

# Lindsay Powell

Author and Historical Detective

## NEWS RELEASE

### **Ancient Rome's 'JFK Moment'.**

*Austin, Tex. author and historical detective re-examines the evidence for the mysterious death of would-be third Roman emperor Germanicus Caesar, father of Caligula, draws parallels with assassination of America's 35<sup>th</sup> President.*

Austin, Texas, November 21, 2013 – As Americans reflect on the events of fifty years ago on 22 November in Dallas, a historical detective has been re-examining a much older case of a V.I.P.'s death and solving one of the great conspiracy theories of the ancient world.

Germanicus Julius Caesar (16 BC-AD 19) was the famous and well educated grandson of Caesar Augustus. When Augustus adopted Germanicus' uncle Tiberius, who in turn adopted his nephew, he was marked out to be the third emperor of Rome – but it was a role he would not live to fulfill.

Like John Fitzgerald Kennedy, he was wildly popular during his lifetime. Poised, handsome and descended from one of the great families, Germanicus married the emperor's beautiful but strong-willed granddaughter, Agrippina the Elder. As John and Jackie Kennedy were to the twentieth century, Germanicus and his wife were the glamorous couple of the first. They were feted by crowds wherever they went and he enthralled them with his oratory. “He was an effective courtroom advocate in Rome, but it was as a successful general in the forests of Germania where he beat the famous rebel Arminius (a.k.a 'Hermann the German') that he made his name and forged his reputation”, says Austin, Tex.-based author and historian Lindsay Powell.

For his victories, in AD 17 the new Emperor Tiberius sent his adopted son to Syria as governor general to bring order to the eastern provinces. It was a fateful promotion. On 10 October AD 19 Ancient Rome suffered its own 'JFK moment'. Germanicus Caesar died mysteriously in Antioch, aged 34. His demise shook the very foundations of the Roman state. Initially people did not believe the reports, but once confirmed, shock gave way to tears, then rage. There were riots in the streets of Rome, which lasted months. The walls of public buildings were daubed with the words *REDDE GERMANICUM* – “Give us back Germanicus!”

Lindsay Powell believes he has untangled the mystery of whether it was pre-meditated murder or misadventure. The cause of his death has vexed historians for centuries. Hardly had Germanicus' body gone cold when many suspected murder. Just as a recent Associated Press-GfK poll found that

the majority of Americans still believe several gunmen were involved in the murder of the thirty-fifth President of the United States, the ancient Romans suspected that the death of their war hero and emperor-to-be was the victim of a political conspiracy and a cover-up. The earliest account we have was written by Josephus some seventy years after Germanicus' death, who writes that the accepted view in his day was that he had been poisoned.

Just as Jackie Kennedy nursed the heartbreak of her husband's sudden death in 1963 and took his body to the nation's capital, 1,994 years ago Agrippina mourned her own tragic loss and carried the urn containing his ashes herself back to Rome. When she reached Italy people lined the docksides at Brindisi and the roadsides all the way to Rome out of respect. The American painter Benjamin West captured the moment of her arrival in his famous painting of 1768 now hanging at Yale University Art Gallery.

Agrippina insisted that her husband's death was murder. Fingers pointed at the governor of Syria, Calpurnius Piso, and, as a deputy of the emperor, even at Tiberius himself. Piso was put on trial by his fellow senators on charges of murder and treason. It met behind the closed bronze doors of the Senate House as the ordinary men and women of Rome outside loudly demanded justice. Before the process ended Piso was found dead, which only added to the mystery and suspicion. Piso was found guilty of treason, but the Senate rejected the notion of a conspiracy in Germanicus' death. Its verdict was accepted by most, but rejected by many, much like the Warren Commission Report of 1964. Significantly the Roman Senate itself was not convinced poison was the cause.

For his new book, *Germanicus: The Magnificent Life and Mysterious Death of Rome's Most Popular General*, Lindsay Powell assessed anew the evidence which has come down to us. The recorded facts are that after a sickness lasting about two weeks, at the moment Germanicus died he had frothed at the mouth and, when his body was displayed at his funeral in the market place by his wife, she pointed out the blue color of his skin. Among the possible causes Powell examined were pre-meditated murder by friends or family, political assassination instigated by the emperor, a virus infection he picked up when he was in the East, and an overdose of medication for it administered by his own doctor. To the medical evidence he applied differential diagnosis and to the suspected homicide the tests of means, motive and opportunity.

So was it assassination? Powell casts doubt on the traditionally accepted view. "The evidence does not support the conclusion it was murder," says Powell. "It may have been an accidental death, caused by a natural disease, or perhaps made fatal by his medication, which in those days could be toxic if poorly prepared or taken in the wrong dosage," he says.

"Germanicus had just returned to Syria from a long trip to Egypt. In the first century the East was a dangerous place for diplomats visiting from Rome." Powell points to the fact that in the century following Germanicus' death twenty-five high ranking Roman officials met their accidental deaths in Syria, which they used as their headquarters for their missions in the eastern part of the empire. One of them was Emperor Trajan (AD 98-117), who was succeeded by Hadrian.

"Sometimes the historical truth is mundane," says Powell. "People die for all sorts of reasons, most without ever a hint of a crime, but whether it is AD 19 or AD 1963, everyone loves an unsolved murder mystery."

Having studied the Roman world for over thirty years, Powell is convinced that the man's premature death was a real setback. "The deeper tragedy is that Germanicus would have made a truly

great emperor. If he had lived the history of Europe and the world would have taken a very different turn.” Instead of Germanicus, his youngest son, Caius, later succeeded Tiberius as Rome's third emperor. “He is better known as Caligula,” says Powell.

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**Photo Caption:**

Historian Lindsay Powell believes he has solved the mystery of Germanicus Caesar's death. The grandson of Augustus, he was marked to be third emperor of Rome, but never was. Tradition has it he was poisoned, but Powell casts doubt on that ancient conspiracy theory.

**References:**

Book: *GERMANICUS: The Magnificent Life and Mysterious Death of Rome's Most Popular General* by Lindsay Powell with a foreword by Philip Matyszak  
Imprint: Pen & Sword Military (10 October 2013)

Hardback 376 pages

ISBN: 9781781591208

Cover photo available on request from Tara Lichterman, Casemate Publishers (see Media Contact).

Benjamin West painting: *Agrippina Landing at Brundisium with the Ashes of Germanicus* (1768):  
<http://artgallery.yale.edu/calendar/events/lecture-truth-power-benjamin-wests-agrippina-landing-brundisium-ashes-germanicus>

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