

*Soprintendenza Archeologica dell' Emilia Romagna*  
**Archaeological site in Veleia**

## ***Baebia Bassilla and the Imperial woman of Veleia***



*National Archaeological Museum, Parma, . statues from Veleia*

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The woman in the Roman era has played an important role not only focused on aspects of private life. In imperial times especially, some very powerful women have strongly influenced the fate of public life.

In Veleia there were found the commemorative statues of some of these imperial matrons, and the bust of a young girl, less famous than the imperial women, but important to his city, *Baebia Bassilla*.

## The Imperial Women of Veleia

During the eighteenth century excavations of Veleia, twelve Luni marble statues were found representing the members of the Julio-Claudian imperial family. The statues were originally lined up on the podium along the wall of the basilica, accompanied by limestone inscribed stelae. Today, only five of these stelae remain and they are exhibited at the National Archaeological Museum of Parma. These statues were erected to celebrate Veleia's political loyalty to the imperial family and to document the spread of the Julio-Claudian family cult in northern Italy. Veleia's relationship with the court was intensified through L. Calpurnius Piso, the patron of Veleia and the brother of Julius Caesar's wife, Calpurnia. These statues characterize the cult of the imperial family as people of high religious offices. This status is demonstrated by the number of figures wearing togas or veiling their heads.

The statues were created in three stages. The first group was created during the reign of Tiberius and included a headless figure of Tiberius accompanied by realistic portraits of Augustus and his wife Livia, Tiberius' mother. Additionally, statues of the two Druze, the Elder and the Younger (brother and sister of the emperor), were constructed, as well as a realistic representation of Lucius Calpurnius Piso, the pontiff, patron of Veleia, and relative of Caesar who probably commissioned the statues. The headless statues of Augustus and **Livia** are identified only by their style and their dedication plaques.

The second group of statues includes figures of Caligula, whose head was replaced by Claudio, and his sister Drusilla. **Drusilla** is also known as **Agrippina the Elder**, mother of the emperor and wife of Germanicus.

A third group of statues includes the image of Claudio (placed on the statue of Caligula), **Agrippina the Younger** (the last wife of Claudius), and the latter's infant son, Nero.

**Livia** Drusilla Claudia was the wife of the emperor Augustus. She was the mother of Tiberius, grandmother of Germanicus and Claudio, and great-grandmother of Nero. She was deified by Claudio.

She met Octavian in Rome in 39 B.C.E. At the time of their meeting, Livia was married with a son, Tiberius. Nevertheless, Octavian Augustus chose to divorce his wife and to marry Livia. It is possible that their rapid marriage was because of political conveniences: Octavian made it convenient for the descendants of Claudius to support his rule. Livia and Octavian remained married for 51 years without having children together. She was held in high esteem by her husband who presented his petitions to her and consulted her for advice on his policies. Therefore, Livia was portrayed as the mind that pulled the strings of the imperial policy. She was behind every death or misfortune of the Julio-Claudian dynasty until the end of her life.

Livia and Octavian Augustus lived modestly. Livia, a model of Roman marriage, did not wear expensive jewelry or sparkling clothing. She personally took care of the house and her husband even sewing her own clothes. She was always loyal and caring towards Octavian Augustus despite the rumors of his amorous adventures. Already in 35 B.C.E. Octavian had given her the honor of managing his personal finances and he had dedicated a public statue to her. Livia also had her own circle of *clientes*.

The couple did not have children of their own. Livia put in place a policy that guaranteed her children a political future. Tiberius was adopted by the emperor in 4 C.E. and he became the heir to the throne. The will of Augustus, who died in 14 C.E., contained the provisions for the adoption of Livia. That means he allowed Livia in the Julio family. Additionally, the will guaranteed her a

third of Augustus' estate (the other two thirds went to Tiberius), and she received the title of "Augusta."

### **Agrippina the Elder (14 B.C.E. - 33 C.E.)**

Agrippina was born by Marcus Agrippina and his third wife Julia, the daughter of Augustus. She married Germanicus, heir to the imperial throne. Together they had nine children that included Gaius Julius Caesar Germanicus (the future "Caligula"), Julia Agrippina the Younger (mother of Nero), Julia Livella and Julia Drusilla. In 14 B.C.E. Agrippina the Elder traveled with her children to the Rhine in Germany and in 18 B.C.E. she arrived in Syria. When her husband, Germanicus, was poisoned by the proconsul, Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso, it was suspected that he had been helped by his wife, Placina. Placina was a friend of Livia Drusilla that she defended throughout the process. Agrippina returned to Rome with the urn of her husband's ashes and from then removed herself from political life. Fearing her popularity, the emperor Tiberius began to oppose her and he exiled her to Ventotene. In 33 B.C.E., she, the granddaughter of Octavius Augustus, let herself die at 47 years old from starvation. A feminine statue was discovered in Veleia on June 17, 1761, near the limestone stele, that identified it as her.

### **Agrippina the Younger, (15 B.C.E. - 59 C.E.)**

Daughter of Agrippina the Elder and Germanicus, Agrippina was forced by Tiberius to get married, at a very young age, to a man much older than her. With this man she gave birth to her son Nero (37 C.E.). After the death of her first husband, she was forced by the court to marry the emperor Claudio, despite their familial relationship. Her life at court is characterized by intrigues aimed to affirm her power and the future position of her son Nero. To reach this goal she arranges a marriage that creates a tie to the imperial family and she manages to convince Claudio to designate her son, Nero, as the heir to the throne (although he is not the legitimate son of Claudio). At the death of Claudio in 54 C.E., she began to rule the empire in place of her very young son. His jealousy and lust for power culminated in the death of a mother that was too strong and powerful in 59 C.E.

### **Drusilla (18 B.C.E. - 38 C.E.)**

Drusilla is the youngest daughter of Germanicus and Agrippina the Elder. Therefore, she belonged to the Julio-Claudian imperial family. Orphaned of her father, she was married at a very young age. However, she was soon widowed. Her mother and her two brothers, Nero Caesar (6-31) and Drusus Caesar (8-33) were banished by Tiberius. They died in obscure circumstances. In 33 C.E. Drusilla married Claudio Longino. However, their marriage was short and they were divorced in 37 C.E. She has a second husband, Marco Emilio Lepido. The emperor Tiberius died in 37 C.E. and was succeeded by Drusilla's brother Caligula. Some authors, as Tacitus and Svetonius, have given reports of incest between Drusilla and her brother. There are doubts about these allegations, which were probably motivated by the clash of power of the Senate and the prince, developed in the first decades of the empire. Caligula was very affectionate of his sister. Therefore, he deified her at her death as "Diva Julia." The first statue found in the basilica of Veleia was a female figure on June 18, 1761. The dedicatory inscription identifies it as the statue of Drusilla.

In the statues found in Veleia, the female figures are represented with the typical clothing of the Roman matrons, wearing a stola, a draped robe with a *cingulum*, a girdle, and palla, a cloak that in this case also covers the head.



Livia



Drusilla



Agrippina  
The Elder



Agrippina  
the younger

## ***Baebia Bassilla* from Veleia : a woman – a city**

### **The Portrait of a Young Woman**



***Portrait of a young woman from Veleia***

The portrait was found in Veleia on April 28, 1760, near the stairs of the western entrance of the basilica, a short distance from where a limestone inscribed stele was found.

It represents a young woman with her head slightly tilted to the right and extremely powerful facial features. Her eyes were formed by bulbs of chalcedony of which only one has been preserved. Her special hairstyle of short hair combed back and fastened on the forehead with a band was a fashion of the late first century B.C.E. However, the small holes on the top of her head indicate that there was probably another headpiece originally attached. The particular short hairstyle could also signify that she played a religious role, perhaps that of a priestess.

The bronze sculpture is a product of the end of the first century B.C.E. from local workshops, in the area west of Emilia.

The portrait is considered an example of roman "provincial" art, with physiognomic and natural features. This is a style traditionally used in central Italy, with Cisalpine influence, especially in the expressive realism, which has its roots Hellenistic art. The face of the young woman has been linked to the figure of Baebia Bassilla, a woman mentioned in an

inscription on a large marble slab that was found broken into four parts. This slab was found in 1760 in the area of Veleia near the basilica.

### ***Baebia Bassilla* and the Gift of *Calcidicum***

*Baebia T. [iti] f.[ilia] Ba[silla] calchidicum municipibus suis dedit*

The inscription mentions the private Evergetism acts of a woman from *gens Baebia*, *gens* cited in the *limestone inscribed relief*. This *gens* is known and documented in the region VIII and in Parma. *Baebia Basilla* was a noble and wealthy woman with a liberal largesse and the ability to finance the renovation of public buildings. She gave *calcidicum* to her community, a portico room of the basilica. It is an important gesture towards the city, remembered by the impressive inscriptions on the precious white marble.

The figure of *Baebia Basilla*, may have been erected in the hole as an honorific portrait to celebrate her generosity towards the city. However, today, there is no archaeological evidence allowing us to certainly connect the inscription of *Baebia Basilla* and the portrait of the young woman.

### **Evergetism: A Commitment to the City**

Evergetism is the practice of giving private goods to the community to improve the lives of the poor or for the construction or renovation of public works (roads, theaters). This practice was widespread in the Roman world and from this idea emerged the concept of republican cities which aimed to improve the conditions of your *family* and the overall *population*. Over time, this type of action aimed at the improvement of your city became a sort of moral and social obligation for wealthy Romans. By participating in the betterment of your city you received prestige and honor and you were remembered by commemorative inscriptions or statues. Typically, women gave gifts to improve the lives of the poor. Therefore, the realization of the *calcidicum* of Veleia emphasizes the unique decision of a woman to give a public work intended to beautify and enrich the forum. Notably this donation signifies the woman's strong relationship with Veleia. An example of Imperial Evergetism is the *institution of taxes* of Neva and Trajan, recorded on the great *bronze Tabula alimentaria* that was found in Veleia.

Archaeological site and Museum  
ANTIQUARIUM in VELEIA

**Director** Dott.ssa Daniela Locatelli

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**Opening Hours:** All week from 9am to one hour before sunset  
Closed Jan 1 & Dec 25

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**Ticket:** Free admission

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