Scholars have long agreed that women appear more frequently in Roman imperial period inscriptions from the eastern Mediterranean than they do in earlier inscriptions from that same region. The agreement breaks down, however, when specialists discuss reasons for the prominence of women, with the argument often dividing over two options: is the increasing number of references to women a sign of empowerment\(^1\) or exploitation?\(^2\) In other words, were women afforded more equality in the early imperial period, or were they simply subject to a new kind of oppressive public practice?

During the late 20th century, Junia Theodora of Corinth became a subject in this debate as an example in support of the argument for empowerment.\(^3\) I think that trend is mistaken. The broader question about women in the early Empire cannot be solved in a chapter-length study, but we can establish that Junia Theodora was at best an ambivalent example of the sort of power women might exercise in the Roman Empire. Careful analysis of an inscription found at Corinth leads to the conclusion that Junia Theodora is known to us only because she used her unusual position in society to support Roman domination of the eastern Mediterranean region. Thus, in Junia we have an example of a woman who promoted a particular configuration of inequality, to the detriment of many other women and men. In that disturbing sense she showed that some Roman women “achieved status and prominence equal to that of many men.”\(^4\)

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1 Pomeroy 1975; Boatwright 1991.
3 Kearsley 1999; Campbell 2009; Osiek 2005, 357 adds more nuance to the picture. Bremen disagreed with Kearsley, but Junia did not fit easily into Bremen’s thesis that wealthy Roman women appeared in public primarily as wives or daughters, and so Junia was relegated to the footnotes of Bremen’s study (1996, 164 n. 73, 165 n. 78, 198 n. 11).
4 Boatwright 1991, 263; but used there more optimistically than my use of the quote.
The Junia Theodora Inscription

Our only information about Junia Theodora comes from an 85-line Greek inscription\(^5\) found in 1954 near the village of Solomos, along the road from Corinth to Argos about 5 km from the Roman Forum at Corinth. The location where the inscription was originally displayed is unknown because it was discovered in secondary use in a late Roman tomb where the inscribed stone was recycled as a door.\(^6\) The 85 lines include five separate texts in which Junia Theodora was praised by the Lycian koinon, and by city officials from Myra, Patara, and Telmessos. This anthology of laudatory texts was probably compiled and inscribed near the end of Junia’s life, for the two koinon decrees offer gifts for her (eventual) funeral (l. 10–11, 43–45, 63–66) and mention her will (l. 7, 59). This suggests that the inscribed marble stele may have originally adorned her grave somewhere near the findspot. My translation of the inscription appears in the appendix to this chapter.

The content of the five texts revolves around Junia and her efforts in Corinth on behalf of Lycia and its inhabitants. She is described as a Roman living in Corinth (l. 13, 22–23, 63, 67, 73) and also as πολείτις ύμων (“your citizen,” with “your” referring to Corinthian officials; l. 16–17). She is said to be καλή (“noble”), ἀγαθή (“good”), and εὔνους (“benevolent”) toward the nation (ἔθνος; l. 2–3, 13, 47–48, 68); σωφρόνως (“living with discretion”) and φιλολύκιος (apparently a neologism\(^7\) meaning “a friend of the Lycians,” l. 23–24). Her actions on behalf of Lycia are described in general terms as σπουδή (“zeal”) and φιλοτιμία (“nobility,” l. 3–4, 7, 49), συμπαθῶς (“having empathy,” l. 4, 50), εὐφεργεσία (“benefaction,” l. 26, perhaps also 74), and φιλοστοργία (“affection,” l. 69).

More specifically, Junia is praised for three kinds of activities.\(^8\) First, she intervened with οἱ ἡγούμενοι/ἡγεμόνες (“the authorities;” l. 5–7, 51–53)

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\(^{5}\) RP I COR 359.

\(^{6}\) Corinth Inventory No. I 2486; Pallas, Charitonidis, and Venencie 1959, 496–498; SEG XVIII (1962) no.143 (note that the Corinth Inventory Number is erroneously given as I 2476 in this publication); Wiseman 1978, 90. The stele was found broken into two large fragments. Other small fragments are lost. The combined dimensions of the two extant fragments are 0.84 m height, 1.260–1.265 m width, and 8 cm depth (maximum). The excavators’ conclusion that the tomb comes from 4th century CE is possible but not proved. Since the bodies in the tomb would not have faced eastward, the excavators assumed that the tomb must have been built before Christianity influenced the disposition of corpses, which is a tenuous basis for dating the structure; Mary E. Hoskins Walbank, personal communication, August 2010.

\(^{7}\) Robert 1960, 326.

\(^{8}\) See Robert 1960, 326–30.