

## THE DEATHS OF JULIA AND GRACCHUS, A.D. 14

ROBERT SAMUEL ROGERS†

*Duke University*

The deaths in exile of the elder Julia and her long-time paramour Sempronius Gracchus are reported by Tacitus<sup>1</sup> as having occurred in the latter part of A.D. 14, after Tiberius had succeeded to Augustus' position in the State. For Gracchus' death Tacitus is the sole source, and he represents it as an execution by order of Tiberius; in the case of Julia there is also a brief statement in Dio (Zonaras):<sup>2</sup> "She perished from general debility and starvation." Dio does not inculcate Tiberius, as Tacitus explicitly does.

These two deaths are the last incidents in the story, which comes down to us in our several sources for the period, of the last weeks or months of Augustus' life and reign and the first months of Tiberius' reign. A large part of the rest of that story, but not these two deaths, has attracted the critical attention of historians in recent decades, been brought under the gravest suspicion, and in sequel on the basis of cogent and convincing argument been rejected as unhistorical and legendary.

The principal work of demolition was done by the late M. P. Charlesworth in his "Tiberius and the Death of Augustus."<sup>3</sup> He attacked not only the nonsensical story of Livia's having poisoned Augustus but all the tales which had gathered around a supposed reconciliation between Augustus and the exiled Agrippa Postumus. And he argued most convincingly that the source of these stories had to be the party of Julia and Agrippina. Charlesworth summarized his conclusions thus:

<sup>1</sup> *Ann.* I.53.

<sup>2</sup> Dio 57.18.1a (Zon. II.2 p. 438, I-4 B [p. 5, 14-17 D], who misplaces it in A.D. 17).

<sup>3</sup> *AJP* 44 (1923) 145-57.

It may perhaps be thought hardly worth while to disprove the poisoning story, which does not win acceptance in modern times. But this story is intimately bound up with other legends, just as absurd, in which historians are still inclined to place credence; the voyage to Planasia, the reconciliation with and possible recall of Agrippa, the murder of Fabius, the plot of Livia, the holding back of the news of Augustus' death are all part and parcel of it, and once we can reject one or two incidents we can throw the whole legend overboard. Augustus never intended to recall Agrippa, and all the scandals connected with this idea can only have emanated from the personal enemies of Tiberius, that is Julia and Agrippina and their adherents.

Came then, almost twenty-five years after Charlesworth, Walter Allen, Jr.'s "The Death of Agrippa Postumus"<sup>4</sup> "to present the hypothesis that Agrippa died a natural death and that the story of his murder may have arisen from a not entirely innocent confusion in the sources." The hypothesis is plausible and very attractive; and the legend of Agrippa's death would have served equally with the legend of Augustus' reconciliation with Agrippa, the interests and purposes of the two Julias, the two Agrippinas, and all their party through the years.

Now it seems to us that Tacitus' account of the deaths of Julia and Gracchus is open to the same suspicions and ought in large part to be rejected for the same reasons as the stories referred to above. It will be convenient to have the complete text of *Annals* 1.53 immediately before us.

Eodem anno Iulia supremum diem obiit, ob impudicitiam olim a patre Augusto Pandateria insula, mox oppido Reginorum, qui Siculum fretum accolunt, clausa. fuerat in matrimonio Tiberii florentibus Gaio et Lucio Caesaribus spreveratque ut imparem; nec alia tam intima Tiberio causa cur Rhodum abscederet. imperium adeptus extorrem, infamem et post interfectum Postumum Agrippam omnis spei egenam inopia ac tabe longa peremit, obscuram fore necem longinquitate exilii ratus. par causa saevitiae in Sempronium Gracchum, qui familia nobili, sollers ingenio et prave facundus, eandem Iuliam in matrimonio Marci Agrippae temeraverat. nec is libidini finis: traditam Tiberio pervicax adulter contumacia et odiis in maritum accendebat; litteraeque, quas Iulia patri Augusto cum insectatione Tiberii scripsit, a Graccho compositae

<sup>4</sup> *TAPA* 78 (1947) 131-39.

credebantur. igitur amotus Cercinam, Africi maris insulam, quattuordecim annis exilium toleravit. tunc milites ad caedem missi invenere in prominenti litoris, nihil laetum opperientem. quorum adventu breve tempus petivit, ut suprema mandata uxori Alliariae per litteras daret; cervicemque percussoribus obtulit, constantia mortis haud indignus Sempronio nomine: vita degeneraverat. quidam non Roma eos milites, sed ab L. Asprenate pro consule Africae missos tradidere auctore Tiberio, qui famam caedis posse in Asprenatem verti frustra speraverat.

We believe that Julia's death certainly and Gracchus' very probably will have been gazetted in Rome. Tacitus' initial statement about Julia, "Iulia supremum diem obiit," looks very much as if it might have been lifted verbatim out of the *acta*.<sup>5</sup> And Gracchus, scion of a famous family, ex-tribune (Nipperdey<sup>6</sup> conjectured with high probability that it was he whose trial was deferred until the expiration of his magistracy of 2 B.C.), indicted and convicted in a *cause célèbre*, and relegated by Augustus, is likely enough to have been noted in the *acta* as now deceased. Our suspicions and doubts, then, are not of the facts that Julia and Gracchus died in the latter half of A.D. 14, but of the manner of their deaths as reported by Tacitus.

After the bare statement of Julia's death Tacitus presents brief and partial review of her history: exiled by Augustus for adultery first to Pandateria, then to Rhégium; (he glozes over the concomitant charge of treason, which is explicit in the elder Pliny;<sup>7</sup>) her marriage earlier with Tiberius and her disdain of him, which was the principal reason for his retirement to Rhodes; when Tiberius came to empire she was exiled, disgraced and, after Agrippa Postumus' execution, hopeless; Tiberius accomplished her end by "privation and slow decay" (Furieux). Dio<sup>8</sup> says "general debility and starvation" but does not impute it to Tiberius, thus leaving open an inference of suicide. That Tacitus meant to charge Tiberius with murder is, we think, clear in his employment of *peremit* and confirmed by his following comment:

<sup>5</sup> On the *acta diurna* cf. P. Fabia, *Les Sources de Tacite* (Paris 1893) 320-21; G. Boissier, *Tacitus and Other Roman Studies*, translated by W. G. Hutchison (New York and London 1906) 219-21; Kubitschek, *RE* 1.293, s.v. "Acta."

<sup>6</sup> *Ad Tac. Ann.* 1.53, citing Dio 55.10.

<sup>7</sup> *N.H.* 7.149. Cf. *TAPA* 90 (1959) 231.

<sup>8</sup> Note 2, above.

"Tiberius thought her death would pass unnoticed because she had been so long in exile."<sup>9</sup>

That final comment of Tacitus is transparent indication of its ultimate source, viz. the propaganda literature of the Julian party. In the same direction points the omission of the conspiracy charge upon which, as well as on the count of adultery, Julia had been relegated in 2 B.C.

Suetonius, though he does not record Julia's death, provides some other information which is interesting and pertinent here. He writes of Tiberius:

Juliae uxori tantum afuit ut relegatae, quod minimum est, officii aut humanitatis aliquid impertiret, ut ex constitutione patris uno oppido clausam domo quoque egredi et commercio hominum frui vetuerit; sed et peculio concesso a patre praebitisque annuis fraudavit, per speciem publici iuris, quod nihil de his Augustus testamento cavisset.<sup>10</sup>

The latter part exhibits Tiberius the strict legalist, which he is well known to have been; the earlier part sounds very much like the restrictions imposed by Augustus when Julia was on Pandateria in the first five years of her exile. For Suetonius also writes:

Relegatae usum vini omnemque delicatorem cultum ademit neque adiri a quoquam libero servove nisi se consulto permisit, et ita ut certior fieret, qua is aetate, qua statura, quo colore esset, etiam quibus corporis notis vel cicatricibus.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> It has not always been so understood. F. B. Marsh, *The Reign of Tiberius* (Oxford 1931) 51, note 1, wrote: "I do not think Tacitus means to imply that Tiberius caused her to be put to death, but only that his failure to alleviate her captivity led her to starve herself, a common mode of suicide among the Romans." Inez Scott Ryberg, "Tacitus' Art of Innuendo," *TAPA* 73 (1942) 383-404, seeing in this passage an example of that innuendo, wrote (p. 385): "The account of Julia's death narrowly escapes being a forthright accusation of murder. . . . While the word 'peremit' would ordinarily mean 'killed,' the context indicates that she was allowed to die in squalor and neglect, rather than actually assassinated or forcibly starved," and (note 14) "This interpretation is accepted by Furneaux on *Ann.* 3.19"; but there, as also on 4.71.6, Furneaux was speaking of the younger Julia. R. Syme, *Tacitus* (Oxford 1958) is not unequivocal on the manner of Julia's death—p. 307, "the decease of Julia"; p. 358, "Tiberius Caesar brought the unfortunate Julia to a lingering death in exile and neglect"; p. 423, "It was alleged that he hastened the end of his former wife, the exiled Julia. That cannot be substantiated." But he seems to understand Tacitus' text as we do.

<sup>10</sup> *Tib.* 50.1.

<sup>11</sup> *Aug.* 65.3.

After her removal to Rhegium, according to Suetonius, her life was "lenioribus paulo condicionibus."<sup>12</sup> The abortive plot to take her off to the German armies, which apparently occurred in Augustus' last year,<sup>13</sup> may very well have made it seem prudent to reimpose the stringent regulations. In another passage Suetonius relates that at the time of Julia's banishment Tiberius, though he welcomed the news that Augustus had divorced her from him, "tamen officii duxit, quantum in se esset, exorare filiae patrem frequentibus litteris et vel utcumque meritae, quidquid umquam dono dedisset, concedere."<sup>14</sup> Assuredly, in this Suetonian material, no slightest hint that the biographer would have inclined to attribute Julia's death, directly or indirectly, to Tiberius.

Born in 39 B.C.,<sup>15</sup> Julia was in A.D. 14 aged fifty-two or fifty-three years. We suggest that she died a natural death. That is what Tacitus' initial statement, "Iulia supremum diem obiit," would certainly indicate. Death in her early fifties is not difficult to accept in view of the ancients' shorter life-expectancy, in view also of the life she had led, before her banishment as well as in exile. And Tacitus' last remark, "obscuram fore necem longinquitate exilii ratus [Tiberius]," deriving, as it so obviously does, from Julian party propaganda, is a far better guarantee of falsehood than of truth in any inculpation of Tiberius.

Immediately after the phrase just quoted Tacitus turns to Gracchus with the words "par causa saevitiae in Sempronium Gracchum." It is perhaps worth while to note parenthetically that here Tacitus reverts to the trial of 2 B.C., delayed in Gracchus' case until the next year;<sup>16</sup> many a casual reader probably understands the causation of Gracchus' execution to be like that of Julia's murder; but the *saevitia* is of Augustus, not of Tiberius.

Gracchus, we learn, had been Julia's paramour even when she was Agrippa's wife, and remained so after her marriage to Tiberius, toward whom he kindled Julia's scorn and hatred; he was the reputed author of a letter from Julia to Augustus attacking Tiberius. (These offenses

<sup>12</sup> *Aug.* 65.3.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. A. E. Pappano, "Agrippa Postumus," *CP* 36 (1941) 41.

<sup>14</sup> *Tib.* 11.4.

<sup>15</sup> *PIR*<sup>2</sup> 1.634 and references there.

<sup>16</sup> See above, p. 385 and note 6.

against Tiberius confirm the casual reader, imagined above, in the feeling that he has correctly interpreted "par causa saevitiae.") Therefore—that is, because of the long continued intrigue with Julia—Gracchus was one of the defendants in the *cause célèbre* of 2 B.C. In that trial<sup>17</sup> Julia was convicted of adultery and high treason; Augustus thought of the death penalty; but relegated her to Pandateria. Iullus Antonius, convicted of high treason and adultery, was executed. And Titus Quinctius Crispinus, Appius Claudius Pulcher, Cornelius Scipio, and Gracchus were all convicted and relegated for treason or adultery or both. Gracchus' place of banishment, we learn from the passage presently under discussion, was Cercina, which lies just off the southeast coast of Tunisia, where he remained for fourteen years. *Tunc* marks Tacitus' return, after his retrospective digression, to A.D. 14. The soldiers, he narrates, who had been dispatched to put Gracchus to death, found him on the shore, expecting nothing happy. He asked for time to write a letter to his wife Alliaria with last instructions, and then offered his neck to the executioners. Thus in the courage of his death he showed himself worthy of his lineage though his life had fallen short of family standards.

One may ask how such details as these of Gracchus' end had ever become known; for his letter to his wife would hardly contain this matter along with the *suprema mandata*. Rather the tone and character of the passage in general, and specifically the word *constantia* in particular, are most strongly suggestive of that evidently considerable literature "de exitu virorum illustrium."

That Tiberius should have ordered Gracchus' execution is in the highest degree improbable. Gracchus had been indicted and tried under Augustus and by him been relegated. Against any change of that sentence stands not only Tiberius' general policy, well known especially from his own categorical statement<sup>18</sup> "qui omnia facta

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *TAPA* 90 (1959) 230–31 and references there.

<sup>18</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 4.37. In a long since forgotten article, "Tiberius' Reversal of an Augustan Policy," *TAPA* 71 (1940) 532–36, we remarked Tiberius' insistent sharing with the Senate of the control and administration of the army, and mentioned his refusal to permit special rank to members of the Imperial Family. The annexation of Commagene and Cappadocia is well known departure from Augustus' policy. We have not observed any other than these; but numerous examples of his adherence to Augustan precedents were rehearsed in the article.

dictaque eius vice legis observem"; there is also, specifically, close analogy to the present incident in Tiberius' attitude toward Decimus Junius Silanus in A.D. 20. Silanus had been implicated with the younger Julia in A.D. 7 or 8; against him Augustus had invoked *amicitiam renuntiare* and he had gone traveling abroad. On his return to Rome in 20, Tiberius said that he retained in full measure his father's offended feelings regarding Silanus.<sup>19</sup>

But suppose for the moment that Tiberius *was* going to execute Gracchus. And let the location of Gracchus' place of exile be remembered well: the island of Cercina in the Lesser Syrtes, just off the south-east coast of Africa Proconsularis. That is an armed province, governed at this date by Lucius Nonius Asprenas. It is unimaginable that the business would have been carried out otherwise than thus: Tiberius would despatch order by courier to Asprenas at his headquarters in Carthage, instructing the execution of the exile; Asprenas would send centurion and detachment of troops to Cercina to put Gracchus to death. Therefore, when Tacitus sets down the last sentence in his account, the very statement clearly betrays that the ultimate source, beyond a peradventure of doubt, was the Julian party's version. And this in turn engenders a strong suspicion that there was no execution but only fiction thereof to serve anti-Tiberian interests. Whence, in that case, derives the preceding simpler and briefer statement about the soldiers, which leaves the reader possibly to infer that they came from Rome? It will be either Tacitus himself, accepting the execution but not wishing to vouch for the Julian incrimination of Tiberius; or, since Tacitus is usually nothing loth to accept any denigration of Tiberius, a source distinct from the Julian party's spokesman, or intermediate between the Julian source and Tacitus abbreviating the version in the former.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 3.24.7. And cf. *TAPA* 90 (1959) 231-32. Syme, though equivocal about Julia's death (above, note 9), has no doubts about Gracchus' execution: *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford 1939) 493, note 3; *Tacitus* 423.

<sup>20</sup> We have strong feeling that the content of Tacitus' last sentence, in its *entirety*, was in the Julian source—this in spite of the indicative *speraverat*. Nipperdey *ad loc.* says, "Dies ist die Ansicht des Tac." But, *contra*, this self-same *speraverat* has appeared in his note *ad* 1.10 as one of almost a score of examples of indicatives in relative clauses where subjunctives might be expected; ample evidence of Tacitus' departure from the norm. On this point I am most grateful for profitable discussion with two able students in our department: John Dillon, graduate, and Robert Boughner, senior major,

In sum, then, we believe that all these persons, Augustus' daughter Julia, her son Agrippa Postumus, and her long-time paramour, Sempronius Gracchus, died natural deaths in the last four and a half months of A.D. 14; that because the three deaths occurred coincidentally with Tiberius' accession and his assumption of the imperial powers, and all so conveniently distant from Rome that little would be known about the circumstances, all three were seized upon by members or adherents of the Julian party for recriminations against the party's enemy Tiberius; that thus they were joined with Livia's assassination of Augustus, Augustus' voyage to Planasia and the reconciliation with Agrippa Postumus, the murder or suicide of Fabius Maximus and his wife's self-accusation, and all the rest, the legendary version of the events of A.D. 14 created in the interests of the Julians; and so have come down to us, Agrippa's and Gracchus' deaths as executions and Julia's as murder, directly or indirectly by Tiberius.