

The Atrectian Alps

Three Roman inscriptions attest the existence of a province thus named, but its localization remains an unsolved problem. J. Prieur lists the procurators in presumed chronological order, their dates covering the period 161 to 249 AD¹. Incumbents are:

Titus Appalius (or Appaeus) Alfinus Secundus, between 138 and 161²

Cannius (or Caius) Annii Flavianus, c. 185³

Titus Cornasidius Sabinus, end of 2nd century⁴.

Prieur does not state that the third inscription reads ATRACTIAN. Moreover the first reads ATRECTIAN, whereas the second reads ATRECTIN-.

In view of the fact that we also have four inscriptions relating to an ATRACTIAN family name, viz.

L. Atrectius Quietus, from Susa⁵

M. Atrectius Albucius, from Aosta⁶

Atrectius (sic) Cupitianus, from Castellum (Picenum prov.)⁷

T. Flavius Adrettius (sic) from Cannes district of France⁸, perhaps associated with a locality Les Adrets we must hold that the balance is heavily in favour of the spelling ATRACTIAN being the basic one.

It must also be noted that the Cornasidius inscription is the only one of the procuratorial texts associating the Atrectian Alps with the Pennine (Alpes Poeninae, roughly from the Great St. Bernard to the Simplon) as a single province. This enables us to conjecture that these curiously named Alps lie E or W of the Pennines, and W, not E of the Raetian massifs (roughly from the St. Gotthard to the Ortler).

The Atrectian is, of course, a political division of territory, yet reflecting a geographical delimitation rather than a protectorate such as the "empire" of Rome's allies the Cottii whose name is firmly established in the Cottian Alps (roughly from Monte Viso to the Mont-Cenis district). We know a lot about the Cottii, but nothing about Atrectii who might have enjoyed the privileges of a quasi-independent dynasty. There is a touch of Thracian magic in Cottius' name. What is there in the word Atrectian?

The first thought one has, in the light of the Cornasidius inscription, is that the Atrectians are some sort of "boundary" group or chain—in relation to either the Cottian or the Raetian—in the sense of Lat. *adrectae* (cf. *regere fines*). The most likely "corridor" would be that of the region known as Lepontian from, say, N of Lake Maggiore to the St. Gotthard and branching NE along

¹ J. Prieur, *La province romaine des Alpes Cottiennes* (Lyon: 1968).

² *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (hereafter cited as CIL), IX, 5357, (Berlin: 1863-).

³ CIL VIII, 17900.

⁴ CIL IX, 5439.

⁵ CIL V, 7313.

⁶ Cited by I. Beretta, *La romanizzazione della valle d'Aosta* (Aosta: 1954).

⁷ G. Wilmanns, *Exempla Inscriptionum Latinarum* 2278 (Berlin: 1873).

⁸ Cited in *Rev. Archéologique* for 1869, p. 303. (Paris: 1869).

the Vorder-Rhein, that is, between the Valais and the W Grisons of modern Switzerland. What J. Whatmough says of the "Leponzie" district⁹ is interesting. The very name, he says, is instructive: "the position of the Lepontine Alps between the Raetic and the Pennine furnishes a useful confirmation of the ancient notices concerning the territory of the Lepontii if, as I suppose, the name continued in use, being, in comparatively modern times, restored."

As there is no evidence in ancient cartography or geographical writings concerning the *Alpes Atrectianae*, we do not know whether the territory of the Lepontii was ever so called. Of course, the word *Adrectiae* could simply mean the Alps facing the southern sun when seen from Italy (cf. *Avers* in the Splügen district?). Not a satisfactory explanation, though it is less naive than that drawn from Livy II, 35 (*ut pleraque Alpium ab Italia sicut breviora ita arrectiora sunt*), where there is little more than a word association.

What in fact have commentators on the inscriptions to say?

Th. Mommsen considered that the word *Atrectian* came from the name of an eponymous hero, but that *Atrectus* as a *nomen* in the Susa text was taken from the *Atrectian* mountain nomenclature.¹⁰

Following Mommsen's note on *Atrectius Quietus*, D. Detlefsen thought that the *Atrectian* territory might have been named after a tribal prince, which would account for the transience of the word and its omission from literary works.¹¹

These two comments are analogous to the origin of the legendary *Raetus* of Switzerland's Grison district who would have given his name to *Raetia* at the time of the Tarquin kings in Rome.

V. De Vit, developing the thesis he expounded in his *Il Lago Maggiore I* (Prato: 1875) postulates that the *Atrectian Alps* lay within the territory of the Lepontii, but without convincing supporting evidence. His contention is that the word *Atre(a)ctian* is drawn from the "vocabolo degli indigini", with a Latinized ending¹².

C. Jullian thought that the *Atrectians* should be situated in either the Chur or the Ticino district of Switzerland; referring to their association with the Pennines, he held that the junction of the *Vallis Poenina* (Valais) and the valleys of the *Tocè* and the *Ticino* was to be explained by the opening up of the *Simplon* as a transalpine route.¹³ He does not mention the *Oberalp-Furka* pass-route in this connection, yet this seasonal mode of communication would justify the administrative union of *Vallis Poenina* and *Raetia* (15 BC to 43 AD, that is, long before we hear officially of an *Atrectian province*).

N. Lamboglia has lent strength to a *Lepontian localization*¹⁴ in his comments on a *Baalbec* inscription,¹⁵ in which among tribes under the jurisdiction of a certain procurator, are listed two from the *Cottian Alps* proper and two hailing from further E, in fact from the *Val Camonica*, near *Brescia* (the *Cammuntii*) and from the *Lepontian region* (the *Lepontii*). Whilst it seems clear that there were remnants of *Lepontians* in the *Cottian Alps* proper (cf. the assignment of their city *Oskela* to the latter mountains by Ptolemy¹⁶), the mention of the *Val Camonica* tribes, so far E, appeared to Lamboglia to indicate a real differentiation as regards the *Lepontii*, and he accordingly thought this to mean that the *Lepontine Alps*, i.e. N of modern *Domodossola*, were in fact those otherwise called *Atrectian*. The thesis is hardly a strong one, but it tends to

⁹R. S. Conway, J. Whatmough, & S. E. Johnson, *The Prae-Italic Dialects of Italy*, Vol II, (Harvard: 1933).

¹⁰*CIL* V, 7313.

¹¹D. Detlefsen, *Das Poemierum Roms und die Grenzen Italiens*, in *Hermes* XXI, 542 (Berlin: 1865).

¹²V. De Vit, *La Provincia romana dell'Ossola, ossia delle Alpe Atreziane*, (Florence: 1892). The only Gaulish word approaching the name would be **atro*, black (Lat. *ater*), the collective form of which might be **atra*, giving *atrec-* or *atrac-* in Latinization.

¹³C. Jullian, *Histoire de la Gaule*, (Paris: 1908-26).

¹⁴N. Lamboglia, *I Pedates Tyrii e l'etnografia alpina*, in *Rivista di Studi Liguri*, XII (Milan: 1946).

¹⁵First published by H. Seyrig in *Bulletin du Musée de Beyrouth*, I, p. 80 (Beyrouth: 1937). In *Année Epigraphique* N° 60 (Paris, 1939), it reads in fine: "(Suburanus Aemilianus, Procurator) . . . Alpium Cottianum et Pedatium Tyriorum et Cammuntiorum et Lepontiorum. . . ."

¹⁶Ptolemy, *Geogr.* III, 1, 34. But even if *Oskela* is really the *Lepontian city of Oxilla* (Anon. of Ravenna) i.e. modern *Domodossola*, rather than *Ocelum* (Usseglio? Usseaux? near *Susa* in the *Cotians*, one does not see that this helps much to solve the *Atrectian* problem.

dissociate the Atrectian from the Cottian group to the W and to center our interest on the modern Val Leventina/Lepontiana district.

G. de Manteyer, on the other hand, wonders whether the Cottians were not “for a time” as he says, known as “Atrectian”. The view here expounded appears to be solely based on the findings of two of the inscriptions bearing the *nomen* Atrectius in Cottian territory, namely at Susa and Aosta.¹⁷

Finally, D. van Berchem thinks that “Atrectian Alps” is a term temporarily used for the Graian Alps (approx. from the Mont-Cenis to the Little St. Bernard), the latter designation not being found during the 2nd century or up to Diocletian’s accession in 284 AD.¹⁸

In these opinions on the subject, no single authoritative statement seems to stand out. Commenting generally, A. Garzetti concludes that in its “attributes and organization” no other example of such a province in the Roman Empire as the Atrectian Alps is known.¹⁹

Perhaps the first task is to see whether in the glossary of Alpine nomenclature there is an approximation to the puzzling term. The nearest one appears to be a pass now called the “Richetli”, a diminutive of the older “Reicheten”. Situated in central Switzerland, S of Glarus and W of Elm, it connects the latter with the Linthal. Following H. Tschudi, the 1723 map by Scheuchzer in his *Itinera Alpina* indicates the older orthography and *Ad-Reicheten* would be the logical continuation westwards of the also marked *Via ad Rhaetos* (sic), now the Segnes Pass.²⁰ Whilst this is a noteworthy association, the case for this pass being at the origin of the Alpes Ad-Rectianae is not over-strong, as the pass is relatively isolated and it links with the Vallis Poenina, away to the SW are to say the least, tenuous.

It is, however, a pointer in another direction for the clarification of the Atrectian problem. Is the latter term to be interpreted as a global designation of a *via ad Raetos*, a way to Raetia? Or, does the root conceal, in RECT-, its real meaning? Would this, in fact, be connected with a goddess whose cult, further E, at Este and Magrè notably, has been established by J. Whatmough?²¹

Can one postulate an *AD REHTIA, incorporating, after the Lat. prefix, REITIAI of Magrè, or (in Venetic) REHTIAH of Este? This goddess has been identified with Artemis or Diana Lucina Cerealis, deity of fructification. The key inscription in this regard is N° 229 in J. Whatmough (op.cit), on a staghorn, which reads:

riþnekerrinake

(from Magrè)

and which he interprets as “Reitiaie Cereali”. Raetic RIT or REIT would seem to correspond to Venetic REHT and to represent Lat. RECT (*rectus*, Gk. *orthos*,—whence an Artemis Orthia cult in the Alps has been deduced). Would *Ad-Rectia fit in here?

Going one step further, and setting aside the *-ake* ending, the *kerrin* element in inscription 229 might be associated with Lepontic **keréna* if, as J. Jud considered, this latter word does in fact mean a stag.²² We are here definitely in Lepontian/Raetic *territoire de chasse*, and this appears to be the most likely district in which to seek the origins of the “Atrectian Alps”.

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¹⁷G. de Manteyer, *La Provence du 1^{er} au 12^{ème} siècle* (Paris: 1908).

¹⁸*Revue des Etudes latines* Vol. XXXIX (Paris: 1961).

¹⁹A. Garzetti, *Sui Lepontii*, in *Athenaeum* XXVI (Pavia: 1948).

²⁰Accessible reproduction in *Schweiz* (Swiss Railways Review) for 1979, N° 6, Zürich.

²¹See note 9 supra and J. Whatmough, *Tusca origo Raetis*, *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* XLVIII, (Harvard: 1937); cf. also *Journ. of Roman Studies*, XI, 1923.

²²Cited in P. Ambros Widmer, *Onomastique*, in *Orbis*, XXII, 1, p. 440, (Louvain: 1973). The *Rätische Namenbuch* II, 715, quoted by Widmer mentions, in addition to the reference to J. Jud’s contention (*Arch. Volksk.* XLV, 274), the fact that the word **keréna* may be the origin of the “Greina” territory of the Somvixerthal, lying SW of the *Richetli* or *Reicheten* pass to which allusion has been made.