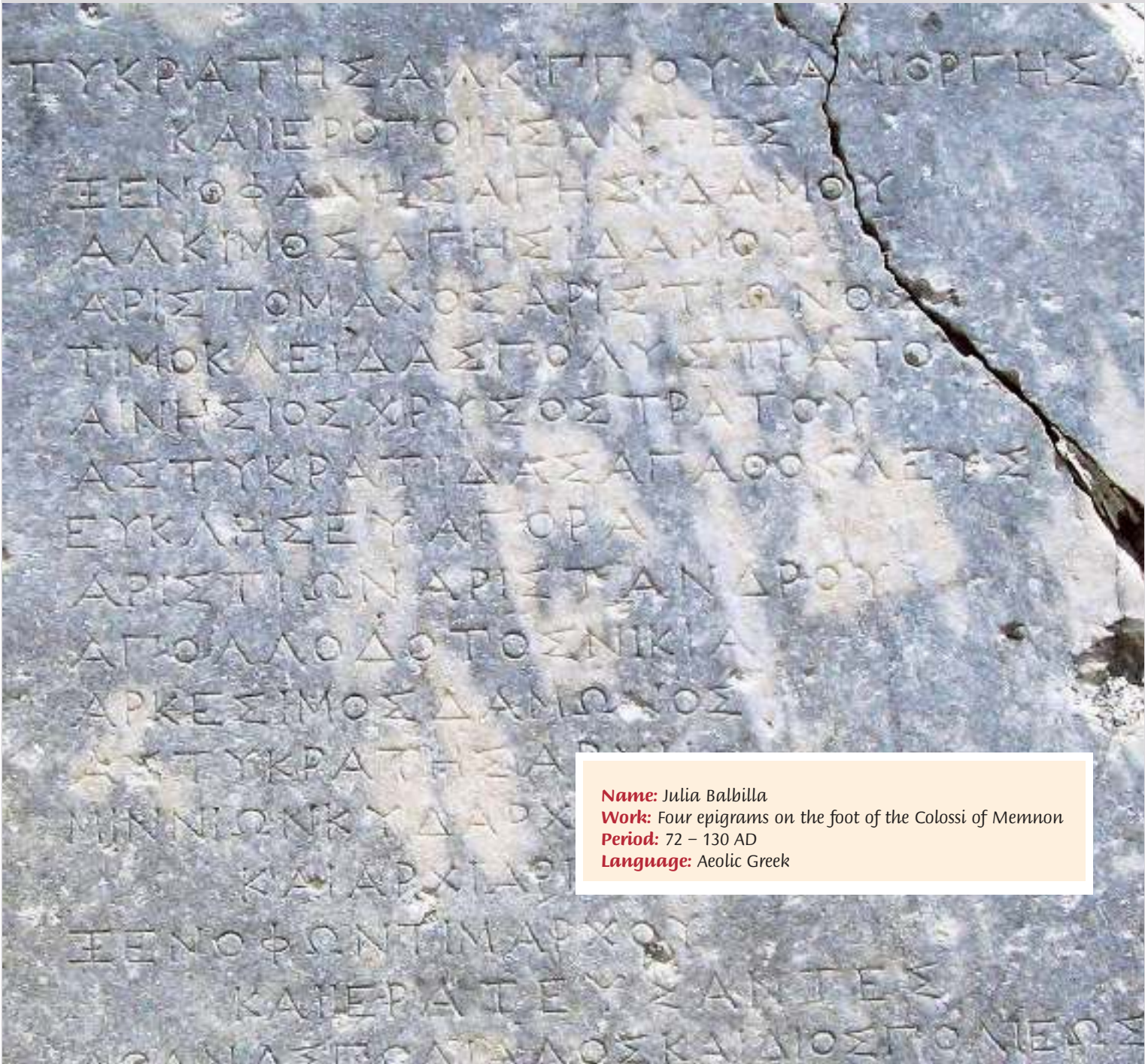


PAGES FROM THE PAST

# A legacy etched in stone

A female court poet of the Roman empire of her time, Julia Balbilla accompanied the emperor and his wife on a trip to Egypt, where she was commissioned to write about their visit. And her account of that visit still survives, inscribed on the foot of the Colossi of Memnon in the Valley of the Kings, Egypt. Let's find out more about her work

Anusha Parthasarathy



**Name:** Julia Balbilla  
**Work:** Four epigrams on the foot of the Colossi of Memnon  
**Period:** 72 – 130 AD  
**Language:** Aeolic Greek

REPRESENTATIONAL PHOTO: KATARZYNA TYL FROM PIXABAY





The Colossi of Memnon in Egypt's ancient temple city of Luxor where Julia Balbilla's work still exists. PHOTO: AFP

### Her story

From an influential Roman family, Julia was born in the Kingdom of Commagene, part of current Turkey that was annexed by the Romans. Julia had Roman, Greek, Egyptian, Syrian and Armenian ancestry and her parents were distant cousins.

One of her grandfathers was King Antiochus IV of Commagene, who was accused of conspiring against the Romans in 72 AD. The other was Tiberius Claudius Balbillus, the Prefect of Egypt. Julia had a pretty luxurious childhood and a traditional Greek education.

After her father's death, Julia spent some time in Alexandria, Egypt, with her mother, who had moved back to her native after her husband's death. After a few years, Julia moved to Athens, Greece, to live with her brother Philopappos. It is here that she became the court poet of Hadrian and lady-in-waiting to Sabina.

She accompanied the royal couple to Egypt in 129 AD and inscribed their travels in the Colossi of Memnon. These four epigrams were written in Aeolic Greek, which archaic poet Sappho was famous for. The epigrams reveal Balbilla as a poet and by allowing her to inscribe it, we are aware of her royal lineage. Not much else is known about her personal life.

### Did you know?

Julia's maternal grandparents were Tiberius Claudius Balbillus and an unnamed Greek woman. Balbilla was named in honour of her maternal grandfather, who was Egyptian-Greek and one of the highest magistrates of the Equestrian rank that served in Rome. Balbillus was also an astrologer and a scholar. Balbilus and his father, Egyptian-Greek grammarian and astrologer Thrasyllus of Mendes, were friends to Roman Emperors such as Tiberius, Claudius and Vespasian.

### Excerpt

In the first epigram, Balbilla compares Hadrian to Memnon, the mythical king of Ethiopia.

*Memnon the Egyptian I learnt, when warmed by the rays  
of the sun,*

*Speaks from Theban stone.*

*When he saw Hadrian, the king of all, before rays of the  
sun*

*He greeted him - as far as he was able.*

*But when the Titan driving through the heavens with his  
steeds of white*

*brought into shadow the second measure of hours,  
like ringing bronze Memnon again sent out his voice  
Sharp-toned, he sent out his greeting and for a third time a  
mighty roar.*

*The emperor Hadrian then himself bid welcome to  
Memnon and left on stone for generations to come  
This inscription recounting all that he saw and all that he  
heard. It was clear to all that the gods love him.*

Balbilla dedicated the fourth epigram to her own lineage and noble bloodline.

*For pious were my parents and grandfathers: Balbillus the  
Wise and King Antiochus; Balbillus, the father of my mother  
of royal blood and King Antiochus, the father of my father.  
From their line I too draw my noble blood, and these verses  
are mine, pious Balbilla.*

Apart from her poetry, not much is known about Balbilla.