic opposition to Nero's tyranny⁸². In this sense, both Pagán and Ash point out that the death of Epicharis, as told by Tacitus, would have been a moral lesson and an embarrassment for the senatorial order⁸³. It is, in short, a model of exemplary fortitude for all social orders.

The third of the women I have chosen to illustrate female fortitude does not belong to the Roman world, with which she was infamously related, precisely, through the exercise of her *fortitudo*.

5. Boudicca: regina virtuosissima

The Queen of the Iceni closes this ternary group of women of fortitude. Her inclusion in the *Annals* is a sign of the recognition that Roman tradition

⁷⁸ Polyaeus, 7. 62.

⁷⁹ D.C. 62.27.3.

⁸⁰ The fame of Epicharis crossed the limits of the ancient world, and was recalled, among others, by G. Bocaccio in his *De mulieribus claris*, written between 1361 and 1362 and in an anonymous Portuguese work published in 1790 in Lisbon entitled *Tratado sobre a Igualdade dos Sexos, ou Elogio do Merecimento das Mulheres oferecido as senhoras illustres de Portugal por hum amigo da razão*. In Chapter IV, dedicated to the ability of women to keep a secret in which the common contrary prejudice is refuted, this text gives as examples the cases of Epicharis and of the Greek Leena, both of humble origins and of great strength; on this question, *vid.* Pimentel 2015: 883-900.

⁸¹ This strength can be seen, for instance, in the *Martyrdom of Carpus* (23.34), in the *Acts of the Martyrs of Lyons (passim)*, in the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (20-21), among others. On the strength of the Christian woman and her virilisation as an instrument to reach perfection, *vid.* Ibarra Benlloch 1990; Pedregal 2005: 151-159; Torres 2005: 171-178; Rivas 2005: 217-228; 251-257.

⁸² Rudich 1993: 104-105.

⁸³ Pagán 2008: 366; Ash 2012: 450.

and historiography bequeathed to foreign figures who, due to the outstanding nature of their actions, could serve as examples of virtue. Like Epicharis, Boudicca also lived during the reign of Nero and she led one of the most important British uprisings, which took place between 60-61 AD, after the death of her husband, King Prasutagus, who had made the Roman emperor co-heir of his people and territory along with his daughters⁸⁴. Rome did not respect the terms of the will and, moreover, the *procurator Britanniae*, Catus Decianus saw this as an opportunity to extort money from the Icenii territory, thus causing Boudicca's wrath⁸⁵.

Boudicca is mentioned in the *Annals* on three occasions⁸⁶. First, the author presents her as a victim of the violence of unscrupulous people, indicating that she was *verberibus affecta* and her daughters *stupro violatae sunt*⁸⁷. Such humiliations were dishonourable because the women belonged to the Icenian royal house and were treated as spoils of war. To emphasize the tragedy, Tacitus noted that the house of Prasutagus had been plundered by serfs and its lands by centurions⁸⁸. The terror exercised by the Roman soldiers and veterans on the territory and its population, according to Tacitus, was unconscionable for a client state of Rome whose king, in order to maintain the stable relationship of his people with the Empire, had made the emperor part of his legacy⁸⁹.

It is not difficult to imagine the feelings of terror, revenge and hatred against Rome that Boudicca felt, having seen her daughters raped as worthless slaves and herself having been flogged. Her physical description is preserved through Cassius Dio, who described her as tall, red-headed, deep-voiced and of a superior intelligence to other women⁹⁰. For some researchers, the Boudicca portrayed by Tacitus is an apology of the "Noble Savage", full of clichés about the barbarian woman, with intact morals who rightly defended her freedom against the tyranny and degeneration of Rome⁹¹. The Briton alliance commanded by Boudicca won battles against the Romans in three places: *Camulodunum*, *Londinium* and *Verulamium*⁹². However, the last and

⁸⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 14.31. On Queen Boudicca, Briton symbol of resistance to Rome, see the works of Aldhouse-Green 2006; Davies, Robinson 2009; Johnson 2012; Gillespie 2018. On the revolt, *vid.* Webster 1978: 46-48. On the precise dating of the events, *vid.* Carroll 1979: 197 ff.

⁸⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 14.32.3; D.C. 62.2; Griffin 1984: 226; Gillespie 2018: 28-30.

⁸⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 14.31.1; 35.1; 37.3. In *Agricola*, there is a brief mention of Boudicca, saying that she was a woman of royal blood who commanded a Briton alliance to make war on Rome.

⁸⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 14.31.1.

⁸⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 14.31.1.

⁸⁹ On this issue, *vid.* Griffin 1984: 225.

⁹⁰ D.C. 62.2. For the different angles presented by Tacitus and Cassius Dio on Boudicca's model of female leadership, *vid.* Gillespie 2015: 403 ff.

⁹¹ On this question, among others, Walker 1968: 225-230; Fraser 1988: 52-69. On the image of the barbarian woman in Tacitus in the Germanic territory, which can in some aspects be extrapolated to the Britons, *vid.* Gallego Franco 1997: 55 ff.

⁹² Tac. *Ann.* 14. 31-33.

decisive confrontation took the victory from the queen, who did not manage, this time, to defend her name⁹³.

The second of Tacitus' references to Boudicca is the most extensive, in which he describes her on the warpath, as a leader into battle, riding in a chariot with her daughters, the legitimate heirs of the king⁹⁴. If the events took place as Tacitus describes them, the image of power of the widowed Queen of the Iceni would have inspired awe. Her elevated position in the chariot must have impressed the warriors that had assembled ahead of the confrontation with Rome, not only because she was a woman warrior, something common among the Celts, but particularly because of the arguments she presented, each one stronger than the last, to justify war against the army of the Empire that dominated the known world⁹⁵. She appealed, as usual before a battle, to the sentiment of revenge for the affronts suffered by her kingdom and legacy, but also, to the feelings shared with her subjects, for their *libertatem amissam, confectum verberibus corpus, contrectatam filiarum pudicitiam*⁹⁶. Tacitus continues the queen's speech by putting in her mouth references to the lowness of the Romans who do not respect the bodies, neither of old age nor virginity (*eo proventus Romanorum cupidines ut non corpora, ne senectam quidem aut virginitatem impollutam relinquunt*), elements which, on the other hand, were common trophies of war in the ancient world⁹⁷. Here, as in his description of Agrippina the Elder, Tacitus emphasises the virtue of Boudicca's *pudicitia/castitas*, as well as her being a model of *libertas*⁹⁸. She also becomes the defender of the tainted virginity of her own daughters, and of the daughters of her subjects. For her, according to Tacitus, there were only two options: *vincendum illa acie vel cadendum esse*⁹⁹. The discourse was culminated forcefully by Boudicca indicating that this was her decision as a woman (*id mulieri destinatum*) and that it was up to the men to decide whether to live or become slaves (*viverent viri et servent*)¹⁰⁰. At no point does Tacitus mention whether she took up arms in the battle against the army commanded by Gaius Suetonius Paulinus, governor of *Britannia* who defeated the coalition of the Iceni and Trinovantes, but it may be assumed that she would not have shied away from her responsibilities and obligations. According to Cassius Dio, Boudicca delivered her speech with a spear in her hand, an image that reinforces her characterisation as the commander of the Briton coalition

⁹³ Boudicca means victory in the Celtic language; *vid.* Hingley, Unwin 2006: 157.

⁹⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 14.35.1.

⁹⁵ On Boudicca's speech, *vid.* Adler 2008: 173.

⁹⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 14.35.1.

⁹⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 14.35.1. On the violence exercised by Rome in *Britannia* and with special attention to the treatment suffered by Boudicca and her daughters, see the recent study by Pagoto Bélo 2018: 85-87 and references therein.

⁹⁸ On the virtues of Boudicca, *vid.* Gillespie 2015: 410.

⁹⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 14.35.2.

¹⁰⁰ For Robert (1988: 120-121), Tacitus presents Boudicca's speech by contrasting barbarian fanaticism with Roman professionalism, emotion with discipline, femininity with masculinity.

and the effect of her address to the troops¹⁰¹. In this sense, Tacitus called her *dux femina* in both the *Annals* and *Agricola*, noting, in the latter work, that *neque enim sexum in imperiis discernunt*¹⁰².

In the third mention, Tacitus refers to the suicide of Boudicca, by ingesting a poison, after the resounding defeat suffered against the Roman legions¹⁰³. According to Cassius Dio, Boudicca became ill after the battle and died soon thereafter¹⁰⁴.

In his description of the events involving these three women, Tacitus conveys his admiration and sympathy for their causes, which, although lost, offer examples of *fortitudo* in the face of the abuse of excessive and tyrannical dominance. In his narrative, he introduces elements that lead the reader to take a stand in their favour, although he is sometimes critical of the behaviours that are inappropriate for their *conditiones feminarum*. He illustrates, moreover, how women were compelled to act with emotion and altruism, at the expense of a cold calculation of the consequences. All three of the subjects analysed here took their circumstances and the defence of their interests directly into their own hands, without the help of any male relative. They can therefore be considered paradigmatic women, each in her own field, with different scopes of action, but who showed a strength greater than that of many of their contemporaries, and who were, however, the product of the moment in which they lived and the position they occupied.

Fortitude is not exclusive to the Romans nor to any other people, neither is it to men or women, nor, obviously, to any social class. It is not even a constant virtue, although it can be exercised and sometimes even triggered from time to time, in accord with the circumstances. The three women selected in this work, under the guidance of Tacitus, make it possible for us to appreciate the strength of the female body and spirit. Each was driven by her own convictions and ideas in order to pursue an objective that moved in the defence of the family, the homeland and the people, even when the price to pay was life itself. The memory of all three still resonates in time.

¹⁰¹ D.C. 62.12.6.

¹⁰² Tac. *Ann.* 14.35; Agr. 16.1; 31.4. On the meaning of the expression *dux femina* in Tacitus *vid.* Santoro l'Hoir 1994: 6-12; Gilliespie 2015: 428.

¹⁰³ Tac. *Ann.* 14.36.

¹⁰⁴ D.C. 62.11.

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