

The Lost Tale of a Powerful Woman: Regilla in the Roman Province of Achaëa

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Περίληψη: Ως τμήμα του ερευνητικού προγράμματος “Greek *Matronae*: Female Civic Presence and Self-Representation in Imperial Greece (1st - 3rd c. CE)”, που χρηματοδοτείται από το Ελληνικό Ίδρυμα Έρευνας και Καινοτομίας (ΕΛ.ΙΔ.Ε.Κ. – 3^η Προκήρυξη Ερευνητικών έργων ΕΛ.ΙΔ.Ε.Κ. για την ενίσχυση Μεταδιδακτορικών Ερευνητών/τριών) και έχει φορέα υποδοχής το Εθνικό Ίδρυμα Ερευνών – Ινστιτούτο Ιστορικών Ερευνών (ΕΙΕ/ΙΙΕ), το παρόν σημείωμα εξετάζει τις δημόσιες δραστηριότητες της Ρηγίλλας, μιας επιφανούς γυναίκας της ρωμαϊκής επαρχίας της Αχαΐας, σε δύο σημαντικές πόλεις, την Ολυμπία και την Κόρινθο. Η ορθή επανεξέταση των ενεργειών αυτής της ισχυρής γυναίκας σ’ αυτές τις κοινότητες θα τεκμηριώσει τον δημόσιο ρόλο της που πρέπει να ερμηνευθεί πέρα από την ιδιότητά της απλώς ως συζύγου του Αθηναίου Ηρώδη Αττικού.

Abstract: As part of the research program “Greek *Matronae*: Female Civic Presence and Self-Representation in Imperial Greece (1st - 3rd c. CE)”, financially supported by the Hellenic Foundation for Research and Innovation (“3rd Call for H.F.R.I. Research Projects to Support Post-Doctoral Researchers”) and kindly hosted by the National Hellenic Research Foundation – Institute of Historical Research (IHR/NHRF), this short note presents some illustrating remarks on the public actions of Regilla, a prominent woman of Roman Achaëa, in two important cities of the province, Olympia and Corinth. The proper re-examination of her activities in these communities does justice in the case of this once-powerful woman who was evidently much more than just the wife of the notorious Athenian magnate Herodes Atticus.

The research program “Greek *Matronae*: Female Civic Presence and Self-Representation in Imperial Greece (1st - 3rd c. CE)” is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of women in Roman Greece, aiming to examine for the first time thoroughly and systematically the activity and visual representation of women in the public life of the cities of the Roman province of Achaëa during the period 31 BCE - 235 CE. It was financially supported by the Hellenic Foundation for Research and Innovation (“3rd Call for H.F.R.I. Research Projects to Support Post-Doctoral Researchers”) and kindly hosted by the National Hellenic Research Foundation – Institute of Historical Research (IHR/NHRF). As a Principal Investigator, I am responsible for the epigraphic documentation of the female civic presence in the province of Achaëa, while Panagiotis Konstantinidis is the Post-Doctoral researcher responsible for the archaeological documentation. In this short note, I aim to

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present some illustrating notes on the public actions of Regilla, a prominent woman of Roman Achaëa, in two important cities of the province, Olympia and Corinth. The re-examination of her actions in these communities does justice in the case of this once-powerful woman.

Appia Annia Regilla Atilia Caucidia Tertulla, or simply Regilla,¹ is the most renowned case of a prominent woman in Roman imperial Greece. Being the wife of the notorious Athenian magnate Herodes Atticus, Regilla paradoxically is more famous for her death rather than her life and activities – despite her many public offices and benefactions to provincial cities. More specifically, it was rumoured that Herodes ordered his freedman to beat the pregnant Regilla to death, though he was acquitted in a trial held by the emperor Marcus Aurelius. Her death and the rumours surrounding it overshadowed Regilla's fame until our time.²

Regilla was a woman of an ancient patrician family of senatorial rank. Her family possessed important landed property outside Rome, on the third mile of the Appian Way, and at Cunusium of Apulia, which was given to her as a dowry.³ Being of Roman patrician origins and related to several empresses,⁴ Regilla contributed to Herodes' prestige beyond Athens. Indeed, their marriage marked the culmination of Herodes' *cursus honorum*: through this union, he was placed at the heart of Roman power.⁵

However, modern research has not always treated the case of Regilla from a historical perspective. Her independent role in the public sphere of Greece is sometimes underestimated. In this, modern researchers follow the ancient literary sources, such as Philostratus, which narrate the events from the point of view of the great sophist, Herodes Atticus. Much more helpful are the epigraphic sources, which reveal the public activities of Regilla and, therefore, her important role in Athenian and provincial society.

An examination of her independent role as a powerful woman of the Roman imperial and provincial society should begin with the grandiose nymphaeum in Olympia. This construction is often described as a Herodian project, despite the fact that a dedicatory inscription reveals that it was actually a benefaction of Regilla. An inscription from Olympia testifies that Regilla dedicated the water cistern of the so-called nymphaeum 'of Herodes Atticus': Ῥήγιλλα, ἰέρεια Δήμητρος, τὸ ὕδωρ καὶ τὰ περὶ τὸ ὕδωρ τῷ Δί.⁶ During her priesthood of Demeter Chamyne, Regilla made this benefaction and offered it to Zeus, the god of the sanctuary. The inscription was engraved on the

¹ *PIR*² A 720 + Add. II, p. xiii, Byrne 2003, s.v. Annius 28, pp. 60-63. My special thanks go to Despina Iosif for her kind invitation.

² See Pomeroy 2007.

³ Perrin-Saminadayar 2019, 159.

⁴ More specifically, Regilla's father, Appius Annius Gallus belonged to the same *gens* with Faustina the Elder (Annia Galeria Faustina), wife of Antoninus Pius and aunt of the future emperor Marcus Aurelius, to whom she gave her daughter in marriage, Annia Galeria Faustina (Faustina the Younger). In this way, Regilla was related to an emperor's wife, Faustina the Elder, and an emperor's mother, Faustina the Younger. On an analysis of the women of Herodes Atticus' family, see now Perrin-Saminadayar 2019. The interest in 'Herodes' women' began with the study of Pomeroy 2007 on Regilla's death.

⁵ Perrin-Saminadayar 2019, 160-161.

⁶ *IvO* 610; *RP I*, EL 17 [2], cf. Tobin 1997, 77, 314-323. Dittenberger and Purgold comment (*comm. ad. loc.*) that the attestation of solely the name 'Regilla' in the epigraphic text is a conscious choice of simplicity, reminiscent of ancient Greek naming customs.

right side of a bull of natural size and Pentelic marble, erected probably over the water cistern.⁷ It is obvious that this benefaction, widely acclaimed as one of Herodes Atticus, should be re-ascribed to its proper dedicant, Regilla. She must have utilized the assets she brought with her in Greece after her marriage with Herodes for this benefaction and did not hesitate to claim her role publicly, as many other prominent women did.⁸

The elaborate statuary programme of the nymphaeum linked the members of the family of Herodes Atticus to the imperial family by depicting the provincial family on the lower level, while the statues of the imperial family were situated at the upper level. Considering the fact that Regilla dedicated the nymphaeum and probably played a role in the statuary programme, it seems plausible to suggest that she sought to promote her most important contribution to her family and a significant source of her social prestige: her kinship with the imperial house. The statuary programme was perhaps decided by the couple to make an allusion to the imperial family and promote their own family as a miniature of the imperial one. Therefore, the nymphaeum in Olympia is a monument of Regilla and serves as a testimony to her generosity and the power of her family. It should not be ascribed as a benefaction of Herodes Atticus but as a benefaction of Regilla.

The Eleians bestowed Regilla the priesthood of Demeter Chamyne in 149 CE, which was particularly honorific since the priestess was the only mature woman who could watch the Olympic games. Moreover, she possessed a prominent position in the stadium, sitting opposite the *Helllanodikai*.⁹ In this way, Regilla played an important public role in the sanctuary both as an illustrious priestess and a generous benefactor.

Regilla was also active in the Roman colony of Corinth. Two epigrams in her honour come from the Corinthian *forum*: The first one was found in front of the middle of the eastern apse of Peirene, inscribed on a statue base set up by the city's *boule* and the text describes her as an image of *sophrosyne* (εικόνα σωφροσύνης).¹⁰ It is highly possible that the family of Herodes Atticus, perhaps Regilla herself, was connected with a reconstruction of the court of Peirene's fountain, since the dedications of the Corinthian *boule* honoured her alone.¹¹

The second epigram, inscribed again on a statue base in her honour, was dedicated by the Corinthian *boule* before the temple of Tyche.¹² According to the text, Regilla was assimilated with Tyche (l. 7: [Ῥηγίλ]λα, ἡ βουλή σε Τύχην ὡς εἰλάσκουσα), an appropriate choice since she was

⁷ Zeus, being represented as a bull, was honoured as the god of fertility, Pomeroy 2007, 90.

⁸ Likewise, Perrin-Saminadayar 2019, 164-165. However, Perrin-Saminadayar's position that the iconographic programme of the statuary in the nymphaeum confirms Regilla's role is not correct, since the exact placement of the statues is still far from certain, see Hitzl - Kropp 2013, esp. 71-72.

⁹ Tobin 1997, 322, Pomeroy 2007, 88.

¹⁰ *Corinth* VIII.1, 86; *RP* I, COR 528 [1] (2nd c. CE). The base of the statue was in second use and bore a garland surrounding three musical instruments. Though the instruments were referring to the preceding statue, the fact that this base was selected by the Corinthian *boule* may indicate that this depiction could be invested with new meanings, connected this time with Regilla. The musical instruments may refer to her knowledge of music. After all, Herodes constructed an Odeum in Athens in her honour, likewise Pomeroy 2007, 113.

¹¹ Robinson 2001, 354-355 and Pomeroy 2007, 108-109 suggest that Regilla was responsible for the renovation of the nymphaeum of Peirene, as she had done for the construction of that in Olympia.

¹² *Corinth* VIII.3, 128; *RP* I, COR 528 [2].

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also the first priestess of Tyche in Athens.¹³ Although the dedication of the statue could be dated according to the text during Regilla's lifetime (between 143 and 160 CE), the letter forms indicate a much later date, at least a century later. Therefore, it has been proposed that the base could have been a replacement of an earlier one.¹⁴ Herodes Atticus was also praised in the epigraphic text (ll. 3-6), and so was Regilla, whom she took as a husband (ll. 5-6). It is clear that the Corinthian *boule* sought to demonstrate its close connection with Regilla, who might have made benefactions in the city and was thus assimilated with the local goddess Tyche. Moreover, it should be stressed that the benefactions of Regilla in Corinth were paired with those of Herodes Atticus, who constructed the odeum of the city according to Philostratus.¹⁵

Therefore, it is clear that Regilla was a prominent person and a member of an illustrious Roman family who sought to establish her position in the provincial society. She was much more than a 'prop' for Herodes' social capital. Still, she acted independently and in collaboration with her husband as a generous benefactor in many communities of the province. One can gain a lot of information by focusing on the agency of this woman, namely her active and often independent presence and influence in the public life of many cities of Roman Greece. In the context of the research program "Greek *Matronae*", it is hoped that Regilla's role in the civic scene, as well as that of many other women, will be properly addressed.

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¹³ *IG II²*, 3607 (temple of Tyche, Panathenaic stadium). Regilla does not seem to have been a priestess of Tyche in Corinth.

¹⁴ Kent, *Corinth VIII.3*, 128, Edwards 1990, 537, n. 44.

¹⁵ *Phil. Vit. Soph.*, 2.1.551.