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Aquisgrani Revisited

Some Remarks on the Medieval (Re-)Construction of Aachen's Roman Past

ABSTRACT

The toponym *Aquisgrani* appears abruptly and without any etymological explanation in the contemporary sources at the end of the 8th century as an extended form of the previously attested *Aquae*. Only from the middle of the 10th century a development can be traced that detaches the word element *-grani* and successively creates a legendary founder of the Roman place called *Granus*. Meanwhile, we can attest from the archaeological record that in Carolingian times there was already a strong local historical awareness of Aachen's Roman past, to which the construction of the »Kaiserpfalz« connects. Now, as it seems, the origin of the *Granus* legend may already be rooted in the second half of the 9th century, a time which, in contrast to the boom at the beginning of the century, in some ways saw a waning interest in Aachen. Thus, the creation of the *Granus* legend may be seen as an attempt to revive and enhance awareness of the city's venerable Roman past through a quasi-etymological approach.

KEYWORDS

Aachen / *Aquisgrani* / *Aquae Granni* / *Granus* / Granusturm / Charlemagne

To this day, the question of the Roman place name for Aachen must be considered unsolved. The original toponym does not appear in either inscriptions or contemporary literary sources. Nevertheless, based on the assumption that the place name *Aquisgrani*, which is only known from the late 8th century onwards, is actually a malapropism of the proper Roman name, scholars and laymen alike predominantly consent to the reconstruction of the Roman toponym *Aquae Granni* (most detailed to date: Prost 1890, 266–295; cf. furthermore e. g. Cramer 1901, 99; Galsterer 1992–1993, 22; Hoffmann 1992–1993; Schaub 2011a, 256; Engels 2013, 114–123; critical e. g. Mann 1984, 6–7). After all, it stands to reason that the toponym *Aquisgrani* was most probably not newly invented *ex nihilo* in the Carolingian era (Galsterer 1992–1993, 22; Hoffmann 1992–1993, 110). But while it is convincing all along the line concerning the appellative *Aquae*, the connection with the Celtic theonym, *Grannus,* remains somewhat vague on an argumentative level and must be considered hypothetical for now.

Be that as it may, this essay does not aim at reopening the question of the original Roman place name from scratch. Instead, this brief excursus will venture a look in the other direction by attempting to trace, on the basis of selected sources, how an awareness of the Roman past of the place gradually emerges in view of the toponym *Aquisgrani* since its first attestation in the Carolingian era[1]. This

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consideration can be correlated not least with the archaeological record, according to which in the Middle Ages large parts of the former Roman site were still visible and seizable. However, this question can only be briefly touched upon here.

The oldest secure historical mention of Aachen is found in two of Charlemagne's charters dated 13th January and 1st March 769 (MGH DD Karol. 1, 81–83 no. 55–56). The city is only identified in the closing formula as the place of issue (»*actum Aquis palatio publico*«). Nota bene, *Aquis* still stands alone here as an ablative locativus of *Aquae*[2]. The dates of issue seem historically coherent insofar as Charlemagne actually spent Christmas 768 in Aachen, as is reported retrospectively in the Royal Frankish Annals, which have only been recorded since about 790 (Annales regni Francorum a. 768 [MGH SS rer. Germ. 6, 28]; cf. Müller et al. 2013, 20–21; Geschichtsquellen des deutschen Mittelalters s. v. Annales regni Francorum: www.geschichtsquellen.de/werk/266 [26.08.2025])[3]. So there is no obvious reason to question these charters as the earliest records of Aachen in the written sources, although it must be admitted that they have only survived from an 11th century chartulary (Hoffmann 1992–1993, 109), so a later interpolation cannot be excluded with certainty. Be that as it may, it is in these Annals that the expanded term *Aquisgrani*[4] actually and undoubtedly appears for the first time in the written record, namely in the year 798 (Annales regni Francorum a. 798 [MGH SS rer. Germ. 6, 104]), whereas two possibly earlier attestations must remain questionable (Mann 1984, 5). The first one regards a charter issued 29th March 786 (MGH DD Karol. 1, 205–207 no. 152) with the closing formula »*actum Aquisgrani palatio nostro*«, presumably an erratic indication derived from *Attiniaco*, since Charlemagne spent Easter 786 (23th April) in Attigny (MGH DD Karol. 1, 206). The other charter uses the same formula but cannot be dated with certainty: it may have been issued in 795 (MGH DD Karol. 1, 241–242 no. 179). As a matter of fact, it is only from 808 that this distinct closing formula with *Aquisgrani* is attested regularly in the diplomatic record, starting for certain with a charter issued 17th July 808 (MGH DD Karol. 1, 279 no. 208). Up to this point, the undoubted and certainly datable diplomas still stick to the simple form *Aquis*. The formerly unattested suffix *-grani*, however, appears

relatively abruptly by the very end of the 8th century, with absolutely no contemporary etymology to explain it (cf. also Müller et al. 2013, 336–343).

An apparently peculiar reading of the toponym, which possibly reveals a certain contemporary reflection on its origin and composition for the first time, is encountered only from the middle of the 10th century onwards. In the prologue of his largely lost work, *Phrenesis*, dated to around 955–956, Rather of Verona (c. 890–974) describes how he was elected Bishop of Liège in 953 through the intercession of his former student and current archbishop of Cologne, with the election taking place »*ad Aquas quod dicitur Grani palatium*« (Ratherius Veronensis, Epistula 11 [MGH Briefe d. dt. Kaiserzeit 1, 56]). And Liutprand of Cremona (920–972) knows to report about the Norman invasion of 881 in Aachen that the looters »*Thermas etiam Grani palatii atque palatia combusserunt*« (Liutprandus Cremonensis, Antapodosis 3, 48 [MGH SS rer. Germ. 41, 100]). The only textual witness of Rather's prologue is the now lost manuscript Lobbes III from the 10th or early 11th century, from which the *editio princeps* quotes »*grani palatium*« (lowercased, but with spatium) (Ballerini/Ballerini 1765, 218), whereas we find it already transformed into »*Grani palatium*« (capitalised) by J. P. Migne in 1853 (PL 136, 366). Nevertheless, the same form already appears in the manuscript München lat. 6388, dated to the 10th century, which forms the textual basis for the Liutprand edition. It is in these two passages that we find the otherwise usual suffix *-grani* as a stand-alone substantive for the first time, that is, as the genitive form of the proper name, *Granus*.

It was no later than in the second half of the 11th century that this said *Granus* was (already?) imagined as the legendary founder of Aachen, as is testified by Jocundus of Maastricht (c. 1030–1090) in his *Translatio Sancti Servatii*, written between 1070 and 1076: just as the *Agrippina civitas* (Cologne) can be traced back to a foundation by *Agrippa* (sic!), *Aquisgrani* can also be traced back to a founder »*qui Granus dicebatur*« (Iocundus Traiectensis, Translatio Sancti Servatii 23 [MGH SS 12, 99]). This Roman founding legend finally comes to perfection in the famous so-called decree of Charlemagne, known to be a forgery, whose origins can be placed in the 12th century, presumably before 1147, in the vicinity of the »Marienstift« in Aachen (Meuthen 1967, 58–

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[2] Significantly, a later 15th or 16th century editor amends the place name to *Aquisgrani*.

[3] In fact, the very same Royal Frankish Annals already mention for the years 765-766 that Pippin had spent both Christmas and Easter in Aachen (Annales regni Francorum a. 765 [MGH SS rer. Germ. 6, 22]).

[4] The text utilises the directional accusative, thus giving »*Aquasgrani palatium*«.

59; 1972, 81–119; Horch 2013, 168–169). Frederick I Barbarossa, however, did not question the authenticity of this document, which in his days had just previously been »rediscovered« by the abbey's canons: he reproduced it in full length in his privilege to the abbey and city of Aachen from 8th January 1166 on the occasion of the sanctification of Charlemagne and, referring to Charlemagne's radiant example, confirmed the imperial political rank of the coronation city and its church (MGH DD Karol. 1, 439–443 no. 295; cf. Meuthen 1967, 54–76; Horch 2013, 168–171). This »decree« contains, *inter alia*, the legendary account, put into the mouth of Charlemagne himself, of how he had rediscovered the place. According to this, he once got lost in the woods while hunting. As his horse stumbled, he found the hot springs and thermal baths and palaces, overgrown with weeds and thorn bushes, which *Granus*, a Roman prince and brother of Nero and Agrippa, had once erected and which he, Charlemagne, had now endeavoured to renovate. One might smile at the challenge this genealogical paradox poses to posterity. In his famous *Aquisgranum sive Historica Narratio* from 1620, Aachen's first local historian Petrus a Beeck, for example, undertakes the laborious attempt to at least identify this historically unattested brother of Nero from the tangle of the Julio-Claudian family tree (Beeck 1620, 2).

Needless to say, the historical evidence clearly contradicts the narrative of Charlemagne's discovery since we know that Pippin and Charlemagne already spent Christmas 765 and the following Easter in Aachen (see above), which must have required a certain minimum of functioning infrastructure and thus at least some sort of distinct and intact settlement (Müller et al. 2013, 32–50; Müller 2014, 28). After all, from an archaeological point of view, an uninterrupted continuity from the Roman to the Carolingian period can be stated without any doubt (Plum 2003; Schaub 2008; 2011b; 2011c; Müller et al. 2013, 42–48, etc.).

However, the legend of *Granus*, founder of Aachen, continues to be passed on. For example, it reappears in the rhymed chronicle of Philipp Mousket (c. 1220–1282), written in Old French, as part of an extensive fairy-tale version of the discovery legend we already know from the so-called Charlemagne decree, with *Granus* figured as a former king of that land (v. 2156–2159; Teichmann 1902, 68). A key point in connecting the 12th century founding legend of the so-called Charlemagne decree to the 16th century humanist chronographs is the Utrecht *Chronographia* by the otherwise unknown author Johannes de Beka, whose composition in the middle of the 14th century can be considered certain[5]. The text once again introduces *Granus* as a leading man of Rome and the legendary founder of Aachen, »*unde et idem locus Aque Grani moderno tempore vulgo dicitur*« (Johannes de Beka, Chronographia 2; ed. Bruch 1973, 5). It is significant that Johannes de Beka resolves the direct relationship between *Granus* and Nero mentioned in Charlemagne's »decree« and also by Mousket: here, the founding of Aachen takes place after *Granus*, denounced as an opponent of the Neronian regime and exiled, had already roamed homeless through Gaul. So *Granus* is placed in quasi »heroic« opposition to Nero's tyranny and is, as it were, elevated to a pedestal of moral integrity through his declared and courageous distance from the infamous atrocities of the disagreeable ruler, which de Beka does not refrain from enumerating. The change from Nero's brother to his adversary is rhetorical calculatio: The *Chronographia*, actually a history of the city of Utrecht, aims at preserving and strengthening the peace between ecclesiastical and secular rule by recalling their common history (Janse 2016). In this matter, de Beka invokes Aachen as a shining role model, with which he eventually also parallels the founding legend of Utrecht. In order not to stain this delicate assimilation, the eradication of the former brotherly relationship between *Granus* and Nero was inevitable.

Despite all appropriate scepticism concerning the sources, one thing is clear: since the 10th century at the latest, the historiographical tradition has reflected a distinct awareness of Aachen's Roman past. In the Carolingian »re-founding« of the town, it construes an ideational link to the thermal baths and palaces, apparently romanticised into a *topos*, which a legendary founder named *Granus* is supposed to have built. This motif later on became independent. For example, to this day the tower on the east side of the town hall is addressed as »Granusturm« (»tower of *Granus*«), with the earliest attestations dating back to the Renaissance. Yet nowadays we know that it is actually one of the best-preserved structures of the original Carolingian palace complex, surpassed only by the Carolingian octagon church (Pohle 2015,

5 The original work is dedicated to Bishop Jan van Arkel (1314-1378) and Count Wilhelm V (1330-1389), with the chronology reaching up to the year 1346. It is later continued by subsequent revisions.

304–316). As late as 1620, Petrus a Beeck quotes it in his history of Aachen as an »*pervetustum monumentum*« that can still be traced back to the Roman founder of the town, *Granus*, from whom it takes its name (Beeck 1620, 3). At the same time, however, the Augsburg patrician and local historian Markus Welser (1558–1614) had already exposed the founding legend of *Granus* as a folkloristic fable and rendered the so-called Charlemagne decree »*absolute vana et frivola*« (Welser 1594, 246). He would be, by the way, the first one to suggest that the medieval name *Aquisgrani* was derived not from a legendary founder but from the Apollonian epithet, *Grannus*[6]. And thus the circle is closed.

It is likely, now, that a certain historical awareness of Aachen's Roman past had already been unfolding since Carolingian times on the basis of a living local tradition. On the one hand, the continuity of settlement in Aachen in late antiquity and in Frankish times, which has become increasingly tangible from an archaeological point of view over the last two decades, most certainly contributed to this (see above). On the other hand, however, the evidence of Roman building structures and ruins, some of which were clearly visible not only in Carolingian times but up until the High Middle Ages[7], may also have been constitutive for the consolidation of a local Roman historical consciousness. A prominent pivotal point in this question is undoubtedly, for example, the minster complex, which has been intensively researched over the course of time and was preceded by an extensive Roman thermal complex, later modifications and burials before the Carolingian St Mary's church was built (research overview: Ristow 2014; Pohle 2015). Two other examples will briefly be mentioned.

Since the research of H. Cüppers, at the latest, it has been proven that Charlemagne's bathhouse, long sought after and assumed to be located there, is actually to be found in the area of another extensive Roman thermal complex. The so-called »Büchelthermen« were probably built as early as the middle of the 1st century, their pools being fed by a nearby spring located directly to the northwest. The complex continued to be used until the late 4th century, with some minor and major alterations (Cüppers 1982, 37–53; Schaub 2018, 335–337). In 1960–1961, Cüppers was able to provide archaeological evidence that parts of the southern wall of the Roman spring

house, as it had been built in the 2nd century, continued to be used, or rather were used again, as a substructure of Carolingian masonry. He interprets the wall in question as the southern wall of the former Carolingian bathhouse, which he reconstructs, in comparison with a plan from 1677 of the »Kaiserbad« later located on this site, as a massive, slightly trapezoidal hall building with a spring house adjoining to the west and a single, large bathing pool (Cüppers 1982, 63–67 with pl. 10, 3. 12–14). The find must have been a relief for those who had for a long time sought with great zeal, with Eginhard's report about Charlemagne's bathing habits in mind (Einhardus, Vita Karoli Magni 22 [MGH SS rer. Germ. 25, 27]), to clarify the question of the localisation and spatial disposition of the Carolingian bathhouse. The question of the extent to which further structures of the Roman »Büchelthermen« or the neighbouring square complex, which A. Schaub puts up for discussion as the forum of the Roman town (Schaub 2013, 177–180), may also have contributed to the Carolingian bathing complex has fired e. g. the imagination of the former Cathedral architect and city conservator L. Hugot, but still awaits a well-founded archaeological evaluation (elaborate overview: Pohle 2015, 398–417).

Another significant record in this respect is the polygonal fortification of the »Markthügel« (»market hill«) from the late 3rd century, which could be validated within the framework of investigations from 1927, 2011 and 2015 (Kyritz/Schaub 2015). While an associated moat was filled in as early as the 5th century (Ristow 2011), parts of the late Roman wall were demonstrably preserved until the 12th century. Remarkably, the Carolingian *aula regia* fits exactly into the course of the southern curtain wall, which at this time – or for this occasion? – had already been razed. Nevertheless, large parts remained intact and will probably have had at least a representative character in the Carolingian »Pfalz« (Kyritz/Schaub 2015).

This brief overview shows that the three major constituents of the Carolingian »Pfalz« – *aula regia*, church, and bathing house – already indisputably establish a connection to the visible Roman remnants of that place. But that is not all: Eginhard states that the Carolingian St Mary's church had been embellished with columns and marbles from Rome and Ravenna (Einhardus, Vita Karoli Magni 26 [MGH SS rer. Germ. 25, 31]) and, in fact predating this report,

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6 This excursus is settled within his discussion of the *Apollo Grannus* inscriptions from Lauingen-Faimingen near Augsburg, which also featured a well-known temple of the deity, whereas Aachen, as has been mentioned above, still lacks any such epigraphic evidence.

7 See also Ley / Schaub, this volume.

in a seemingly correspondent letter from 787, Pope Adrian I authorises the Frankish king to collect marble, mosaics and other decorative elements from a palace in Ravenna (Hadrianus I papa, Epistula 81 [MGH Epp. 3, 614]). Regardless of the historical truth, such statements testify to the effort to make Aachen equal in rank not only to Rome, but also to the famous late antique royal seat of Ravenna. Of course, Charlemagne's Aachen was meant to compete on a cosmopolitan scale, the means of which have been thoroughly and diversely researched[8]. This sort of conscious confrontation with its Roman and even Byzantine legacy will not least have fuelled the already contemporarily stylised *Roma secunda* metaphor, with which Aachen is styled at the latest in the so-called »Karlsepos«, dated 799 or shortly after (Karolus Magnus et Leo Papa 94 [MGH Poetae 1, 368]; Beumann 1966; Steinbauer 2010, 130–133)[9].

As has been shown, it is precisely at this time, a time defined by Charlemagne's successive sedentism in Aachen from 794 onwards, literally set in stone by the construction of his monumental »Kaiserpfalz« (Müller 2014, 31–37), that the name *Aquisgrani* emerges. It is first attested in 798, strikingly with absolutely no explanation in contemporary literature. In fact, as far as we can deduce from the sources, we are looking at a period of almost 150 years during which this suffix receives no etymological attention whatsoever. The transformation of *-grani* into the genitive form of the proper name, *Granus*, though, will not have occurred spontaneously, so some sort of preliminary lead time may be assumed. Now, as H. Müller has shown, Aachen was booming during the reigns of Charlemagne and Louis the Pious in the first half of the 9th century, who stayed here almost permanently, whereas the sovereigns' interest in Aachen increasingly faded in the second half of that century due to political and territorial circumstances (Müller 2014, 28–31 with figs 1–3)[10]. The external perception of the city at this time must have presented a contradictory picture, oscillating between Charlemagne's *Roma secunda* with the architectural jewel of the »Kaiserpfalz« embedded within it on the one hand, and on the other hand its current fate, being frequented only extremely rarely for ceremonial or political purposes.

It is conceivable that the terminological and thus etymological development sketched in this essay begins precisely here, in the second half of the 9th century, as the desire to revive, at least in name, the significance of this old, Roman city emerged out of this particular situation (cf. also Müller et al. 2013, 341–342). Whether the meaning of the younger suffix *-grani* had already been lost when it first appeared in the written sources, as E. Teichmann suggested (Teichmann 1902, 75), we do not know for sure. Anyway, as he puts it, the unfolding local tradition, which would turn the word element *-grani* into a name and later into a legendary founder of the place named *Granus*, in the end served to fill the knowledge gap concerning this word element, driven by the desire to understand its origin and to revive its meaning. Teichmann's concise summary, in this respect, almost sounds like a catchphrase and may be quoted here as a fitting conclusion: »Kein Kind der Phantasie des schlichten Volkes ist das Granusmärchen, sondern die Frucht gelehrter Grübelei« (Teichmann 1902, 75).

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8 Merely citing the literature that has dealt with the architectural models and concepts of the »Kaiserpfalz« in general or the octagon church in particular over the course of the last few years would by far exceed the confines of this essay.

9 The only surviving manuscript (Zurich Central Library, Ms. 78) is dated not later than the late 9th century.
10 See also Müller, this volume.

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