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► **To cite this version:**

Stéphane Martin. Early Roman magistracies with Celtic names: native substrate or anchoring innovation?. *Anchoring Innovation in Antiquity*, 17-20 December 2015, OIKOS, Dec 2015, Soeterbeeck, Netherlands. pp.1-9. hal-02164737

HAL Id: hal-02164737

<https://hal.science/hal-02164737>

Submitted on 25 Jun 2019

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Proceedings of *Anchoring Innovation in Antiquity*, 17-20 December 2015

Early Roman magistracies with Celtic names: native substrate or anchoring innovation?

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Key-words: Anchoring Innovation, (dis)continuity Gaul, Local government, Romanization

Although data have increased quite a lot and paradigms have changed quite a few times in the last decades, research on the Roman conquest of Gaul is still dominated by the issue of change vs. continuity. The current tendency is to stress – and rightly so – how Roman period developments cannot be understood without reference to the pre-Roman Iron Age situation. This is the combined effect of the post-colonial frame of thought in which we all work, consciously or not, and of the huge progress made in the archaeology of the late Iron Age in the last 30 years, which has completely changed our view of the period.

This “continuist” trend of research is not typical of archaeologists but has been embraced by a growing number of ancient historians working on pre-Roman political institutions. Their main hypothesis is that in Gaul, Roman municipal magistracies inherited part of their characteristics from already existing Iron Age

institutions¹. This is not at all contradictory with what we know of the process of municipalisation in Gaul, i.e. how the new provinces were gradually organised according to the Roman system of *civitates*.² During the early stages of municipalisation, when most of the *civitates* were peregrine and free to retain or establish an organisation of their own, it is not surprising to encounter “exotic” features. The “continuist” hypothesis is not without support in the written sources. The main case is that of the *vergobretus*, known from Caesar (*BG*, 1.16.5) to be the principal magistrate of the Haedui (settled in modern Burgundy). It happens that a handful of Latin inscriptions from the 1st half of the 1st c. A.D. mention such *vergobreti*. Other contemporary inscriptions name other magistracies that do not fit neatly in a Roman frame, although they generally bear a Roman name such as *praetor* or *summus magistratus*. They too are interpreted as continuing late Iron Age magistracies: it is indeed very likely that their specificity is to be sought in an indigenous background.

However, a difficulty arises when, because of this un-Roman character, they are said to be traces of a loosely conceived “Gallic substrate”, i.e. a survival of long standing pre-Roman realities. The case of the *arcantodan* is particularly interesting in this respect and it is worth presenting the evidence and the main interpretations in some detail. The only attestations of the word are three Gallic coin-types issued by two different *civitates*, the Lexovii in modern-day Basse-Normandie and the Meldi west of Paris.³ The word itself is composed of two elements, *arcanto-* referring to silver (lat. *argentum*) or maybe gold⁴, and *dan* meaning magistrate or judge⁵. On all coins is the word associated with a name. The most likely interpretation is therefore

¹ See mainly Lamoine (2009).

² Dondin-Payre and Raepsaet-Charlier (1999) is the standard book on the subject.

³ There is no way to be sure that the legend *ARC/AMBACTI* on a coin struck on the territory of the Mediomatrici (LT 8986 and 8987 = *RIG* IV, 45) is the abbreviation of *arcantodan*, as numerous Gallic names starting with *arc-* are known. Were it the case, it should be noted that it dates to the same period.

⁴ According to Pailler (2006).

⁵ Delamarre (2003) s. v. *arganton*, 53, *argantodanos*, 54 and *danos*, *dannos*, 135-6.

that it designates a magistrate responsible for the minting of the coins. Indeed, on the coins from the Lexovii, the legend states that they are *simissos publicos* (i.e. a half-as coined by the *civitas*) and other coins from the same series bear the name of the *vergobreto(s)*. The coins are traditionally dated around or after the Gallic Wars but they are probably no earlier than 40 BC and maybe as late as 20/10 BC, although there is so far no way to date them securely. We have no trace of the *arcantodan* before or after this period.

Although this could be due to our lacunary documentation, two things should be noted: first, that both the Lexovian and Meldian coins are from the same period; second, that legends on Gallic coins are quite numerous from the mid-2nd c. BC in various parts of Gaul, implying the appearance of the *arcantodan* no earlier than 40 BC and in only two *civitates* is probably meaningful. Such is the material base for all inquiries on the *arcantodan*. As far as we can interpret it, sources seem to point to a phenomenon limited to the early stages of municipalisation. Partisans of the “Gallic substrate” hypothesis have however tried to expand its chronological and geographical span by aggregating other evidence to the coins presented above. The result has been the creation of a highly hypothetical late Iron Age *arcantodan* common to the whole of Gaul and instrumental in the creation of Roman period magistracies.

L. Lamoine has sought to “find” the *arcantodan* through the mentions of municipal quaestors in Gaul.⁶ Using an exhaustive corpus of 66 quaestors in all Gallic provinces (including Gallia Narbonensis) from the 1st to the 3rd c. AD, he argues that there is a specificity to Gallic quaestors to be explained by a Gallic heritage. His case is however not convincing, not the least because the distribution areas of quaestors and *arcantodan* do not overlap.⁷ Furthermore, Lamoine does not take into account the

⁶ Lamoine (2009) 167–225. The chapter is entitled “La Questure comme moyen de retrouver les *Arcantodans*”.

⁷ Part of the explanation lies in the well known paucity of stone inscriptions in Western Gaul.

date of the inscriptions, nor the status of the *civitates*. But most of his inscriptions come from *civitates* with Latin or Roman right: it is well known from municipal charters that the quaestorship is a normal magistracy in such communities, and there is nothing specifically Gallic in this.⁸ Finally, it must be noted that quaestors are very rarely entrusted with the minting of coinage, be it in Rome or in the provinces. Consequently, although a full study of quaestorship in Gaul remains to be done, in the present state of data there is no way to connect quaestors and *arcantodan*, even less to state that the first derived from the second.

J.-M. Pailler, in a very recent paper, has re-examined all the mentions of *dan/dan(n)us* and its compounds, including the *arcantodan*.⁹ Apart from the coins from the Lexovii and Meldi, *dan/dan(n)us* is known from a few inscriptions and graffiti: *cassidan(ni)* at La Graufesenque (FR) (1st c.), a *dannus* in Pachten (DE) (2nd c. ?), and *platiodanni* from Mainz (DE) (3rd c.).¹⁰ As one can see, the attestations of *dan/dan(n)us* and its compounds are widely spread in time and space, from Southern France to Middle Rhine and from the 2nd half of the 1st c. BC to the 1st half of the 3rd c. AD.

The *arcantodan* is central in Pailler's argumentation because it is the most clear of all *dan/dan(n)us* compounds. It is at the same time the earliest and the only one with a clear link to the *civitas* (in the case of the Lexovii). The *cassidanni* from La Graufesenque seem to play some role in the production of Samian pottery, although it is not clear which one. The *dannus* from Pachten may be a kind of representative of a local community, as he sets up an inscription on behalf of the inhabitants of a private domain; he is therefore unlikely to be a civic magistrate. In the case of the

⁸ As pointed out by Raepsaet-Charlier (2011).

⁹ Pailler (2015).

¹⁰ La Graufesenque: Marichal (1988), cat. 2, 4, 11 and maybe 8 (photo of cat. 11: [http://db.edcs.eu/epigr/bilder.php?bild=\\$Graff_00011.jpg](http://db.edcs.eu/epigr/bilder.php?bild=$Graff_00011.jpg), accessed 09/02/2016; *casidano* is at the end of the first line).

Pachten: *CIL* XIII, 4228 (photo: [http://db.edcs.eu/epigr/bilder.php?bild=\\$CIL_13_04228_1.jpg](http://db.edcs.eu/epigr/bilder.php?bild=$CIL_13_04228_1.jpg), accessed 09/02/2016).

Mainz: *CIL* XIII, 6776 (photo: [http://db.edcs.eu/epigr/bilder.php?bild=\\$TR_CIL_13_06776_3.jpg](http://db.edcs.eu/epigr/bilder.php?bild=$TR_CIL_13_06776_3.jpg), accessed 09/02/2016).

platiodanni, they may have an official role. *Platio-* probably derives from the Latin *platea*, meaning large street. The *platiodanni* are said *vici novi*: they may therefore be magistrates of the *vicus*, a subdivision of the *civitas*, in charge of the streets – or perhaps in charge of a particular task on a particular *platea*.

The only clear link between all these inscriptions is their use of *dan/dan(n)us*. For all we know, this is a generic word, translated in a Late Antique/early Medieval glossary as “iudicem”. It is therefore no wonder that all inscriptions carry a “fonction de régulation”, as Pailler puts it. But he goes a step further and argues that *dan/dan(n)us* designates a Gallic magistracy equivalent to the Greek *agoranomos* or the Roman *aedilis*. He reconstructs what he calls “les trois temps de l’*arcantodan-*”, corresponding to the gradual weakening of the function. The “deuxième temps” is the *arcantodan* itself, as monetary magistrate. The “troisième temps” are the *cassidanni* from La Graufesenque and he doesn’t make much of the Pachten and Mainz inscriptions. He states that we cannot understand this evolution without a “premier temps”, dated to the late Iron Age, when the *dan/dan(n)us* would have had its full meaning. As he himself acknowledges, this first step is not attested in any of our sources.

The creation of this “premier temps” is in itself very telling and reveals the dangers and weaknesses of the “Gallic substrate” hypothesis. Indeed, it is sometimes necessary to assume the existence of stages not attested in the documentation. But there is no such necessity here. First of all, a Gallic name isn’t necessarily pre-Roman. We know stone inscriptions in Gallic in the High Empire (e.g. *CIL* XIII, 2880, from Alésia, very Roman in shape and script¹¹), and we learn from Gregory of Tours that Gaulish was still spoken in the 6th c. AD. It is therefore perfectly possible that the word *arcantodan* was created in the 2nd half of the 1st c. BC to designate a new reality. This leads to a second point: to state that the *arcantodan* is by necessity an attenuated

¹¹ Photo: [http://db.edcs.eu/epigr/bilder.php?bild=\\$CIL_13_02880_1.jpg](http://db.edcs.eu/epigr/bilder.php?bild=$CIL_13_02880_1.jpg) (accessed 09/02/2016).

version of a previously existing magistracy is to deny any adaptive capacity to the Gallic populations under consideration.

As said previously, the limited evidence on the *arcantodan* points to a phenomenon limited in space and time, between 40 and 20/10 BC. This corresponds to the period when the Roman provincial and civic order was first implemented in Inner Gaul. One characteristic of the Mediterranean civic model (both Greek and Roman) is that coinage is controlled by the city (*polis/civitas*). This does not seem to have the case in Gaul. There is no firm evidence for coinage minted by *civitates* before the Gallic wars and furthermore coins issued by Gallic communities disappear before the end of the 1st c. BC: they did not survive municipalisation.¹² It is therefore all the more striking to observe that the coins from the Lexovii that mention an *arcantodan* are also the only coins in Inner Gaul to state that the coin is *publico(s)*. As a result, there is every reason to think that the occurrence of the *arcantodan* in this small time span is an answer to this crucial period of institutional change, a failed attempt at civic coinage *more Romano* in a limited number of *civitates*.

The *arcantodan* is indeed native, in that it is an indigenous creation. But being indigenous does not mean it is ancient, a relic of a Gallic substrate. The “substrate hypothesis” was successful in drawing our attention to the origin of non-Roman elements, in underlining that Romanisation didn’t equate to making a clean break with the past. But although its exponents do not deny evolutions between pre-Roman and Roman period, it is decidedly too static.¹³ To postulate a “Gallic substrate” raises two problems. On the one hand, our sources largely preclude such a

¹² For detailed discussion, see Martin (2015).

¹³ See the definition in Lamoine (2009) 23–4: “En géologie, le *substratum* ou substrat correspond à la couche de terrain inférieur, resté en place sous une nappe de charriage. Au figuré et pour le domaine qui nous intéresse, le substrat est l’organisation politique indigène qui sert de fondement à l’organisation d’époque romaine, un élément supplanté mais dont l’influence reste sensible.”; Evolutions are generally conceived in terms of weakening of the supposedly original meaning: see Pailler (2015).

reconstruction: because we have almost no texts for pre-Roman Gaul, we have to rely on a few Greek and Latin literary sources rarely predating the mid-1st c. BC., complemented by early Roman inscriptions in Latin. It is not surprising that the resulting mixture is all too often mythicized and largely atemporal. On the other hand, the “Gallic substrate” also denies agency to the populations of Roman Gaul by systematically interpreting possible indigenous innovations as relics of the pre-Roman past.

It is more fruitful to replace it by another metaphor: anchoring is a prime candidate.¹⁴ Anchoring does give the idea of stability offered by the substrate: the terrain has a definite influence on how and where you anchor yourself. But at the same time, anchoring is more dynamic than substrate. Indeed, you do not anchor haphazardly; the location must be chosen with care. Even in a case of emergency – particularly in a case of emergency – one will try to anchor oneself with the uttermost care: it might be a matter of survival. Anchoring combines will (you choose where to anchor) and constraint (you only can choose to a certain extent) or, to phrase it differently, structure and agency.

How do we interpret early Roman magistracies with Gallic names in terms of anchoring? The *arcantodan* studied in this paper appears as a failure: municipal coinage never took off in Gaul and the magistracy disappeared. But on the whole, it was a successful anchoring. Peregrine *civitates*, as were most of the Gallic communities, needn't have magistracies modelled on the Roman ones; although they often emulated them, they could retain or create elements of their own. Such were the *vergobret*, *praetor* and *summus magistratus*, created from scratch or adapted from existing magistracies. Later they were replaced by *duoviri* or *quattuorviri* when the *civitates* acquired Latin or Roman right, but they were nevertheless instrumental in anchoring the civic model “à la Romaine” in Gaul.

¹⁴ For the heuristic interest of metaphors, see e.g. Debarbieux (2014), who discusses “ancrage” in the field of geography.

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