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# The family of Romulus Augustulus

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Romulus Augustulus is usually regarded to have been the last western Roman emperor; indeed, he was the last to be proclaimed emperor in the West, but it should not be forgotten that coins were minted by Odoacer in the name of the previous emperor, Julius Nepos (appointed Augustus by the emperor Leo I in 474), as late as 480.<sup>1</sup> Romulus was deposed on 4 September 476 or close to that day.<sup>2</sup> It is known from Anonymous Valesianus (8.38) that his father, Orestes, was Pannonian by birth, who attained the rank of *patricius* after having served as a secretary (*notarius*) at Attila's court. It is known from Jordanes (*Getica*, 45.241) and other sources that Orestes became *magister militum*, and was placed in command of Roman troops to quell the rebellious Burgundians and Visigoths in southern Gaul. However, instead of marching with his army to Gaul in 475, he headed towards Ravenna, to attack Nepos and drive him out of Italy (he took refuge in Dalmatia, where he was made bishop of Salona). Anonymous Valesianus further briefly mentioned that Romulus had been made Augustus by his father (on October 31, 475);<sup>3</sup> however, after the arrival of Odoacer with his Sciri (a Germanic tribe), Orestes was killed at Placentia and his brother Paulus near Ravenna. Romulus was deposed and exiled with his relatives and the large sum of 6.000 *solidi* to Campania;<sup>4</sup> Odoacer then became ruler of Italy for almost seventeen years (476–493).

In Jordanes' words:

When Augustulus had been appointed Emperor by his father Orestes in Ravenna, it was not long before Odoacer, king of the Torcilingi, invaded Italy, as leader of the Sciri, the Heruli and allies of various races. He put Orestes to death, drove his son Augustulus from the throne and condemned him to the punishment of exile in the Castle of Lucullus in Campania. Thus the Western Empire of the Roman race, which Octavianus Augustus, the first of the Augusti, began to govern in the seven hundred

1 Kent 1966; Demo 1988; briefly on Romulus and Odoacer see also Henning 1999, 208–212; Heather 2006, 426ff.; briefly on the last decades of the western Roman Empire: Mitchell 2007, 1ff.; on its fall: 18ff.

2 Henning 1999, 57; the best survey of classical sources about the year 476 is still Wes 1967, 52–88; see also Momigliano 1973.

3 PLRE II (Romulus 4); Henning 1999, 55ff., with citations from ancient sources.

4 Jord. 8.38: *Augustulus, qui ante regnum Romulus a parentibus vocabatur, a patre Oreste patricio factus est imperator. Superveniens autem Odoachar cum gente Scirorum occidit Orestem patricium in Placentia et fratrem eius Paulum ad Pinetam foris Classem Ravennae. Ingressi autem Ravennam deposuit Augustulum de regno, cuius infantiae misertus concessit ei sanguinem, et quia pulcher erat, etiam donans ei redditum sex milia solidos, misit eum intra Campaniam cum parentibus suis libere vivere. Enim pater eius Orestes Pannonius, qui eo tempore quando Attila ad Italiam venit se illi iunxit et eius notarius factus fuerat. Unde profecit et usque ad patricatus dignitatem pervenerat.*

and ninth year from the founding of the city, perished with this Augustulus in the five hundred and twenty-second year from the beginning of the rule of his predecessors and those before them, and from this time onwards kings of the Goths held Rome and Italy.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the erroneous information in Anonymous Valesianus, Romulus reigned for ten months and not ten years.<sup>6</sup>

More about Romulus' family can be learned from the *History of Byzantium and of the Period of Attila* – preserved only in fragments – written by the Byzantine rhetor and historian of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, Priscus of Panium (Thrace). In 449, Priscus was invited by Maximinus, then probably *comes consistorianus* (member of the imperial council or court of justice),<sup>7</sup> to accompany him on a delegation to the court of Attila. At about the same time an embassy was also sent to Attila from Ravenna, by Aetius; it was led by the *comes* Romulus. Both embassies met in the near proximity of Attila's residence somewhere in Pannonia. In the often cited passage Priscus described in detail the long journey of the eastern embassy from Constantinople to Attila's encampment, as well as the meeting of both groups of envoys; despite valuable details referring to Attila's residence, the site nonetheless cannot be located with certainty.<sup>8</sup>

This fragment contains important historical data concerning the eastern and western parts of the Empire and the Huns, and is of particular importance since Priscus wrote about the events as an eyewitness.<sup>9</sup> The text concerning the family of Romulus Augustulus, in the translation of R. C. Blockley, reads as follows:

When we had completed a journey of seven days, on the orders of our Scythian guides we halted at a village, since Attila was to take the same road and we had to follow behind him. There we met some western Romans who were also on an embassy to Attila. Amongst them were Romulus, who had the rank of count, Promotus, the governor of Noricum, and the general Romanus. With them were Constantius, whom Aetius had sent to Attila as his secretary, and Tatulus, the father of Orestes who was with Edeco. They were not members of the embassy but were travelling with the envoys out of personal friendship, Constantius because of his earlier acquaintance with them in Italy, Tatulus out of kinship, since his son Orestes had married a daughter of Romulus. [...] They were making this embassy from Patavio, a city in Noricum, in order to pacify Attila, who wanted Silvanus, the manager of the

5 Jord. *Getica*, 46.242–243: *Augustulo vero a patre Oreste in Ravenna imperatore ordinato non multum post Odoacer Torcilingorum rex habens secum Sciros, Herulos diversarumque gentium auxilios Italiam occupavit et Orestem interfectum Augustulum filium eius de regno pulsum in Lucullano Campaniae castello exilii poena damnavit. sic quoque Hesperium Romanae gentis imperium, quod septingentesimo nono urbis conditae anno primus Augustorum Octavianus Augustus tenere coepit, cum hoc Augustulo periit anno decessorum prodecessorumve regni quingentesimo vicesimo secundo, Gothorum dehinc regibus Romam Italiamque tenentibus.* (English translation: Mierow, *Jordanes*).

6 Sartori 1998, 38f. and 51ff., with other citations.

7 Ensslin 1926/27, 1–9.

8 See, for example, Browning 1953.

9 Priscus Fr. 11.2 according to Blockley 1983, 26–263; fr. 8 in the editions of Müller, FHG IV, and Dindorf HGM I (*Exc. de Leg. Rom.* 3).

bank dealing in bullion at Rome, to be handed over to him on the ground that he had received some golden bowls from Constantius. This Constantius came from the Gauls of the West and he too, like the later Constantius, had been sent by Aetius to Attila and Bleda as secretary.

Priscus went on to describe the affair of the golden bowls, which the first Constantius had received from the bishop of Sirmium during the siege of the city by the Huns, to ransom him or other prisoners after the city's capture. Constantius, upon arriving in Rome, handed over the bowls to one Silvanus; however, Attila and Bleda suspected Constantius of treachery and had him crucified. At the time of both embassies Attila, who had in the meanwhile been informed of the matter of bowls, accused Silvanus of having stolen his property and demanded that he be handed over to him. The main purpose of the western embassy, as understood by Priscus, was to protect Silvanus and clear up the matter of these bowls. As it seems, however, Priscus was not told the real reason why the embassy led by Romulus had been so urgently sent by Aetius to Attila. As had been hypothesized earlier,<sup>10</sup> and sustained with additional arguments in recent studies,<sup>11</sup> the main aim of the mission was to persuade Attila that his planned marriage to Honoria, the sister of the reigning emperor Valentinian III, would never be accepted by the latter. Iusta Grata Honoria bore the title of Augusta, as did her mother Galla Placidia, and consequently Attila's marriage to Honoria would enable him to share in the imperial power.

In another passage by Priscus from the same fragment (11.1) it is clear that Orestes, the father of the future emperor Romulus – who, at the time of the embassy, had not yet been born – was active at Attila's court at the same time as Edeco, the father of Odoacer, one of Attila's most trusted followers. Edeco (or, more correctly Edika) was of Hunnic origin and was married to a Scirian woman; after the fall of Attila he became the king of the Sciri.<sup>12</sup> Orestes was by origin from the part of Pannonia that was under Hun dominion. How did this happen? According to Priscus,

The Scythian [=Hun] Edeco, who had performed very well in the war, arrived again as [Attila's] ambassador [to Constantinople] together with Orestes. The latter was a Roman by birth and was from that section of the Pannonian land along the river Sava, which had been subject, after the agreement of the general of the western Romans, Aetius, to the barbarians [i.e. Attila]. This Edeco came to the court and delivered the letters of Attila, in which the latter accused the Romans in reference to fugitives.<sup>13</sup>

Flavius Aetius had been a hostage to Alaric for three years (405–408), and several years later also a hostage at the Hunnic court; his brilliant military and political career owed a great deal to his Hunnic allies, with whose help he could both defeat his political opponents and fight successfully against the Visigoths in Gaul and the Franks.<sup>14</sup> As a reward for their

10 Várady 1969, 315 ff.; Šašel 1978, 143–145.

11 Šašel Kos 1994; Gračanin 2003.

12 Pohl 1986; on Odoacer (Odoavakar), see Wolfram 2002.

13 *Exc. de Leg. Gent.* 5 = fr. 11 in Blockley 1983, 242–243; fr. 7 in the editions of Müller-Dindorf; the date is extrapolated from the context.

14 PLRE II (Aetius 7); Zecchini 1983; for the embassy led by Romulus see pp. 262–265. On the Huns:

support, in the year 433–434, when he became *magister utriusque militiae*, he ceded them the region of Pannonia along the Sava, as is mentioned by Priscus. The frontiers of the empire became threatened to such an extent after the battle at Hadrianopolis that the formerly efficient client relationship collapsed and was gradually replaced by a system of border defence incorporating *foederati* settled in provincial territory. The careers of Aetius, Edico and Orestes indicate that “wealth and power had now to be achieved through patronage from the Huns”.<sup>15</sup>

As to the family of Romulus Augustulus, it turns out that two men who participated in the western embassy were his grandfathers. The envoys of this embassy are known only from the text of Priscus, including Romulus’ maternal grandfather, the *comes* Romulus himself.<sup>16</sup> He was an elderly man experienced in political affairs and was sent to the king of the Huns from Italy by Aetius, together with one Constantius, who was sent to Attila to be his secretary, perhaps to replace Orestes. Romulus and Constantius started their journey on the orders of Aetius almost certainly from Italy, and most probably from Ravenna. It is not possible to identify the position and role of the *comes* Romulus, since in the late Roman period *comitatus* was a group of ministries attached to the emperor, which formed the central government and included both civil and military officials.<sup>17</sup> It may only be hypothesized that he was *comes rei militaris*,<sup>18</sup> perhaps indeed *comes Illyrici*.<sup>19</sup>

The name of the mother of Romulus Augustulus has not been preserved in the literary or other sources, it is merely known that she was the daughter of the *comes* Romulus. Orestes had married her some time before 449, in any case several years before their son Romulus was born. Since it was a general practice in the Roman Empire, and in particular also among the local municipal elite,<sup>20</sup> to name the eldest son after his father’s father, it may be concluded that Romulus was not the first born boy; indeed this does not seem likely, since he was not of age in AD 476, when he was deposed by Odoacer; a boy born soon after the marriage of Orestes and the daughter of the *comes* Romulus would have been at least 24 years old in 476. Romulus bore the name of his maternal grandfather. As has been seen, there is no doubt that his father, Orestes, was a Pannonian. However, it has generally been believed – and still is – on the basis of an inexact interpretation of the text of Priscus, that his mother, too, originated – broadly speaking – from the same area, specifically from Poetovio in Noricum.<sup>21</sup> This would consequently mean that the *comes* Romulus and his family were from Poetovio, thus belonging to the provincial upper class. The authenticity of this information depends on where to place the lacuna in Priscus’ narrative (see the trans-

Gordon 1960; Thompson 1948; on the embassies, 102–120 and particularly 111–113; Maenchen-Helfen 1973; and lastly, a brief description in: Knaut/Quast 2005, 26–37 (for the Huns: mainly M. Kazanski).

15 Whitby 2000, 711.

16 PLRE II (Romulus 1).

17 Jones 1973<sup>2</sup>, 366ff.; cf. also Schlinkert 1996, 81ff.; 226 n. 12, and *passim*.

18 Henning 1999, 55.

19 Castritius 1985, 25; Lotter 2003, 18.

20 Cf. Devijver 1996, 111ff.

21 As, for example, Saria 1951, 1176; Várady 1969, 319ff.; Šašel 1978, 143–145; Bratož 1983, 18; Wolfram 1987, 37; Bona 1991, 110–117. See most recently about Romulus and his family Henning 1999, 55–56.

lation *supra*). According to C. De Boor and later editions,<sup>22</sup> this section of the text should be translated as: "His son Orestes had married a daughter of Romulus. \*\*\* They were making this embassy from Patavio, a city in Noricum ..."; however, the authors of editions prior to De Boor placed the lacuna after the words: "Patavio, a city in Noricum", reading the sentence in translation as: "His son Orestes had married a daughter of Romulus, from Patavio, a city in Noricum. \*\*\*." Philological arguments favour De Boor's proposed reading.<sup>23</sup> It should thus be concluded that the place of origin of the family of *comes* Romulus remains unknown.

Poetovio, a Norican city close to the border with the area under Hun dominion, may have been the last important town within the borders of the Roman Empire at that time (Fig. 1). Ever since the first groups of various, mainly Germanic, barbarian peoples had been settled in the provincial territory, life in Noricum and Pannonia changed considerably. This manifested itself most of all in the decline of the towns, which varied in different regions; the situation in various parts of these two provinces was surprisingly diverse.<sup>24</sup>

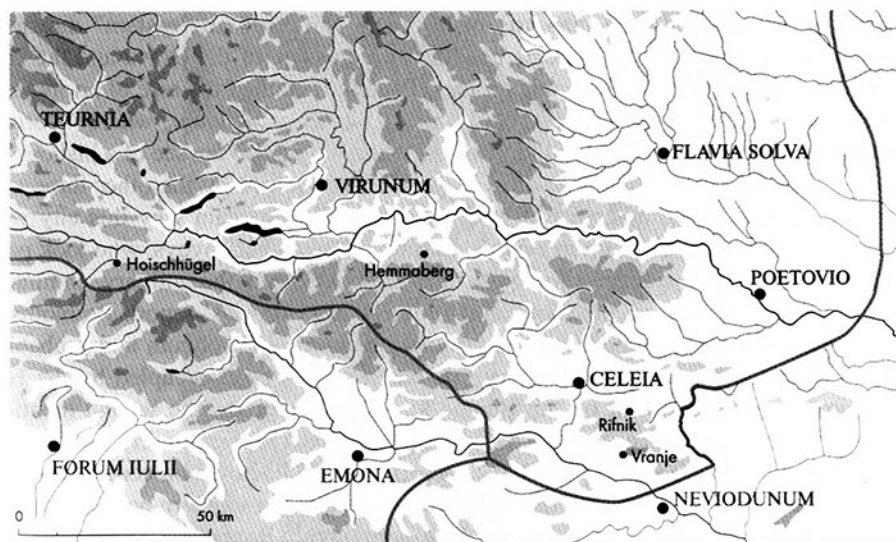


Fig. 1: Southern Noricum in the late Roman period

It is not known when Poetovio had been transferred from Pannonia to Noricum; however, this transfer may have been related to changes in the provincial administration under Diocletian.<sup>25</sup> Like Carnuntum, Savaria, and Scarbantia – probably up to the reign of Claudius

22 *Excerpta de Legationibus* (*Excerpta historica Iussu Imp. Constantini Porphyrogeniti Confecta*, vol. 1). Ed. C. de Boor. Berlin 1903, p. 132; cf. Blockley's edition 1983, 262–263, from which the translation is taken.

23 Šašel Kos 1994, 108–109.

24 Wolff 1991, 295ff.

25 Weiler 1996, 127–128 and n. 23; Šašel Kos 1994, 99ff.



and the establishment of the provinces of Noricum and Pannonia – Poetovio was included within the Norican kingdom. It was an important Norican settlement along the Amber route, and, under the reign of Augustus, a legionary fortress: the legion VIII Augusta was stationed there after the conquest of Illyricum. Poetovio, together with the legion, was transferred to the province of Pannonia for military-strategic reasons; Noricum was made a *provincia inermis* and no legion had since been stationed in it up to the Marcomannic Wars.

From the reign of Trajan onwards, Poetovio was a *colonia Ulpia*.<sup>26</sup> It was located along the important route leading from the Balkans through the Illyrian-Italic Gates into Italy; it should be noted that in the Roman Imperial period the route along the Drava was more travelled than the route leading to the east through Emona and Siscia along the Sava (*Itin. Ant.* 129–130; *Itin. Hieros.* 560–563). Poetovio was first mentioned as a Norican city when, according to Ammianus Marcellinus, the emperor Gallus, who had arrived at the Norican city of Poetovio, was arrested on the orders of Constantius in a palace outside the city walls (14.11.20; cf. also 15.1.2). Other sources, too, mention Poetovio as a Norican city, such as the *Itinerarium Hierosolymitanum* (561, 4) and Priscus,<sup>27</sup> while the fact that it is noted in the *Tabula Peutingeriana* as within the province of Noricum (4.20) is not decisive, since the names of provinces on the map are misleadingly shifted in an “eastern” direction.<sup>28</sup> Because of its exceptional geo-strategic position at a crossing of the Drava and the cross-roads of some major Norican-Pannonian routes, Poetovio retained the role of an important administrative, industrial (see the *Expositio totius mundi et gentium*, where ‘Noricum’ should read for ‘Poetovio’),<sup>29</sup> and military centre, while it was also the see of a bishop.<sup>30</sup>

In Poetovio, Romulus and Constantius may have been joined by the other three members of the mission, since otherwise it would be difficult to explain why this city would have been mentioned at this point in Priscus’ narrative. Two other envoys, who took part in this embassy, were the governor of Noricum, Promotus, and the military commander Romanus; as has been noted, both are known merely from Priscus’ report. Promotus and Romanus represented the highest civil and military authority of Noricum and probably of that part of Pannonian provincial territory that had not (yet) been occupied by the Huns; these regions bordered directly on the Hunnic kingdom. Promotus, the second mentioned ambassador, was the governor of the province of Noricum (*praeses Norici*),<sup>31</sup> the last one known in the sources, who most probably came officially to Poetovio on certain occasions. Very likely he was the governor of *Noricum mediterraneum*, the southern part of the former province, which was closer to the area of Hun dominion.<sup>32</sup> Romanus, whose exact rank remains unknown,<sup>33</sup> was a military commander in Noricum and was possibly in charge of the entire Norican army (*limitanei*, perhaps also *comitatenses*);<sup>34</sup> he may have also been in

26 Saria 1951, 1167ff.; Horvat et al. 2004.

27 Šašel Kos 1994.

28 Weber 2004, 280–281 n. 12.

29 57, ed. J. Rougé 1966, 196; cf. also GGM II 513ff.; Šašel Kos 1994, 100–101.

30 Bratož 1999, 267ff.

31 PLRE II (Promotus 1).

32 Weber 2004, 282–283.

33 PLRE II (Romanus 2); cf. Várady 1969, 321.

34 Jones 1973<sup>2</sup>, 246; II, 607ff., in particular 649ff.

charge of troops stationed at Poetovio. Most probably, however, he was either a *dux* – perhaps of Pannonia Prima and Noricum Ripense –<sup>35</sup> or a *comes rei militaris*.<sup>36</sup>

Priscus is also the only source to mention the paternal grandfather of Romulus Augustulus, Tatulus, who joined the envoys of his own desire, because he was the father of Orestes; he may or may not have been a close confidant of Aetius.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps he lived in Poetovio, if he had moved there after the Hun occupation of Pannonia Secunda, his original home. He was a native of Pannonia and the father of Orestes and Paulus, of whom it is only known that he was killed by Odoacer in Ravenna on September 4, 476, after Odoacer had killed Orestes at Placentia (Anon. Val. 8.37, Cass., *Chron.* s.a. 476).<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, it is interesting that the name *Tatulus* is epigraphically documented only once, precisely in the region along the river Sava, at Ajdovski Gradec above Vranje near Sevnica, in the territory between Celeia and Neviodunum.

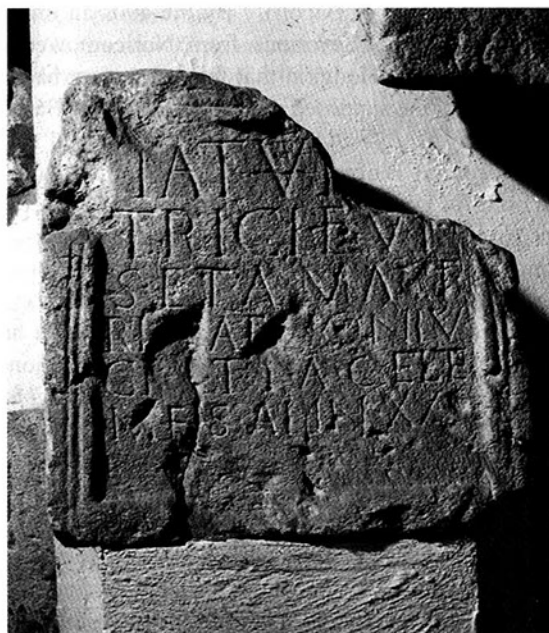


Fig. 2: The tombstone of Tatul[us] Trici filius and his family (AIJ 34 = RIST 356).

A Roman tombstone came to light at the late Roman fortified settlement there, where two early Christian churches, a large cistern, and several houses were excavated.<sup>39</sup> It was erected by one *Tatul[us] Trici filius* for himself, his wife *A(elia?) Maceri[n?]a* and their (?) son

35 E.g. Castritius 1985, 25; Lotter 2003, 18.

36 Both these posts proposed by Blockley 1983, 384 n. 46.

37 Heather 2006, 427.

38 PLRE II, 852; cf. 1055; 949.

39 Petru/Ūlbert 1975. 65–67.



*T(itus) A(elius?) Celtemes* (Fig. 2).<sup>40</sup> The tombstone was discovered along with other Roman stone monuments, which were all reused as building material and must have originally come from an as yet unidentified Roman settlement below the hill. A closely related name in the form *Tatulo* is additionally attested twice, but also only in Pannonia.<sup>41</sup> While nothing is known of the origin of the family of the *comes* Romulus, the emperor's maternal grandfather, Tatulus' family was undoubtedly Pannonian, for which Tatulus' name itself provides good evidence.

The ultimate fate of the last western emperor is more or less pure guesswork. As has been mentioned in the beginning of the article, he was banished with his relatives to *castellum Lucullanum*, having received a large amount of money (6.000 *solidi*) from Odoacer. Castellum Lucullanum developed from a residence of L. Licinius Lucullus (cos. 74 BC) near the bay of Naples. In late antiquity it must have been a fortified settlement, most probably a small military and administrative centre in Campania, identified with the locality Pizzofalcone near Baia (community of Bacoli).<sup>42</sup> By the 490s an important monastery had been built there, where relics of St Severinus from Noricum were preserved.<sup>43</sup> It was suggested over a century ago by T. Hodgkin that this monastery had been founded by the last imperial family, notably by the supposed mother of Romulus, Barbaria.<sup>44</sup>

Eugippius, the author of the *Life of St Severinus*, mentioned that a woman of high senatorial rank (*illustris femina*) Barbaria "venerated Severinus with religious devotion" and had a mausoleum built for him at Castellum Lucullanum (*Vita Severini* 46.1–2). Many historians saw a connection between Romulus' mother and this Barbaria: a wealthy woman of high social standing, well acquainted with the situation in Noricum, and resident in Castellum Lucullanum – as quite possibly more than pure coincidence. Although the identification of both women has often been accepted almost as a fact, it has also been emphasized that this could only be a hypothesis.<sup>45</sup> Eugippius further mentioned that Barbaria and her late husband had known the saint by fame and correspondence (*ibid.*), and from another passage it is clear that Eugippius knew of the patrician Orestes and of his "unjust murder" (*Epistula ad Paschasium* 8). The last ambiguous evidence that might concern Romulus Augustulus is offered by Cassiodorus (*Variarum* 3.35). A letter was sent around AD 510 by Theodoric to one Romulus, confirming the grant of money he and his mother had so far been receiving from Liberius, the minister who had previously served Odoacer. Barbaria may or may not have been Romulus' mother; it is likely but it cannot be proved.

Recently, an interesting article reinterpreted the pertinent data bearing witness to the exiled emperor; I would merely like to draw attention to the argument concerning Barbaria's name, which does not seem convincing. Again it has been erroneously assumed that her family would have been resident in Noricum or its close vicinity, and it has further been argued that her name would have been derived from the Barbii.<sup>46</sup> Members of this *gens*

40 Šašel 1975, 136 no. 4 (= AIJ 34, and RIST 356).

41 Mócsy et al. 1983, s. v.; OPEL IV, s. v.

42 Sartori 1998, 54, with other citations.

43 Nathan 1992.

44 Nathan 1992, 262 n. 5, in which Hodgkin's book (*non vidi*) is cited.

45 Lotter 1976, 37; 200; Bratož 1983, 14–15; Sartori 1998, 55, with other citations.

46 Nathan 1992, 266–267.

were indeed settled in the hinterland of Aquileia, notably in Noricum and Pannonia, and played an important role in the economic development of the two provinces.<sup>47</sup> However, the name *Barbarius* (from *barbarus*, a foreigner, a non-Greek or non-Roman) cannot be regarded as having been derived from the *gentilicium* *Barbius*; derivatives from the latter would have been *Barbianus*, *Barbilius*, *Barbonius*, *Barbullanus*, and similar names. The name *Barbarus*, however, is well attested in the western part of the Roman Empire.<sup>48</sup> It may be interesting to note that the *gentilicium* *Barbarius* has been attested to date only in Gallia Narbonensis.<sup>49</sup>

### Abbreviations

AIJ	V. Hoffiller, B. Saria, <i>Antike Inschriften aus Jugoslawien</i> , Heft I: <i>Noricum und Pannonia Superior</i> , Zagreb 1938.
CAH	<i>The Cambridge Ancient History</i> .
FHG	<i>Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum</i> , ed. C. Müller.
GGM	<i>Geographi Graeci minores</i> , ed. K. Müller.
HGM	<i>Historici Graeci minores</i> , ed. L. A. Dindorf.
OPEL	B. Lörincz, <i>Onomasticon provinciarum Europae Latinarum</i> , Vols. I, Budapest 2005; II, Wien 1999; III, 2000; IV, 2002.
PLRE II	J. R. Martindale 1980, <i>The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire</i> , vol. II, A.D. 395–527, Cambridge.
RE	Pauly-Wissowa-Kroll-Mittelhaus-Ziegler, <i>Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft</i> .
RIS	E. Weber 1969, <i>Die römischen Inschriften der Steiermark</i> , Graz.

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<sup>47</sup> Šašel 1966 (= 1992).

<sup>48</sup> OPEL I, s. v.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*: CIL XII 1756. – My sincere thanks are due to Prof. Rajko Bratož for having kindly read my paper and for offering valuable comments.

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