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## **CLAUSTRA ALPIUM IULIARUM — PROTECTING LATE ROMAN ITALY**

### **Abstract**

Claustra Alpium Iuliarum is a late Roman linear defence system that consisted of walls, towers, and fortresses, and was intended to defend against incursions into Italy from the eastern and northeastern parts of the Empire. In contrast to the outer borders of the Roman Empire, it was constructed in the late third/early fourth centuries inside the borders of the Roman state, along the geographical line dividing northeastern Italy from Illyricum. It lies in the mountainous area of the Julian Alps (uninhabited even in modern times), extending from the northern Adriatic (Rijeka in Croatia) to the Soča valley in Slovenia. The most important *via publica* between Aquileia and Emona was defended by three linear defence lines.

The author presents literary sources and numismatic evidence, as well as the results of archaeological excavations, and points out the chronological problems connected with the construction of this late Roman defence structure.

### **Key words**

Claustra Alpium Iuliarum, Julian Alps, roman defence system, 4<sup>th</sup> century

The defence system known from the fourth century Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus under the term *Claustra Alpium Iuliarum* is unique<sup>1</sup>, since it was constructed to protect northeastern Italy and not to defend the external frontiers of the Roman empire as — for instance — were the well-known limes of Hadrian in Roman Britain or the limes on the Rhine and the Danube or in northern Africa<sup>2</sup>.

In ancient written sources the defence system *Claustra Alpium Iuliarum* was always mentioned in association with the area of the Julian Alps, as understood by ancient geographers and historians. According to them, the term *Iuliae Alpes* denoted the region that stretched from Rijeka (Tarsatica) in Croatia to Vrhnika (Nauportus) in Slovenia, as well as Trieste (Tergeste), Zuglio (Iulium Carnicum), and Cividale (Forum Iulii) in northeastern Italy (fig. 1)<sup>3</sup>. Tacitus, however, referred to them in the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century as the Pannonian Alps (Pannoniae Alpes)<sup>4</sup>.



Fig. 1. The main settlements defining the Julian Alps (StepMap)

<sup>1</sup>Amm. Marc. 31. 11. 3.

<sup>2</sup>D.J. Breeze, *The Frontiers of Imperial Rome*, Barnsley 2011.

<sup>3</sup>J. Šašel, *Iuliae Alpes*, [in:] *Acti VII Ce. S.D.I.R.*, 1975–1976, p. 601–618 (= J. Šašel, *Opera Selecta*, Situla 30, Ljubljana 1992, p. 432–449).

<sup>4</sup>Tac., *Hist.* 2. 98. 3; 3. 1. 1–3.

This area separating Italy and Illyricum could be crossed on three main roads only: one connecting Tergeste with Tarsatica, the second Tergeste with Emona (modern Ljubljana), and the third Aquileia with Emona (fig. 2)<sup>5</sup>.



Fig. 2. The area under consideration in the 4<sup>th</sup> century (P. Kos)

The Julian Alps west of Emona were picturesquely described by the Roman historian Herodianus in the first half of the third century AD as follows: “This long mountain range with peaks stretching above the clouds was created by nature as a kind of defence line for Italy. It is covered by dense and thick forests; passes are narrow due to the precipitous slopes and rocks are everywhere”<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup>J. Šašel, Sistemi di difesa della porta illirico-italica nel Tardo Antico, [in:] *Il crinale d'Europa. L'area illirico-danubiana nei suoi rapporti con il mondo classico*, Roma 1984, p. 114 (= J. Šašel, *Opera Selecta*, Situla 30, Ljubljana 1992, p. 796).

<sup>6</sup>Herodian, 8. 1. 5–6. For the commentaries, see M. Šašel Kos, *A Historical Outline of the Region between Aquileia, the Adriatic, and Sirmium in Cassius Dio and Herodian* / *Zgodovinska podoba prostora med Akvilejo, Jadrantom in Sirmijem pri Kasiju Dionu in Herodijanu*, Ljubljana 1986.

The extreme strategic importance of this area for the defence (or, on the other hand, the penetration) of northeastern Italy can be comprehended from numerous ancient literary sources. The area played an important role at the time of the barbarian incursions, but primarily during the numerous internal political clashes. The mountainous area with its narrow gorges and vast forests was always cause for serious worries among the military commanders and their soldiers, which is so well described by Herodianus when recounting the incursion of the army of Maximinus Thrax from the Balkans to Italy in the spring of 238. He reported: “The army of Maximinus advanced through the region in great fear. When observing the landscape they justifiably anticipated danger...”<sup>7</sup>. And further on he wrote: “When reaching the other (Italian) side without being hindered, they started to sing triumphantly”<sup>8</sup>. Even in peaceful periods, travellers were often victims of robbers operating and hiding in the mountainous forests of the area, as for instance the Roman officer Antonius Valentinus, who was killed on the road over the Julian Alps and buried in Castra (modern Ajdovščina)<sup>9</sup>.

Its strategic importance can best be illustrated by events in the late sixties of the second century AD, when for the first time Italy was seriously threatened by external enemies. At that time the Quadi and Marcomanni invaded northern Italy without hindrance, besieged Aquileia, and devastated Opitergium (modern Oderzo, northeast of Venice), fully exposing the vulnerability of Italy from the east<sup>10</sup>. This episode clearly demonstrated that at that time the Julian Alps did not yet have a defensive system. Only in the aftermath of this incursion was the broader area between Forum Iulii, Tergeste, and Celeia (modern Celje) incorporated into the *praetentura Italiae et Alpium*, a short lasting defence system — a kind of broad military-administrative zone — established under the emperor Marcus Aurelius in approximately 168/169 (fig. 3)<sup>11</sup>. The defence area was under the command of *legatus Augusti* Quintus Antistius Adventus, as documented

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<sup>7</sup>Herodian, 8. 1. 6.

<sup>8</sup>Herodian, 8. 2. 1.

<sup>9</sup>Inscr. Ital. X 4, 339.

<sup>10</sup>Amm. Marc. 29. 6. 1.

<sup>11</sup>J. Šašel, Über Umfang und Dauer der Militärzone Praetentura Italiae et Alpium zur Zeit Mark Aurels, *Museum Helveticum* 31, p. 225–233 (= J. Šašel, *Opera Selecta*, Situla 30, Ljubljana 1992, p. 388–396). See also G. Bigliardi, La Praetentura Italiae et Alpium alla luce di nuove ricerche archeologiche, *Aquileia Nostra* 78, 2007, p. 297–312.

on a stone base erected soon after 170 at Thibilis in Numidia<sup>12</sup>. The army was stationed in a newly built legionary camp at Ločica near Celje.

This defensive military zone of Marcus Aurelius is often regarded as a predecessor of *Claustra Alpium Iuliarum*. I believe, however, that such a comparison is unjustified, since the former system should be considered as defence in depth while the latter system must be regarded as linear defence.



Fig. 3. Supposed approximate area (in grey) incorporated into the defence system *praetentura Italiae et Alpium* (StepMap)

Even after such a devastating experience, the Romans still did not secure the passes in the Julian Alps with artificial defensive structures. The report of Herodian on the advance of the army of Maximinus Thrax into Italy in 238 clearly demonstrates that the passes over the Julian Alps were not yet defended<sup>13</sup>.

Thus, in spite of the strategic importance of this area, it was indeed rather late in the Roman period when the first building activities took place in order to establish a line for successfully defending Italy.

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As early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, local historians began to pay attention to the stone walls extending in the hinterland of Rijeka. The well-known historian I.W. Valvasor (1641–1693) had already connected them with the Roman period (fig. 4A–B).

<sup>12</sup>See J. Šašel, *Antični viri / Ancient sources*, [in:] J. Šašel, P. Petru, *Claustra Alpium Iuliarum I*, Fontes, Ljubljana 1971, p. 22 no. 4.

<sup>13</sup>Herodian, 8. 2. 1.

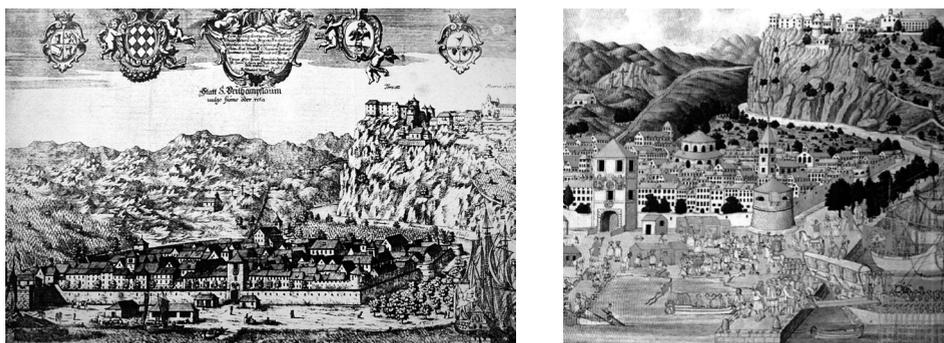


Fig. 4A–B. A: Engraving (I.W. Valvasor, *Die Ehre des Herzogthums Crain*, Laybach 1689). B: Oil painting from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Both pictures show Rijeka at that time. In the upper left part of both pictures, the Roman wall ascending the hill is clearly visible

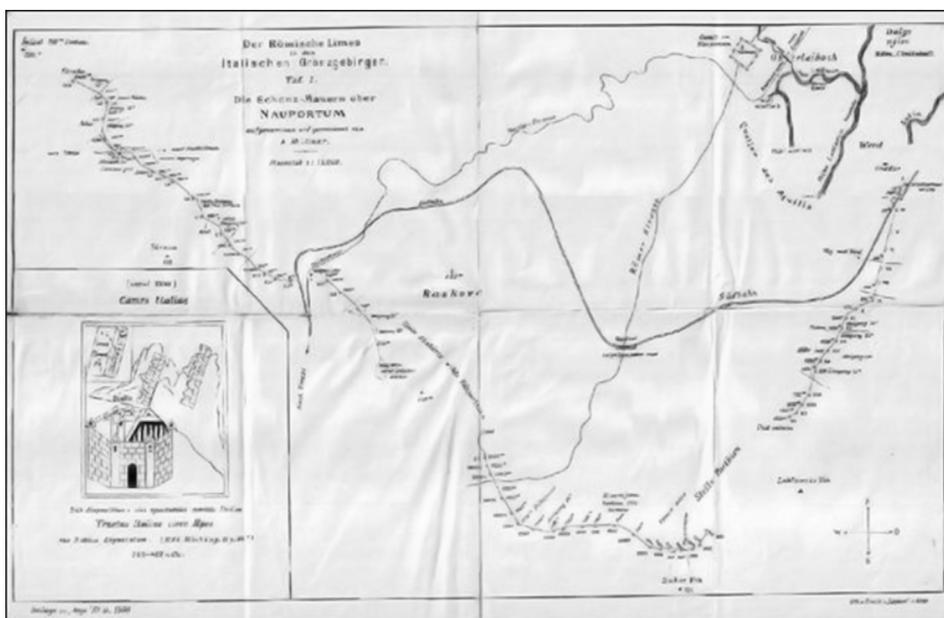


Fig. 5. The section of the defence line in the hinterland of Vrhnika (Nauportum), as measured and sketched by Alfons Müllner in 1900<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup>A. Müllner, *Der römische Limes in den italischen Grenzgebirgen. I. Die Schanzmauern um Nauportum*, *Argo* 8, 1900, p. 201–204; p. 220–222, Beilage.

In the following centuries, the remains of walls and towers of the defence system were often studied and measured (fig. 5), however, this did not systematically occur earlier than in the fifties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when a joint research project of Slovenian and Croatian archaeologists was launched. The survey of the entire line of the defence system was published by the National Museum of Slovenia at the late date of 1971<sup>15</sup>.

On this basis, we know that the defence system *Claustra Alpium Iuliarum* consisted of three lines of walls, stretching for about 150km from Rijeka (Tarsatica) to the valley of the Soča River (Aesontius) in northwestern Slovenia.

Today the course of the defence walls and the position of towers as well as forts and fortresses are to a great extent well-known and documented. Some segments of walls and towers (but only a minor part) have been excavated (not all of them published), some of them have been conserved and presented *in situ* (fig. 6), however, the majority can nowadays be seen in the field only as protruding mounds (fig. 7). The walls were not built in a continuous line, but were constructed only in the areas that were more easily traversable. It should be noted that the areas where the walls are located are still mostly uninhabited, lying in vast forests and mountainous regions with limited possibilities of passage. The walls primarily closed off those areas that were more easily accessible (fig. 8), usually where small local roads passed through towards Italy and the West<sup>16</sup>.



Fig. 6. The conserved and partly reconstructed fort of Lanišče. Photo: P. Kos

<sup>15</sup>J. Šašel, P. Petru, *Claustra...*

<sup>16</sup>See, for instance, S. Ciglenečki, *Potek alternativne ceste Siscija — Akvileja na prostoru zahodne Dolenjske in Notranjske v času od 4. do 6. stoletja / Der Verlauf der Alternativstrasse Siscia — Aquileia im Raum von Westdolenjsko und Notranjsko in der Zeitspanne vom 4. bis zum 6. Jh.*, *Arheološki vestnik* 36, 1985, p. 255–284.



Fig. 7. Pokojišče near Vrhnika. The outlines of a square tower and defence wall can still be seen in the forest. Photo: P. Kos

The main goal of the defence system, however, was to protect the most important state road (*via publica*), connecting northern Italy and its capital Aquileia with the Balkans, and further with the Near East, as well as with northeastern Europe, since it followed the course of the prehistoric Amber Road (see fig. 2)<sup>17</sup>.

This road led originally over the Ocra (modern Razdrto) pass<sup>18</sup>, which Strabo in his “Geography”, written in ca. 18 AD, mentioned as “the lowest part of the Alps stretching from Raetia to the Iapodes”, over which “goods are transported with carts from Aquileia to a place named Nauportus”<sup>19</sup>. During the reign of Augustus, it was transposed in a more northerly direction thereby shortening

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<sup>17</sup>C. Witschel, Meilensteine als historische Quelle? Das Beispiel Aquileia, *Chiron* 32, 2002, p. 325–393.

<sup>18</sup>J. Horvat, A. Bavdek, Okra. Vrata med Sredozemljem in Srednjo Evropo / Ocra. The gateway between the Mediterranean and Central Europe, Ljubljana 2009.

<sup>19</sup>Strab. 4. 6. 10; 7. 5. 2.

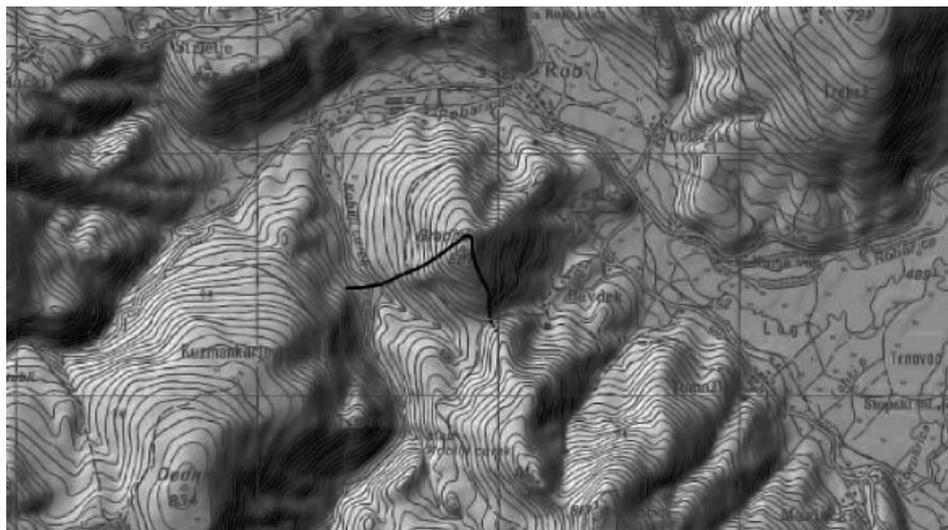


Fig. 8. The course of the 1548m long Roman defence wall reinforced with towers near the village of Rob presented in a digital relief model. It clearly shows the closure and control of passable valleys. N. Perovšek, *Oživljanje poznoantične rimske zapore v slovenskih krajih / The revival of Late Roman walls in the area of Slovenia* — unpublished BA thesis), Ljubljana 2008, fig. 17. P. Kos on basis of R.J.A. Talbert (ed.), *The Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World*, Princeton 2000, Map 20.

the travelling time from Aquileia to Emona by a whole day. Rufius Festus wrote about this important achievement in his short history of the Romans (“sub Iulio Octaviano Caesare Augusto per Alpes Iulias iter factum est”)<sup>20</sup>.

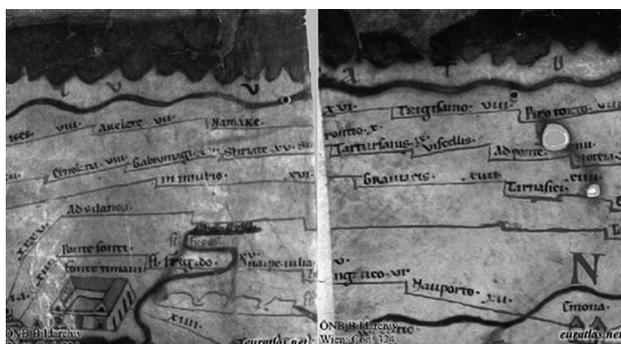


Fig. 9. Sections 3 and 4 of the Tabula Peutingeriana showing the area between Aquileia and Emona (Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 324)

<sup>20</sup>J. Šašel, *Iuliae Alpes*, [in:] *Acti VII Ce. S.D.I.R.*, 1975–76, p. 604 (= J. Šašel, *Opera Selecta*, Situla 30, Ljubljana 1992, p. 435).

On the Tabula Peutingeriana the names of the stations along the new road — *Fluvio Frigido, In Alpe Iulia, Longatico, Nauporto* — are noted (fig. 9)<sup>21</sup>. The line of this most important road between Nauportus (Vrhnika) and Castra (Ajdovščina) was the most defended part of the entire defence system, thus showing its major strategic importance. It was closed off not only with one line of walls and towers but also reinforced with a second and third additional lines of walls and towers, as well as larger and smaller forts (fig. 10).

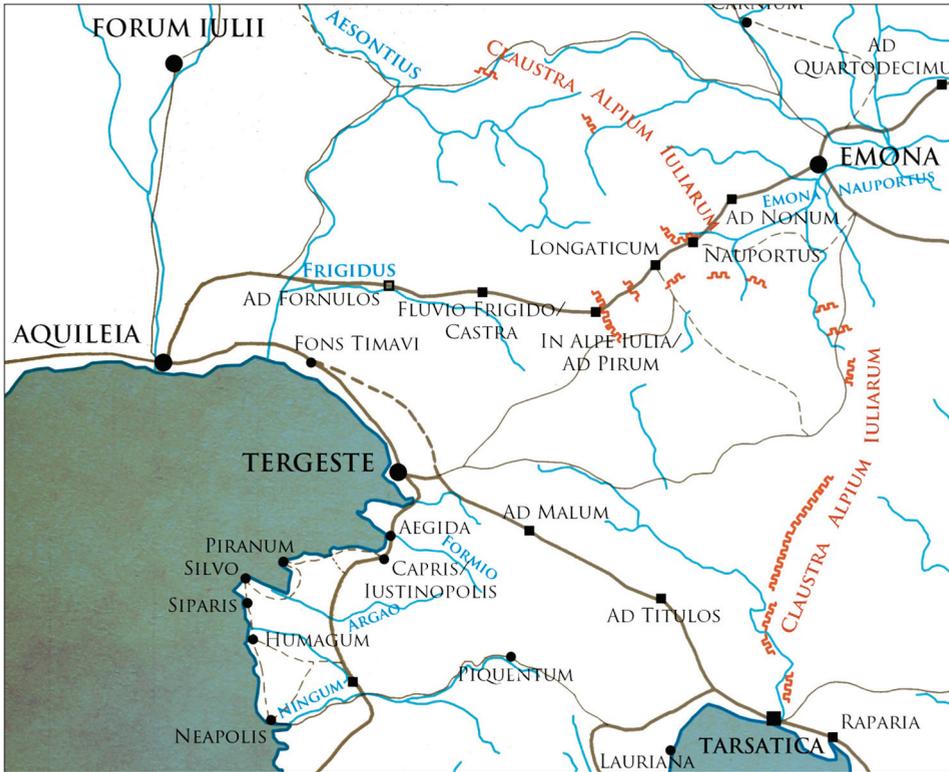


Fig. 10. The course of the defence lines

The most appropriate name for the linear defence system is *Claustra Alpium Iuliarum*, as used by Ammianus Marcellinus when writing about the hostilities

<sup>21</sup>For more detailed information on the Tabula Peutingeriana, see R.J.A. Talbert, *Rome's World. The Peutinger Map Reconsidered*, Cambridge 2010.

in 352 between the usurper Magnentius and Constantius II: “*claustra patefacta sunt Alpium Iuliarum*”<sup>22</sup>.

The defence system in the Julian Alps is mentioned in ancient literary sources under various names, not all of which, however, can be interpreted as constructed elements but rather as natural obstacles<sup>23</sup>.

TERM	YEAR TO WHICH THE AUTHOR IS REFERRING	AUTHOR*
confinium	6	Veleius Paterculus
claustra, praesidia	69	Tacitus
clausae Alpes	350/351	Aurelius Victor
claustra Alpium Iuliarum	352	Ammianus Marcelinus
Italōn dishoriai	352	Iulianus
angustiae Alpium Iuliarum	361	Ammianus Marcelinus
Alpium vallum	375, 388	Sanctus Ambrosius
murus Alpius	388	Sanctus Ambrosius
Iulia claustra	388	Pacatus Drepanius
claustra	388	Paulus Orosius
claustra, semirutae turres, vallum	394	Claudius Claudianus
claustra Italiae	401	Rufinus Turranius
tractus Italiae circa Alpes	early 5 <sup>th</sup> century	Notitia Dignitatum
Clusurae Alpium	452	Prosper Tiro

\*All literary sources were meticulously collected by J. Šašel, *Antični viri/Ancient sources*, [in:] J. Šašel, P. Petru 1971, op. cit, p.17–45

Obviously its name is almost always directly connected with the term *Alpes Iuliae* or such a connotation can be understood from the context of the text.

Therefore it is hard to agree with the apparent tendency to interpret the defence system *Claustra Alpium Iuliarum* as a broader border zone that would stretch beyond the actual lines of the defence walls as far as ca. 100km to the

<sup>22</sup>Amm. Marc. 31. 11. 3.

<sup>23</sup>For the terms *clausurae*, *claustrae*, *murus* and *vallum*, *fossatum*, *bracchium*, see J. Napoli, R. Rebuffat, *Clausurae*, La frontière, *Travaux de la Maison de l’Orient* 21, 1993, p. 35–43. For the term *clausura*, also see N. Labory, À propos de la signification du mot *clausura* utilisé en architecture militaire, *Latomus* 62, 2003, p. 898–901.

east, as well as to the west<sup>24</sup>. I believe, however, that the actual term *Claustra Alpium Iuliarum*, or the later *tractus Italiae*, refers strictly to the defence walls and other structures in the Alps. This can be argued on the basis of the above mentioned fact that the system almost always appeared in connection with the Julian Alps and can be further corroborated with a drawing of the *tractus Italiae circa Alpes* in the “Notitia Dignitatum”<sup>25</sup>, explicitly depicting walls with towers on the mountains ascending from the Italian plain east of Aquileia, which is illustrated in the front of the drawing (fig. 11)<sup>26</sup>. It should also be noted that the term *claustra* must most probably be interpreted as a linear defence line<sup>27</sup>.

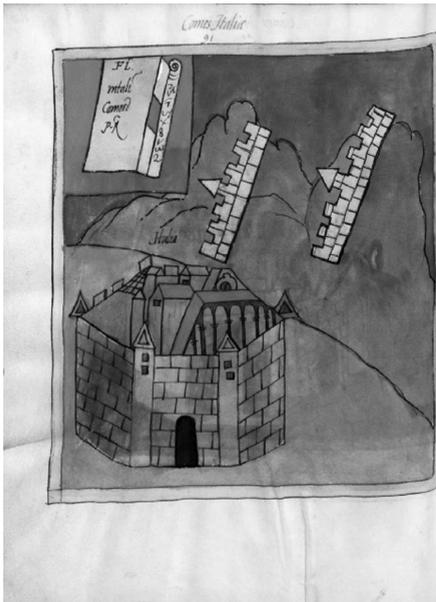


Fig. 11. Notitia Dignitatum Occ. XXIV. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, München, Clm 10291, fol. 214v

<sup>24</sup>S. Ciglenečki, Utrdba Tonovcov grad — pomemben člen poznorimske obrambe Italije / The Fort at Tonovcov grad — An important part of the Late Roman defence system of Italy, [in:] S. Ciglenečki, Z. Modrijan, T. Milavec (eds.), Poznoantična utrjena naselbina Tonovcov grad pri Kobaridu: naselbinski ostanki in interpretacija (=Late antique fortified settlement Tonovcov grad near Kobarid: settlement remains and interpretation, Opera Instituti Archaeologici Sloveniae 23, Ljubljana 2011, p. 259–271).

<sup>25</sup>For the new edition of Notitia Dignitatum, see C.N. Faleiro, La Notitia Dignitatum: nueva edición crítica y comentario histórico, Madrid 2005. See also J.-L. Boudartchouk, La frontière et les limites de l'Empire romain tardif. En mots et en images, à travers la Notitia Dignitatum (ca. 400–430), Archéopages 21, 2008, p. 48–55.

<sup>26</sup>Not. Dign. Occ. XXIV.

<sup>27</sup>J. Napoli, R. Rebuffat, Clausurae, p. 42.

This leads us to the problem of the chronological determination of the construction of the defence structures *Claustra Alpium Iuliarum*. Chronological proposals for its construction range from the period of Diocletian (284–305)<sup>28</sup>, the reign of Constantine (306–337)<sup>29</sup>, to the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century<sup>30</sup>.

For establishing the chronology we have three types of sources at our disposal: archaeological excavations, numismatic sources, as well as ancient written sources. In spite of the scale of the ancient literary sources, ideas are still present in modern research that the construction of the *Claustra Alpium Iuliarum* occurred only in the very late 4<sup>th</sup> century, surprisingly ignoring archaeological as well as numismatic sources<sup>31</sup>. Such ideas rely on the writing of Ambrose, “De obitu Valentiniani” 4, which supposedly refers to an unidentifiable event in the year 392. Ambrose mentions the term *vallum*, which is interpreted as proof that no walls had existed prior to that<sup>32</sup>. When setting the *terminus post quem* for the defence wall construction, they additionally refer to the same author (Ambrose, “De excessu fratris Satyri” 1. 31), who mentioned that Italy was protected in 374 from the invasion of the Quadi and the Sarmatians by wooden barricades, which would supposedly prove that no walled defence structures existed at that time<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup>S. Johnson, *Late Roman Fortifications*, London 1983, p. 218. A. Marcone (L’Illirico e la frontiera nordorientale dell’Italia nel IV secolo D.C, [in:] G. Urso (ed.), *Dall’Adriatico al Danubio. L’Illyrico nell’età greca e romana*, Pisa 2004, p. 353), expresses doubt that the system could have already functioned under Diocletian.

<sup>29</sup>Ad Pirum: S. Johnson, *Late Roman Fortifications*, p. 217. Defence system *Claustra Alpium Iuliarum*: N. Christie, *From the Danube to the Po: Late Roman Defence in Pannonia and Italy*, [in:] A. Poulter (ed.), *The Transition to Late Antiquity, on the Danube and Beyond* (Proceedings of the British Academy 141), Oxford–New York 2008, p. 566; M. Vannesse, *I Claustra Alpium Iuliarum: Un riesame della questione circa la difesa del confine Nord-Orientale dell’Italia in epoca tardo-romana*, *Aquileia Nostra* 78, 2007, p. 315, 320; M. Vannesse, *La défense de l’Occident romain pendant l’Antiquité tardive* (Collection Latomus 326), Bruxelles 2010, p. 307, p. 312. See also G. Bigliardi, *Alpes, id est Claustra Italiae. La trasformazione dei complessi fortificati romani dell’arco Alpino centro-orientale tra l’età tardo-repubblicana e l’età tardo-antica*, *Aquileia nostra* 75, 2004, p. 335. For N. Christie, *The Alps as a frontier* (A.D. 168–774), *JRA* 4, 1991, p. 417, the system cannot post-date Constantine.

<sup>30</sup>A. Marcone, *Tra Adriatico e Danubio nel IV secolo*, [in:] M. Buora, W. Jobst (eds.), *Roma sul Danubio. Da Aquileia a Carnuntum lungo la via dell’ambra*, Roma 2002, p. 175.

<sup>31</sup>A. Poulter, *An indefensible frontier: the Claustra Alpium Iuliarum*, in print.

<sup>32</sup>J. Napoli, R. Rebuffat, *Clausurae*, p. 41.

<sup>33</sup>A. Degrassi, *Fasti Capitolini*, Torino 1954, p. 139; A. Marcone, *Tra Adriatico e Danubio nel IV secolo*, p. 176; J. Napoli, *Recherches sur les fortifications linéaires romaines*, Roma 1997, p. 283.

But there are other written sources as well, telling a slightly different story, which are by far more reliable. These are the sources relating to the civil war between the usurper Magnentius and the legitimate sovereign Constantius II in the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century<sup>34</sup>. Ammianus Marcellinus explicitly used the term *Claustra Alpium Iuliarum* for the defence system of that time<sup>35</sup>. Moreover, Iulianus, the Greek philosopher and writer, military commander, and later Roman emperor (Julian) wrote as a contemporary of the events: “The highest part of the Alps was defended by an old fort, which the usurper (i.e. Magnentius) restored, building new defence structures”<sup>36</sup>. This very important source shows that as early as the early fifties the fortress of Ad Pirum (which was doubtless meant by the term “old fort”) was regarded as an old fortified structure.

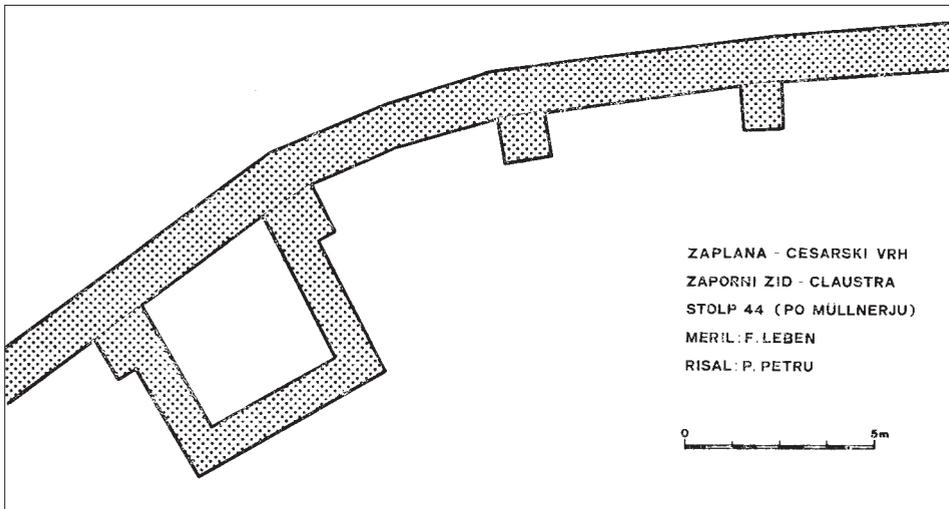


Fig. 12. Plan of a defence wall with tower near Zaplana above Vrhnika. P. Petru, “Novejše arheološke raziskave *Claustra Alpium Iuliarum* in kasnoantičnih utrd v Sloveniji”, *Arheološki vestnik* 23, 1972, p. 345, fig. 1

<sup>34</sup>For the details of the historical background, see J. Šašel, *The Struggle between Magnentius and Constantius II for Italy and Illyricum*. — *Živa antika* 21, 1971, p. 205–216 (= *Opera Selecta*, Ljubljana 1992, p. 716–727).

<sup>35</sup>Amm. Marc. 31. 11. 3.

<sup>36</sup>Julian, *Or.* III 1720–25.

Some stretches of walls with towers (the hinterland of Rijeka<sup>37</sup>, Verd<sup>38</sup>, Zaplana (fig. 12)<sup>39</sup>, Rakitna<sup>40</sup>) and small forts (Turnovšče above Vrhnika<sup>41</sup>) within the first defence line, as well as the forts of Lanišče and Martinj hrib<sup>42</sup> within the second defence line, have been archaeologically excavated, not all of them properly published. The most important fortress within the third defence line was Ad Pirum (today Hrušica) on the highest mountain pass between Aquileia and Emona (fig. 13, 14).



Fig. 13. Aerial view of the Ad Pirum pass with the fortress from 1956–1957

<sup>37</sup>R. Starac, *Liburnijski limes — arheološko-konservatorski radovi na Lokalitetima Vranjeno i Za Presiku / Limes Liburnico — Ricerche archeologiche e lavori di recupero nelle località di Vranjeno e Za Presiku*, [in:] *Tarsatički principij. Kasnoantičko vojno zapovjedništvo / Principia di Tarsatica. Quartiere generale d'epoca tardoantica*, Rijeka 2009, p. 275–287.

<sup>38</sup>D. Vuga, *Dolinska pot pri Vrhniki*, *Varstvo spomenikov* 15, 1972, p. 148.

<sup>39</sup>M. Urleb, *Strmica nad Vrhniko*, *Varstvo spomenikov* 9, 1965, p. 185–186. See also P. Petru, *Neuere Grabungen an den Clausurae Alpium Iuliarum*, *Studien zu den Militärgrenzen Roms (Vorträge des 6. Internationalen Limeskongresses in Süddeutschland)*, Köln–Graz 1967, p. 122–126; idem, *Novejše arheološke raziskave Claustra Alpium Iuliarum in kasnoantičnih utrdb v Sloveniji / Recenti ricerche archeologiche delle Claustra Alpium Iuliarum e delle fortificazioni tardo antiche in Slovenia*, *Arheološki vestnik* 23, 1972, p. 343–366.

<sup>40</sup>J. Klemenc, *Izkopavanja na Rakitni*, *Varstvo spomenikov* 9, 1962–1964, p. 152.

<sup>41</sup>M. Slabe, *Nova podoba arheološkega območja Turnovšče nad Vrhniko / The new appearance of the archaeological site of Turnovšče above Vrhnika*, *Varstvo spomenikov* 22, 1979, p. 123–144.

<sup>42</sup>F. Leben, Z. Šubic, *Poznoantični kastel Vrh Brsta pri Martinj Hribu na Logaški planoti / Das spätantike Kastell Vrh Brsta bei Martinj Hrib auf dem Karstplateau von Logatec*, *Arheološki vestnik* 41, 1990, p. 313–354.

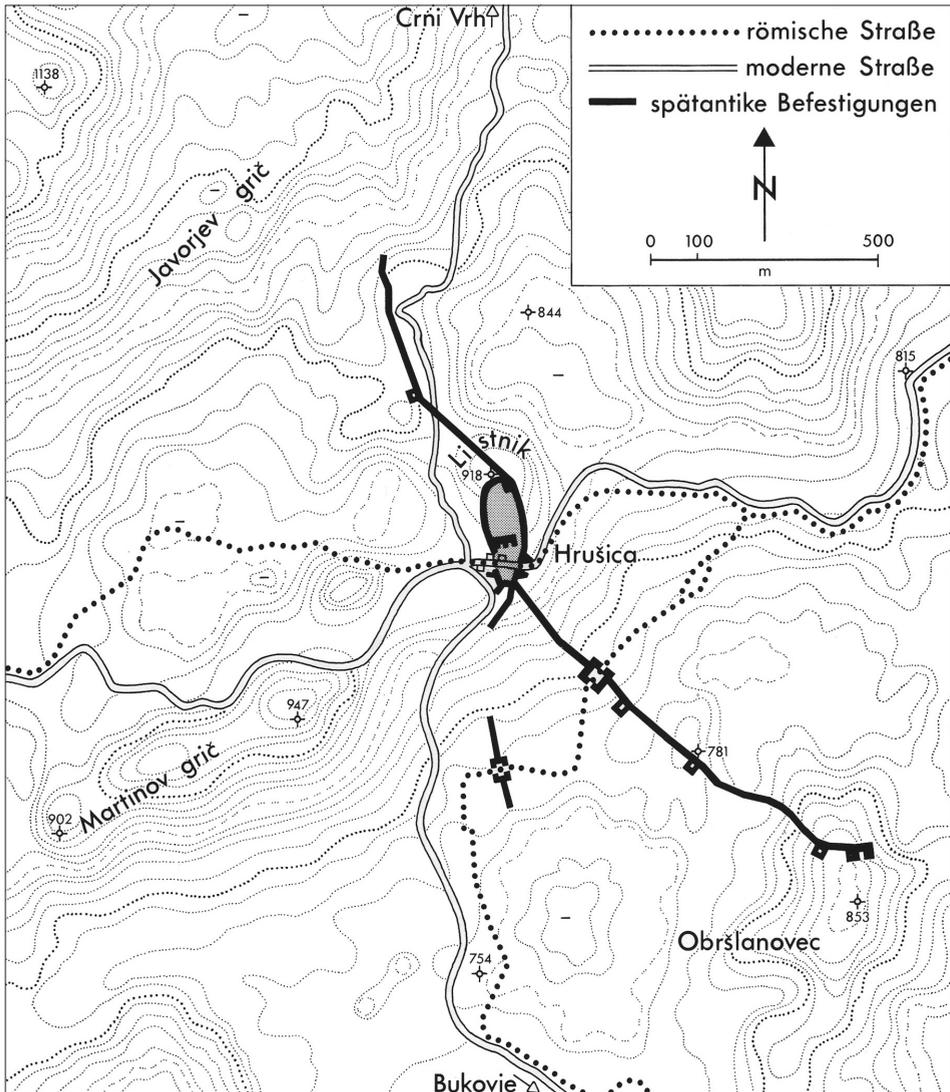


Fig. 14. The fortress of Ad Pirum with adjoining walls, towers, and two road towers on the vicinal road below the fort. T. Ulbert, *Ad Pirum (Hrušica)*. Spätromische Passbefestigung in den Julischen Alpen (Münchner Beiträge zur Vor- und Frühgeschichte 31), München 1981

It is also the most well researched fortress of the entire system, presented in a monographic publication<sup>43</sup>. Recently the results of the excavations of

<sup>43</sup>Ibidem.

the principia of the fortress of Tarsatica (fig. 15 A–B) were also presented in a monograph<sup>44</sup>. The walls and towers of the fortress Castra (fig. 16 A–B), lying ca. 18km west of the last defending line of *Claustra Alpium Iuliarum*, have also been studied in detail<sup>45</sup>. Therefore, we have a good foundation to reconsider the chronological determination of its construction.

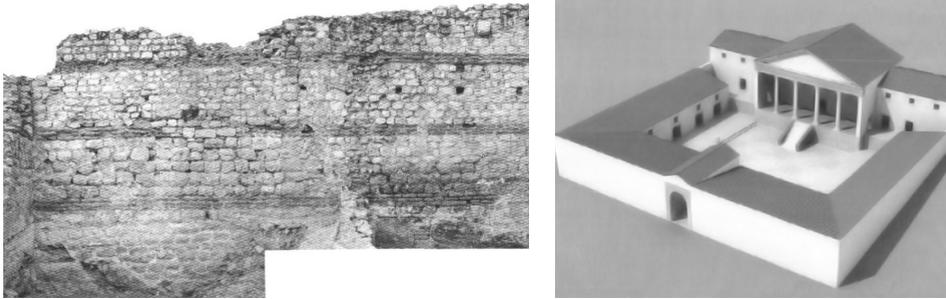


Fig. 15 A–B. Fortress of Tarsatica. A: western wall of the *principia*. B: Hypothetical reconstruction of the *principia*. L. Bekić, N. Radić-Štivić (eds.), *Tarsatički principij...*



Fig. 16. A A–B. Plan of the late Roman fortress of Castra and an aerial photo with marked towers. A: N. Osmuk, *Ajdovščina — Castra. Stanje arheoloških raziskovanj (1994) / Ajdovščina — Castra. Forschungsstand (1994)*, *Arheološki vestnik* 48, 1997, p. 119–130

<sup>44</sup>L. Bekić, N. Radić-Štivić (eds.), *Tarsatički principij. Kasnoantičko vojno zapovjedništvo / Principia di Tarsatica. Quartiere generale d'epoca tardoantica*, Rijeka 2009, p. 183–225.

<sup>45</sup>N. Osmuk, *Ajdovščina — Castra. Stanje arheoloških raziskovanj (1994) / Ajdovščina — Castra. Forschungsstand (1994)*, *Arheološki vestnik* 48, 1997, p. 119–130.

I believe that the most decisive arguments for establishing the time of the construction of the walls and fortresses are offered by coin finds, which are undoubtedly a primary historical source<sup>46</sup>. On the one hand, we have coin finds from well documented stratigraphic units, while on the other hand, the bulk of coin finds from the fortresses reflects the influx of money into circulation, thereby dating the activities in a fort (fig. 17)<sup>47</sup>.

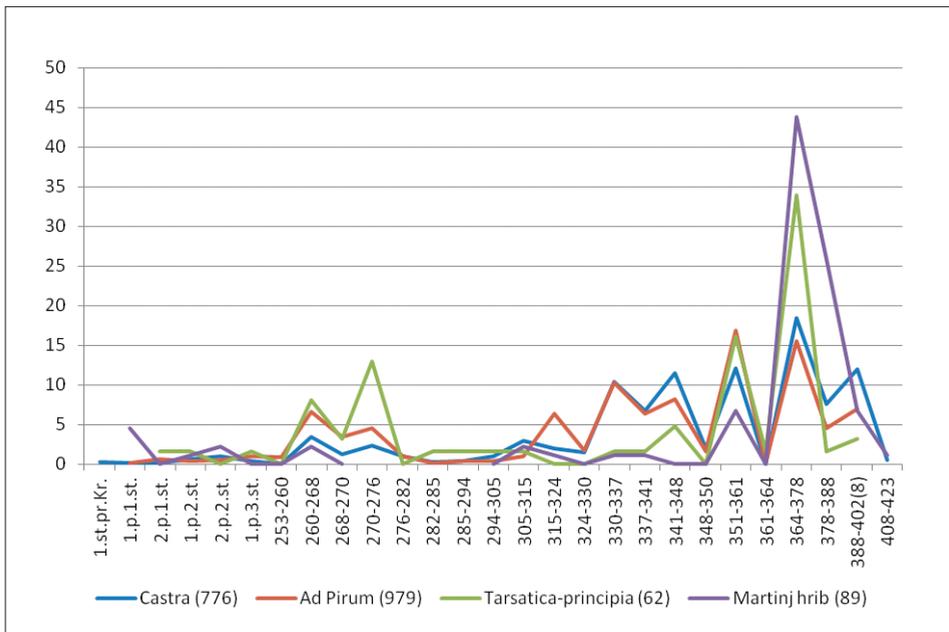


Fig. 17. Graph showing the percentage share of coins from individual minting periods

The sensitivity of coin finds can be best presented through an example from the mid 4<sup>th</sup> century at the Castra and Ad Pirum forts. The following graph (fig. 18) shows that the percentage share of coins from individual minting periods at Castra and Ad Pirum does not significantly deviate from the percentage share

<sup>46</sup>For the interpretation of coin finds, see P. Kos, Interpretacija (antičnih) novčnih najdb. Metodologija — njene možnosti in pasti / The interpretation of Roman coin finds. Methodology — its potentials and pitfalls, Arheološki vestnik 48, 1997, p. 97–115.

<sup>47</sup>The evidence was collected and interpreted by P. Kos, The construction and abandonment of the Claustra Alpium Iuliarum defence system in light of the numismatic material / Gradnja in opustitev obrambnega sistema Claustra Alpium Iuliarum v luči numizmatičnega gradiva, Arheološki vestnik 63, 2012, p. 57–93.

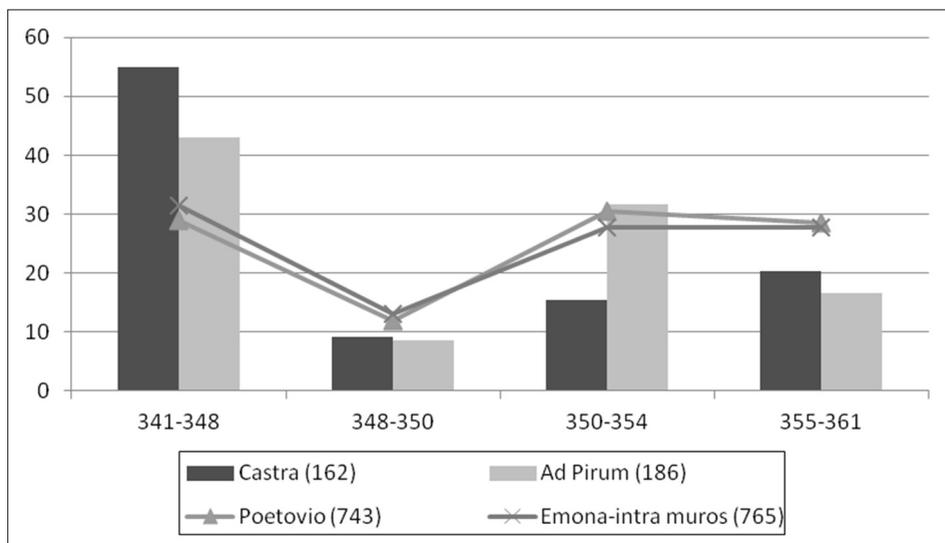


Fig. 18. The percentage share of coins from individual minting periods between 341 and 361

of coins at two large Roman towns in modern Slovenia: Emona and Poetovio (today Ptuj). When studying in detail the minting period 350–355, however, a considerably higher percentage share of coins of Magnentius and his brother Decentius is represented at Castra and Ad Pirum (fig. 19). This fact doubtless reflects a more intensive presence of the soldiers of Magnentius at both forts and at the same time corroborates the reports of Iulianus about the presence of Magnentius’ army in the fortress of Ad Pirum<sup>48</sup>.

Fig. 19. The numerical and percentage share of coins of Magnentius and Decentius among coin finds from the period 350–355

	CASTRAS	AD PIRUM	EMONA — INTRA MUROS	POETOVIO
350–355	25	59	232	227
Mag.+Dec.	12 (48%)	25 (42%)	37 (15.94%)	5 (2.2%)

One further illustrative example can be presented by studying in detail the exact distribution of coins in the field at the southwestern tower of Ad Pirum

<sup>48</sup>Julian, Or. III 1720–25.

wall (fig. 20). It enables us to chronologically determine rather exactly the destruction of the earlier square tower (after 352) and the later construction of the new one, this time pentagonal (after 375).



Fig. 20. The southwestern tower on the wall of the Ad Pirum fortress showing two chronological phases of its construction

Coin finds are presented from archaeological contexts that can definitely be connected to construction activities on the walled defensive structures — for instance coins found in the mortar cores of the fortress Castra towers or coins found in the mortar layer on the outer side of the fortress wall of Ad Pirum. Data are presented about the latest coins from individual fortifications, which indicate an interruption in the regular influx of money into circulation and thus also a break in the intensity of life at the fortifications<sup>49</sup>. In this manner, it can be established that the first construction activities in building the walls and towers of the fort of Castra can be placed as early as the 280s. For Ad Pirum, the coin from the mortar layer gives us a *terminus ante quem* for the building of the wall in 312, while the otherwise rare coin finds in the towers of the defence system indicate building activities no earlier than the mid 4<sup>th</sup> century. Coin finds show an interruption in monetary circulation at the Lanišče and Martinj hrib forts at the end of the 380s, and at Tarsatica at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, while coins from the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century were also found at the forts of Castra and Ad Pirum (fig. 21).

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<sup>49</sup>For details, see P. Kos, The construction...

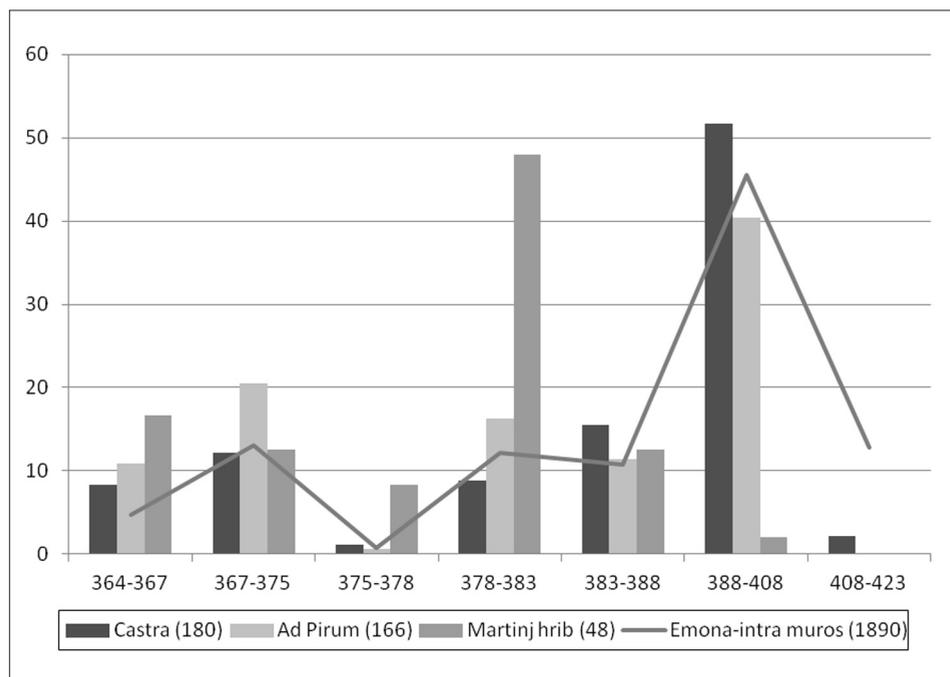


Fig. 21. The percentage share of coins from individual minting periods in the period between 364 and 423

On the basis of field survey and archaeological excavations at some segments of *Claustra Alpium Iuliarum* we have fairly good idea what the system looked like. There were long stretches of around 1.2m thick walls that were most probably ca. 3m high, very often reinforced with towers (they occurred at an approximate distance of 100m) with dimensions of 4×4m or 5×5m. Some of these towers, especially those in exposed places, were most probably used as signalling posts. Signalling with fire must have been common at that time and therefore it may be of interest to mention the functioning of signalling with fire as described by Sextus Iulius Africanus in his encyclopaedic work “Kestoi” in ca. 230 AD. He was the only author to describe this system; however, since he was a Greek-speaking author he wrote about how to signal in the Greek alphabet. He described the technique as follows: “Romans use the following technique, which seems to me extraordinary. If they want to signal with fire they do as follows. They choose the suitable places for signalling. They have three fires — on the right, on the left and in the middle, meaning alpha to theta on the left, from iota to pi in the middle, and rho to omega on the right. If signalling a letter alpha they lift the fire on the left once, for the letter beta twice and for

the letter gamma three times, and so on. The receivers of the signal can easily decode such signals and transmit them to the next outpost<sup>50</sup>.

Where the roads crossed the defence line, it seems that towers were erected across the road with a gate preventing easy passage. Two such road towers were excavated not far from the most important fort Ad Pirum (fig. 22 A).

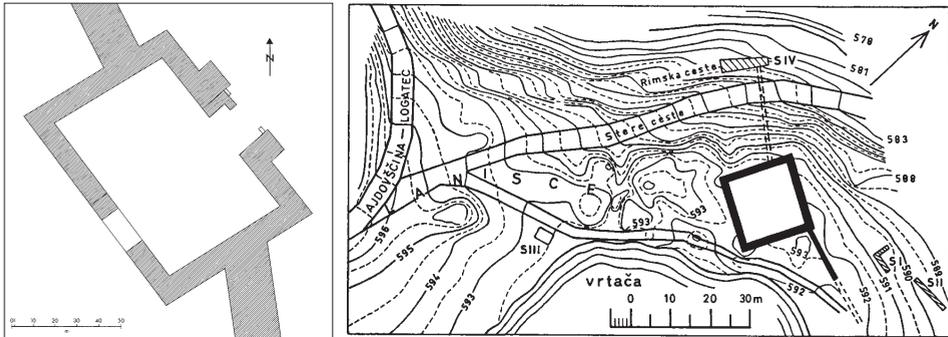


Fig. 22 A–B. A: Road tower on the road beneath the Ad Pirum fortress. B: Plan of the fort of Lanišče

There were smaller forts built on the most sensitive points, giving shelter to smaller military units, such as small fort at Lanišče measuring 20×20m (fig. 22 B).

The most important fort in the system was Ad Pirum, where traffic from Italy to Illyricum and *vice versa* was possible only through the fortress, thus thoroughly controlling the pass. It was situated on the highest pass (altitude 867m) between Aquileia and Emona, enclosed by huge walls that were nearly 3m wide. The fort was divided in the upper part with a huge wall reinforced with towers (fig. 24 A). The upper part was not suitable for a permanent settlement, due to its steep slopes, as shown by archaeological excavations. In the lower part of the fort, building activities could be carried out only over ca. 2000m<sup>2</sup> (fig. 24 B). The remains of some wooden barracks and two houses were found there. The houses can be dated on the basis of small finds from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> centuries; some of them had been often destroyed by fire. The small finds illustrate the civilian character of the settlement on the pass during the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries.

<sup>50</sup>M.K. Dahm, Roman Frontier Signalling and the Order of the fupark, *The Journal of Indo-European Studies* 39/1–2, 2011, p. 1–12.

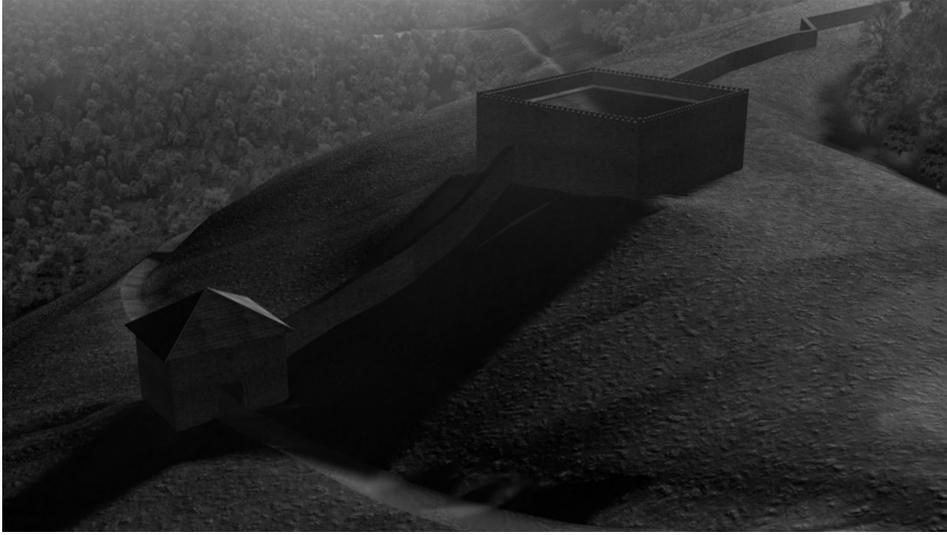


Fig. 23. A hypothetical reconstruction of the Lanišče fortress and the road tower beneath it for the control of traffic on the Emona — Aquileia road (author P. Kos)



Fig. 24 A–B. The Ad Pirum fortress. A: View of the upper part of the fortress with the transverse defensive wall. B: View of the lower part of the fortress. A–B: Photo: P. Kos

The finds that can be connected with military activities range from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century to the very late 4<sup>th</sup> century. The rather scarce space available for permanent settlement indicates that only small military units were permanently stationed in the fort, which must have been additionally reinforced only in times of acute danger.

Certain virtual reconstructions of the fort Ad Pirum have been proposed in the past, some of them at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century quite romantic (fig. 25), and some of them more realistic.



Fig. 25. A romantic reconstruction of the Ad Pirum fortress made in 1863 by Alberto Rieger, [in:] V. Scussa, *Storia cronografica di Trieste dalla sua origine sino all'anno 1695 del canonico D. Vincenzo Scussa, cogli annali dal 1695 al 1848 del procuratore civico cav. Pietro dott. Kandler, Trieste 1863*

During last three years the National Museum of Slovenia was a partner in the project “Archaeological Parks”, financed by the EU with the goal to disseminate knowledge gained through archaeological research to the broader public<sup>51</sup>.

On the basis of archaeological investigations, we tried to produce a virtual reconstruction of the fort in the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. For various details, parallels from forts on the late Roman Danubian limes in Austria (showing, for instance, the height of the towers storeys) or from late Roman fort depictions on late Roman coins (showing the roof shapes of towers) were taken into consideration<sup>52</sup>.

<sup>51</sup>The project: The Archaeological Parks of the Northern Adriatic is financed through a program of trans-borders cooperation of Italy–Slovenia 2007–2013.

<sup>52</sup>A short film presenting the fortress in the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century was also made: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=V3ExSa6QyXY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=V3ExSa6QyXY).



Fig. 26. A virtual reconstruction of the interior of the Ad Pirum fortress based on archaeological excavations. View of the eastern part of the lower fortress (author P. Kos)



Fig. 27. A virtual reconstruction of the interior of the Ad Pirum fortress. View towards the upper part of the fortress (author P. Kos)

Archaeological excavations have not documented any traces of settlement in the upper part of the fortress, which must have been used only as a refuge for

the inhabitants at moments of acute danger. In the lower part of the fortress, traces of two solidly built houses with central heating and glass windows were documented, as well as some wooden barracks identified by the evidence of many iron nails.

On the basis of a find of a statue base with the inscription *Bono / rei p(ublicae) / nato* we assume that a statue of an emperor was erected at Ad Pirum, presumably of Iulianus (fig. 28).



Fig. 28. Ad Pirum — statue base with an inscription. Civico Museo di Storia ed Arte, inv. no. 13592. (Ubi erat lupa no. 16134)

Aurelius Augustinus, a north African bishop of the late 4<sup>th</sup> and early 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, describes in his “De civitate Dei” the events after the decisive battle between Theodosius and Eugenius in September 394: “After his predicted victory, he ordered the statues of Jupiter that had been erected in the Julian Alps demolished. Golden thunderbolts were benevolently donated to his couriers, who were mocking them, saying that they would like to be hit by them”<sup>53</sup>.

It could be speculation, but recently not far from the fort Ad Pirum the remains of a bronze statue, cut into small pieces, have been found, including a hand preserved in its entirety, which could — perhaps — be connected with Augustinus’ report (fig. 29).

<sup>53</sup>August., De Civ. D. 5. 26. 1.



Fig. 29. The bronze right hand from the Ad Pirum fortress (length 19cm). Photo: Narodni muzej Slovenije

With regard to the Ad Pirum fortress, it should once more be stressed that it played a major role in connection with important historical events during the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. The building activities under Magnentius have already been mentioned (documented in historical sources and also clearly illustrated by coin finds). The strengthening of the fort's defence, however, proved to be useless. Magnentius was soon forced to leave Aquileia and soon afterwards committed suicide.

The defence line in the Julian Alps was also very important during the civil war between the usurper Magnus Maximus and the legitimate ruler Theodosius in 388. The historian and theologian Orosius reported that the passes in the Julian Alps were extensively fortified by Magnus Maximus<sup>54</sup>. However, due to a logistic miscalculation by his commander Andragathius, the defence line was left unmanned, thus enabling the free passage of Theodosius' army.

The best known incident, however, is connected with the events in 394, when the most important battle between the Christian emperor Theodosius and the polytheistic usurper Eugenius took place not far from the defence line, at Fluvius Frigidus (not distant from the fort of Castra). The battle is described by Orosius and he also mentioned ambushes in the Julian Alps set up by Eugenius and his commander Arbogast, and even their encircling Theodosius, who was praying in a chapel on the summit of the Julian Alps (that is in the fort of Ad

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<sup>54</sup>Oros. 7. 35. 3.

Pirum)<sup>55</sup>. Theodosius, along with his army, fell into an ambush, but the *comes* of Eugenius, Arbitio, changed sides and helped Theodosius<sup>56</sup>. A vivid description of the decisive battle at Fluvius Frigidus is well-known, which Theodosius won with God's help, specifically with the help of a very strong bora wind blowing towards the army of Eugenius and thus preventing them from fighting. Even today, this wind still causes severe problems in transportation and has often been described, not merely in ancient written sources but also later (fig. 30).



Fig. 30. Travelling through the region as affected by the bora wind in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Valvasor, op. cit.)

Thus, ironically, the huge defence system, a mayor constructional achievement, never fulfilled its goal. It did not prevent incursions by barbarians nor did it stop the breakthrough of various military factions.

<sup>55</sup>Claud., Cons. Hon. III, 87–110.

<sup>56</sup>Claud., Paneg. dictus Probino et Olybrio coss., 100–112.

**Peter Kos**

**CLAUSTRA ALPIUM IULIARUM — NA STRAŻY  
ITALII OKRESU PÓŻNORZYMSKIEGO**

**Streszczenie**

Alpy Julijskie, które starożytni sytuowali pomiędzy Tarsaticą (dzisiejszą Rijeką) a Nauportus (Vrhnika) lub też w północno-wschodniej Italii — od Tergeste (dzisiejszego Triestu), poprzez Iulium Carnicum (Zuglio) po Forum Iulii (Cividale) — niemal zawsze pojawiają się w połączeniu z Claustra Alpium Iuliarum, a więc z systemem obronnym o niezwykle znaczeniu strategicznym. Niektórzy badacze chcą widzieć jego początek w dość prowizorycznym systemie murów i twierdz ustanowionym przez Marka Aureliusza ok. 168/169 roku, obejmującym m.in. obóz legionowy Ločica niedaleko Celje. Autor zdecydowanie się temu sprzeciwia. System obronny Claustra Alpium Iuliarum nie istniał w 238 roku, o czym świadczy opis Herodiana, mało tego, powstał dużo później. Na podstawie badań archeologicznych można ustalić, że obejmował trzy linie murów, rozciągające się na dystansie 150km pomiędzy Tarsaticą (Rijeką) a Aesontius (doliną rzeki Soča), a jego zasadniczym celem była ochrona najważniejszych dróg łączących północną Italię z Bałkanami. Najlepiej bronionym odcinkiem był rejon pomiędzy Nauportus (Vrhnika) a Castra (Ajdovščina). Datacja sprawia bardzo dużo problemów, propozycje badaczy obejmują czasy panowania Dioklecjana (284–305), Konstantyna (306–337), aż po drugą połowę IV wieku. Nieocenionym źródłem okazują się monety, dzięki którym możemy datować np. powstanie fortu Castra na ok. 280 r. po Chr. czy najważniejszego ogniwa Claustra Alpium Iuliarum — fortu Ad Pirum — na 312 r. (*terminus ante quem*). Tereny te zaistniały kilkakrotnie w dziejach, niedaleko fortu Castra w roku 394 cesarz Teodozjusz stoczył zwycięską bitwę pod Fulvius Frigidus z uzurpatorem Eugeniuszem (pomógł mu silny wiatr *bora*, a nie mury czy wieże).

