

**Lindsay Powell**  
Author and Historical Detective

**NEWS RELEASE**

**The Moment When Ancient Rome Stood Still**

*Ancient Rome's 'JFK Moment'.*

*Local author and historical detective re-examines the evidence for the mysterious death of would-be third Roman emperor Germanicus Caesar, father of Caligula.  
Presentation of the case at University of Reading, 9 October 2013.*

50 years ago, on 22 November, a defining moment of the twenty first century took place. The death of John F. Kennedy to an assassin's bullet in Dallas, Texas became known as the 'JFK moment' a point in time many who heard the news that day could vividly recall even years later.

1,994 years ago on 10 October, ancient Rome suffered its own 'JFK moment'. The sudden death of wildly popular Germanicus Julius Caesar in Antioch in Syria plunged the Roman world into a deep depression. His demise at age 34 shook the very foundations of the Roman state. There were riots in the streets of the capital city which lasted months and the walls of public buildings were daubed with the words *REDDE GERMANICUM* – Give us back Germanicus!”

The cause of Germanicus' death has vexed historians for centuries. Local author and historical detective Lindsay Powell believes he has untangled the mystery of whether it was pre-meditated murder or misadventure. He will be presenting his case to the University of Reading on 9 October.

Germanicus (16 BC-AD 19) was the adopted son of the Emperor Tiberius and his heir-apparent, the man marked out to be the third emperor of Rome. Hardly had his body gone cold when many suspected murder and some saw the emperor as the prime suspect. Tiberius felt a show trial was needed to try and clear his name.

Like John and Jackie Kennedy, Germanicus and his wife, Agrippina were the time's glamorous couple. They were feted by crowds wherever they went. “He was a successful general having beaten the famous Arminius (a.k.a Herman the German) and an effective courtroom advocate; and she was the grand-daughter of the lately deceased Emperor Augustus and mother of his nine children”, says Powell. Their most famous son, Caligula, later succeeded Tiberius as Rome's third emperor.

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 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 colour 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 Egypt or Syria, 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? Historical detective Lindsay Powell casts doubt on the normally accepted view. Soon after Germanicus' mysterious death poison was the widely suspected cause and many today still believe it to be the cause. "The evidence, however, does not support the conclusion it was murder," says Powell.

After his Germanicus' death Agrippina carried the urn containing his ashes back to Rome. When she reached Italy people lined the docks at Brindisi and roadsides all the way to Rome in silence. The English painter J.M.W. Turner captured the moment of her arrival in his famous painting of 1839 now at Tate Britain, London. She insisted her husband's death was murder and looked for justice. Fingers pointed at the governor of Syria, Calpurnius Piso. He was put on trial by his fellow senators on charges of murder and treason, but he was found dead before a verdict could be entered, which only added to the mystery and suspicion. Significantly the senate itself was not convinced poison was the cause of Germanicus' death.

Having looked at the evidence, what is Powell's own conclusion? "It was likely a virus," he says. "He 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 many 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, in the years following Germanicus' passing.

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

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## References:

Book: *GERMANICUS: The Magnificent Life and Mysterious Death of Rome's Most Popular General* by Lindsay Powell with a foreword by Philip Matyszak

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Turner painting: Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Ancient Rome; Agrippina Landing with the Ashes of Germanicus* (exhibited 1839) photo available at:

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-ancient-rome-agrippina-landing-with-the-ashes-of-germanicus-n00523>

**Media Contact:**

Katie Eaton  
Pen and Sword Books  
Telephone: 01226-734241  
eMail: [keaton@pen-and-sword.co.uk](mailto:keaton@pen-and-sword.co.uk)

**Book's Author:**

Lindsay Powell  
Telephone +1 512 694 8886  
eMail [info@Lindsay-Powell.com](mailto:info@Lindsay-Powell.com)  
On Twitter @Lindsay\_Powell  
Website <http://www.Lindsay-Powell.com>