

## Livia

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Controversy continues to surround the figure of Livia Drusilla, wife of the emperor Augustus. Even in antiquity historians were uncertain as to whether she was a saint or a devil, and modern historians still seem to share the same vacillation. Recently, however, Robert Graves, in his I Claudius and Claudius the God, portrayed Livia in such lurid colours as a conniving and unscrupulous murderer that a fresh look at this enigmatic figure seems appropriate.

The major ancient sources for our knowledge of Livia are the historians Velleius Paterculus, Tacitus, and Dio Cassius. From their accounts we can compile a picture of a woman born in 58 BC into one of the most prominent families of Rome, her father being M. Livius Drusus Claudianus; as befitted a daughter of the upper class, Livia was married at a young age to another noble scion, Tiberius Claudius Nero, by whom she would bear two sons, Tiberius (the future emperor) and Drusus. Her husband, however, fell into political difficulties when he supported Lucius Antonius (the brother of the famous Marc Antony) against the young Octavian (later Augustus) in the Perusine War of 41 BC. After Octavian took Perugia, Tiberius was forced to go into exile with Livia and their young son Tiberius. Fortunately, a treaty signed in 39 BC allowed the family to return honourably.

Livia's return to Rome was fortunate indeed for her husband's one-time enemy Octavian. Involved in an unhappy marriage with Scribonia, Octavian quickly took a fancy to the beautiful Livia (Velleius describes her as genere, probitate, forma Romanarum eminentissima). Despite the fact that she was six months pregnant with Drusus, Livia was handed over to Octavian by her husband, who clearly had seen the political handwriting on the wall. The marriage took place in 38 BC, and would last until the death of Augustus in 14 AD.

It seems clear that Augustus thought highly of his new wife's political acumen and soon began to consult her on matters of state. Dio Cassius records that:

"Livia was honoured very greatly, far above all women of the past, so that she could at any time receive the Senate and those individuals who desired to greet her at home; she never ventured to enter the Senate House, but she undertook to administer everything as if she were the empress. For during Augustus' lifetime she had enormous influence, and she often claimed that she had made Tiberius (her son) the emperor."

It was in fact in respect to her plans for Tiberius that Livia seems to

have exercised her strong will most forcefully: she became determined that her son would succeed Augustus as the next emperor, despite her husband's obvious dislike for the sullen Tiberius.

Did she, however, stoop to murder to ensure her plans for Tiberius? On the face of it, it does seem peculiar that Augustus' choices for his successor had a tendency to die most unexpectedly: Marcellus, the emperor's first choice, fell suddenly ill and died while still a young man; Gaius and Lucius, the emperor's grandsons, also met death at early ages. Eventually only Tiberius remained (his brother Drusus having died under mysterious circumstances in Germany), and the imperial power passed to him by default. The Roman historian Tacitus hints that Livia was involved in these deaths, but offers no proof; other ancient historians do not agree: Dio Cassius, for example, wrote that:

"Livia was accused of having caused the death of Marcellus, but the justice of this suspicion became a matter of controversy by reason of the character both of that year (23 B.C.) and of the year following, which proved so unhealthful that great numbers perished during them."

Dio here points out an obvious fact: life in antiquity was often precarious, and, as extant epitaphs attest, it was not unusual for people to die in the prime of life. In the end, we may have our suspicions about Livia's role in removing obstacles to the rise of Tiberius, but we do not have hard proof of her guilt.

What we do have is evidence that Livia's effect on both Augustus and Tiberius was beneficial. For example, Dio states that she was a moderating influence on her husband, advising him to take a conciliatory approach to his foes; she is supposed to have told Augustus "it seems to me that far more wrongs are set right by kindness than by harshness." Likewise, she seems to have had a restraining effect on Tiberius, and, after her death at age 86 in 29 A.D., his rule became noticeably more violent.

At least in this respect, then, Livia can be said to have earned her title of "Mother of Her Country". For the success of Augustus' reign she deserves a fair amount of credit, although the true extent of her contribution may never be known. But, perhaps she also deserves some censure for her manipulation of the reluctant Tiberius to serve her own apparent lust for power. It may well be that Tacitus' epitaph for Livia sums up her character succinctly:

"Her private life was of traditional strictness. But her graciousness exceeded old-fashioned standards. She was a compliant wife, but an overbearing mother."