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# ACTA NUMISMATICA HUNGARICA

## I

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# Contents

Editorial foreword.....	7
Abbreviations of Journals and Periodicals.....	9
Katalin BÍRÓNÉ SEY Lajos Huszár (1906–1987).....	13
Bibliography of Lajos Huszár.....	17
Melinda TORBÁGYI A rare Celtic drachm.....	37
F. Péter KOVÁCS – Melinda TORBÁGYI Celtic coins from the Middle Tisza Region (Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok County, East Hungary).....	41
Lajos JUHÁSZ The Pannonian war of Aelius Caesar and Antoninus Pius a fiction of modern scholars?.....	45
Tamás FEHÉR A mysterious Gallienus bronze coin with SPES PVBLICA reverse.....	55
Alain GENNARI The “Sirmium group”: about the so-called Gepids siliquae. With a specific catalogue – 2nd edition.....	63
István VIDA – Alain GENNARI An imitative hexagram of the 7 <sup>th</sup> century.....	253

Enikő Kovács	
Medieval pattern coin from Esztergom	257
Enikő Kovács	
Late medieval finds from Kisnémedi Church Hill	263
Lajos PALLOS	
The Numismatic Collection of the Hungarian National Museum	271
Reviews	307

# The Pannonian wars of Aelius Caesar and Antoninus Pius. A fiction of modern scholars?

Lajos JUHÁSZ

It has long been suggested by various scholars that there was a war between the Roman Empire and the German tribes on the Pannonian frontier in the years around 140 A.D.<sup>1</sup> This thesis is based on the following. From the *Historia Augusta* we learn that Aelius Caesar, Hadrian's designated heir to the throne, successfully led campaigns in 137 A.D. as the governor of the two Pannoniae.<sup>2</sup> Following his death on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 138, T. Haterius Nepos was appointed as the *legatus Augusti pro praetore* of Pannonia Superior.<sup>3</sup> So the joint governorship of the two provinces wasn't repeated. Haterius Nepos was a high-ranking general who was the last person not of the imperial family honoured with the most prestigious military decoration, the *ornamenta triumphalia*. According to the *communis opinio* he continued and ended the war after Aelius' death for which he received the triumphal honours.<sup>4</sup> The final settling of the German affair is supposed to be marked by the REX QVADIS DATVS (Fig. 1) sesterce issued by Antoninus Pius in 140–144, which is again-and-again cited as a proof of this war.<sup>5</sup> This brief period of Roman history is interesting because it is disputed if it can be in connection with the Marcomannic wars some decades later. Archaeological finds have also been interpreted in a way to support this thesis. Coin hoards and destruction layers that can be dated to the 130–140s in Pannonia or in the middle Danube region are often – without criticism – connected with the wars of Aelius and Pius.<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 1. (Photo: [http://www.acsearch.info/ext\\_image.html?id=458887.jpg](http://www.acsearch.info/ext_image.html?id=458887.jpg))

However, these events and facts are not inevitably related to each other. First of all the *Historia Augusta* only states that Aelius managed to achieve a reputation of an average general in Pannonia.<sup>7</sup> It doesn't specify where, and most importantly against whom he had fought against. On the other hand dispatching Aelius as the joint governor of the two Pannoniae rather had hereditary, than military reasons.<sup>8</sup> It wasn't some kind of a barbarian threat that required the presence of an inexperienced future emperor, but it was quite the contrary. Aelius was sent there to gain military expertise, and establish personal ties with one of the empire's

- 1 E.g. MÓCSY 1974, 102–103; SWOBODA 1956, 5, 11; PISO 199–94, 199–200; FITZ 1993, 477–479. For a detailed bibliography see ECK 1999a, 28–29. especially note 10. For a detailed summary see DOBESCH 2001, 1033–1035.
- 2 *Vita Aelii* 3, 5–6.
- 3 Eck 1999b, 226.
- 4 R.-ALFÖLDI 1999, 93; Eck 1999b, 226.
- 5 RIC III 620.
- 6 A. Mócsy mentions coin hoards ending in 130–131, 132–134 and 137, but he admits that this in itself is not sufficient for a precise dating. Mócsy 1974, 102; PISO 1993–1994, 199. For the critical view on the burnt layers in Aquincum see Eck 1999a, 29.
- 7 *Vita Aelii* 3, 6.
- 8 Eck 1999a, 28. For a different opinion see PISO 1993–1994, 199.

biggest armies.<sup>9</sup> These troops would secure his imperial ambitions in case of an usurpation. It is also worth considering why the joint governorship of the two Pannoniae was not continued after Aelius Caesar. If the danger had not been so great after his death, then there would have been no opportunity for T. Haterius Nepos to earn the *ornamenta triumphalia* with his military actions. But if the enemy did pose a major threat to the Empire, as previously thought, then it would have been logical to keep the two provinces united under one general.

Secondly W. Eck pointed out that the *ornamenta triumphalia* was given to T. Haterius Nepos not because of his actions in Pannonia Superior, but because of his role in the suppression of the Jewish Bar Kochba revolt between 132 and 136.<sup>10</sup> He was governor of the province Arabia from 130 to probably at least 134, a neighbouring province to the then rebelling Judea.<sup>11</sup> One of W. Eck's most convincing arguments for the denial of the wars in Pannonia is that the *ornamenta triumphalia* was only awarded on very special occasions, i.e. when the emperor himself held the imperial acclamation.<sup>12</sup> In Haterius Nepos' time it was only after the Bar Kochba revolt under Hadrian and after the expansion in Britain under Pius in 142.

Furthermore R. Noll, after examining the coin hoards in Pannonia and the neighbouring territories, came to the conclusion that there were no military conflicts around 140.<sup>13</sup> These only appear after 144 and get more and more intense towards the time of the Marcomannic wars. But as R. Noll correctly points out, the reason for the hoarding cannot always be certainly connected with military actions. The burnt layers also have to be handled with criticism. As R. Noll and W. Eck correctly remarked, burnt layers only mean that there was a fire at that place and not necessarily military activity.<sup>14</sup>

So it can be concluded that there is in fact no firm archaeological or literary evidence to support a significant war under Aelius and Pius in the Pannonian region.<sup>15</sup> In the case of Aelius Caesar nothing points to the identity of those he had led campaigns against.<sup>16</sup> The only reason to suppose German tribes is Antoninus Pius' REX QVADIS DATVS coin, and a passage in a *Historia Augusta* along with an inscription in Rome saying that Pius had defeated the Germans.<sup>17</sup> This sesterce was minted in Rome between 140 and 144. The reverse depicts the standing Antoninus Pius in toga on the right, holding a scroll in the left hand, while handing a diadem over to the Quad king in long cloak, trousers and with a pointed beard.<sup>18</sup> There are several striking novelties in this representation that were not repeated by any other emperor in Roman coinage. The first is the non-military appearance of Pius, which corresponds to the one in the literary sources.<sup>19</sup> The Roman rulers, when depicted with other nations or enemies, are usually wearing military uniform or travelling clothes,

9 It is possible that the conflicts the *Historia Augusta* refers to were only the usual skirmishes, but received more attention than usual to increase Aelius Caesar's „public relations“.

10 The text (CIL XI 5212) from Fulginae which states the *ornamenta triumphalia* for Haterius is fragmentary and doesn't say for which deeds he received this great honour. Eck 1999a, 29–31; Eck 1999b, 226–227.

11 Eck 1999c, 84–85, Addendum p. 89.

12 Eck 1999a, 30; Eck 1999b, 223–227. Although there are some exceptions, as W. Eck admits.

13 NOLL 1954, 52, 61–62. see also E. Swoboda's critic SWOBODA 1956, 7–8.

14 NOLL 1954, 43–44; Eck 1999a, 29.

15 There are no coherent coin hoards or destruction layers that prove a greater barbarian invasion. Eck 1999a, 29.

16 It could well have been the Jazyges as well as the Germans. *Vita Aelii* 3, 5–6.

17 *Vita Pii* 5, 4; CIL VI 1208. Neither the *Historia Augusta*, nor the inscription says when, where and against which tribes. This didn't necessarily have to be the Quadi, since under the more than 2 decades of Pius' reign there probably were many separate battles and skirmishes on the long borders from the shores of the North Sea to Pannonia. As a matter of fact there are no sources that suggest hostilities from the Suebi in this period.

18 STRACK 1937, 66; NOLL 1954, 50. For M. R.-Alföldi's different interpretation see below.

19 *Vita Pii* 9, 10.

but not a toga. The other is that the emperor is standing face-to-face with a barbarian, and not in a submission scene.<sup>20</sup> These point to a peaceful act that took place in a serene setting in Rome and not in the field.<sup>21</sup> The Quad reverse seems like a diplomatic act between two almost equal parts, but Pius is depicted somewhat higher.<sup>22</sup>

The non-military Quad reverse is very similar to the REX ARMENIIS DATVS (Fig. 2.) sesterces struck by Antoninus Pius in Rome between 140 and 144.<sup>23</sup> Not only the legend, but also the depiction is very similar. The emperor in toga on the right, holding a scroll, crowning the Armenian king, in trousers, tunic and a long cloak, from the back.<sup>24</sup> Pius is again higher than his counterpart, but the difference is much more striking than on the previous reverse.

R. Göbl examined these two reverses together with all the other *rex datus* coins.<sup>25</sup> This joint treatment emphasises how strikingly different Pius' representations are from the rest. Trajan was the first emperor to mint a *rex datus* coin, the REX PARTHIS DATVS (Fig. 3).<sup>26</sup> On the reverse the emperor, seated on platform, is crowning the standing Parthaspates from behind. Kneeling in front of them is a female figure in eastern attire with a special headgear.<sup>27</sup> According to Cassius Dio this ceremony was carried out in Ctesiphon, the capital of the Parthian Empire, where Trajan summoned all Romans and Parthians to a great plain and appointed Parthaspates king from a platform.<sup>28</sup>

Two other coins have to be mentioned here, because they have strong connections with the previously described one. The first reverse Trajan issued with reference to foreign kings was the REX PARTHVS (Fig. 4.) coin in 112–114 and 114–117.<sup>29</sup> It depicts the emperor as usual, seated on a platform and surrounded by his retinue. In front of him stands the Parthian king Parthamasiris, behind him five soldiers. This scene took place in Elegeia, Armenia, as it is known from the work of Cassius Dio.<sup>30</sup> Parthamasiris was not only surrounded by Roman soldiers, but was also humiliated by Trajan. The other coin is the REGNA



Fig. 2 (Photo: [http://www.acsearch.info/ext\\_image.html?id=125525.jpg](http://www.acsearch.info/ext_image.html?id=125525.jpg))



Fig. 3. (Photo: [http://www.acsearch.info/ext\\_image.htm?lid=17761.jpg](http://www.acsearch.info/ext_image.htm?lid=17761.jpg))



Fig. 4. (Photo: [http://www.acsearch.info/ext\\_image.htm?lid=469552.jpg](http://www.acsearch.info/ext_image.htm?lid=469552.jpg))

20 The only other time, when a barbarian is treated as equal can be seen on the cuirass of the Primaporta statue. For this see more below.

21 STRACK 1937, 66; R.-ALFÖLDI 1999, 91.

22 Pius was regarded as a tall man, but this can also be a reference to the Roman emperors' superior status in general. GÖBL 1961, 78–79. For Pius' tall stature see Vita Pii 13, I.

23 RIC III 619.

24 NOLL 1954, 51.

25 GÖBL 1961, 70–80.

26 RIC II 667–668.

27 NOLL 1954, 51. The headgear is usually described as a *corona muralis*, but it is much taller than that, and the castellated end is missing. On the other hand a tiara would pose interpretative problems, since it is typically Armenian. It is much more likely to interpret it as a tiara, although originally Armenian, but also used by the Parthians.

28 Cassius Dio 68, 30, 3.

29 RIC II 263a (112–114 A.D.), 310 (114–117 A.D. – three of the soldiers are carrying standards), 669.

30 Cassius Dio 68, 19, 2–5.





Fig. 5. (Photo: 5 - [http://www.acsearch.info/ext\\_image.html?id=2772.jpg](http://www.acsearch.info/ext_image.html?id=2772.jpg))



Fig. 6. (Photo: <https://www.forumancientcoins.com/numiswiki/view.asp?key=REX%20ARMENIIS%20DAT>)

ADSIGNATA (Fig. 5.), dated to 114–117, which shows three kings standing and receiving something, probably a diadem from Trajan.<sup>31</sup> It isn't possible to define exactly who these persons are or which territory they represent.<sup>32</sup> Both types were minted in gold, as well as in sesterces.

The last coin of this kind is the REX ARMENIIS DATVS struck by Lucius Verus between July and December 164 (Fig. 6).<sup>33</sup> The emperor is again seated in military uniform on a platform, surrounded by his retinue. Verus is crowning Sohaemus from the back, who is standing in front of him on the ground.

Common for all the newly made kings on the *rex datus* reverses, except for the Quad, is that they receive their diadem from the back, while they reach for it with their right hand. P. Strack sees this acceptance gesture as part of an Eastern crowning ritual, without giving any further explanation.<sup>34</sup> As a matter of fact there are many representations of Roman emperors crowned from the

back by Victoria or another person, although they aren't receiving it with their right hand.<sup>35</sup> According to M. R.-Alföldi the Quad reverse differs from the other ones, because the barbarian king receives a "Königsfibel" and not a diadem, like the one from Osztrópataka found in a Vandal grave.<sup>36</sup> Her argument is based on the object's round form with the V-shaped prolongations and the fact that it is handed over and not placed on the head as on the other *rex datus* coins. However, if it is to be interpreted as a fibula, it would be reasonable to expect the brooch to be fastened on the recipient.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand the same thing with V-shaped extensions can be seen on Pius' REX ARMENIIS DATVS reverse, on which the Armenian king is crowned with it from behind.<sup>38</sup> There might be a more practical explanation for the unusual depiction on the Quad coin. It is very likely that the Quad king wore a *nodus*, the traditional headdress of the Suebi.<sup>39</sup> Setting a diadem on a *nodus* wouldn't only have been impossible, but would also have left the new king looking ridiculous. This could hardly have been the purpose of such a significant event. This thesis is further enforced by the small protuberance above the right temporal of the Quad king that can be seen on the best preserved and often cited coin, now in the Münzkabinett in Vienna.<sup>40</sup> The 3-dimensional rendering on coins, or the stressing of some realistic details by means of it, is not unknown. It is also attested on the tribunals like on the above mentioned *rex datus* reverses, especially observable by its second foot.

31 RIC II 366–367, 666.

32 The RIC presumes that they are the rulers of Armenia, Mesopotamia and Parthia. RIC II p. 240. Cassius Dio states that Trajan had defeated many kings, some of whom had voluntarily surrendered. Cassius Dio 68, 18, 3b.

33 RIC III 511–513, 1370–1375; SZAIVERT 1986, 197.

34 STRACK 1937, 66.

35 HÖLSCHER 1967, 81–83.

36 R.-ALFÖLDI 1999, 92.

37 In the same way as people are decorated with military or public honours today.

38 NOLL 1954, 49. Abb. 1, 3; Münzkabinett Vienna Inv. Nr. MK\_RÖ10632.

39 The princes had specially ornated headdresses. Tac. *Germ*, 38, 2–4. The short hair depicted on the reverse of the coin can well be due to the *nodus*.

40 Inv. Nr. MK\_RÖ10635. A small point-like elevation, which is clearly differentiated from the rest of the finely portrayed head or of the reverse's other parts. This small detail is only noticeable by the personal examination of the coin, which I was fortunate enough to do.

However, there are some important questions left unanswered: why are the *rex datus* coins of Pius so different from the ones of Trajan and Lucius Verus? Why did Pius insist on a completely new design, and why didn't he follow the one of Trajan? Furthermore, why did not Verus adopt the same reverse as his adoptive father, but returned to the one issued nearly 50 years before? The change is so significant that there has to be a profound reason for it.

As mentioned earlier, Trajan's and Verus' coins all depict the emperor wearing a military uniform, seated on a platform. Pius on the other hand is represented standing, clad in toga. The difference in clothing and posture indicates that the actions were performed at two completely opposite places. The military ones with the platform happened out in the field, while the more sophisticated and peaceful ones in Rome itself.<sup>41</sup> This isn't surprising since both Trajan and Verus led a campaign in the East. This is not influenced by the fact that Lucius Verus did not personally participate in the wars, but victory was gained by his generals. On the contrary, Verus was the official leader of the campaign that brought major successes to the Roman Empire. Accordingly he, as well as Marcus Aurelius, was granted the names Armeniacus, Parthicus Maximus and Medicus.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand Rome could well have been the setting for the crowning of new kings, since foreign kings' visits to the *Urbs* were not unusual at the time.<sup>43</sup>

On the other hand Antoninus Pius dwelled in Rome during his reign and fought his wars through his legates.<sup>44</sup> Despite his military conflicts, the *Historia Augusta* stresses Pius' great diplomatic and not military skills and calls him the Roman emperor most respected by foreign nations.<sup>45</sup> He managed to persuade the Parthian king not to attack Armenia merely by writing him a letter, and he used his personal influence with several other rulers too. Antoninus Pius' pacifistic attitude is also reflected in his *rex datus* reverses, where he appears in a toga, i.e. as a simple Roman citizen, not as a victorious general. He is holding a scroll, which can also be interpreted as the letter of inauguration, or as a general symbol of diplomacy. Considering all that was said above, it is very likely that the installation of the Armenian and the Quad king was a result of negotiations and Pius' personal influence, not that of arms. After all, the main virtue of every emperor was to bring and secure peace. This could be achieved by two means: war or diplomacy. The distinction was also represented in the coin reserves. The more common type was of course military success, but the second one was just as good, or maybe even better, although not as grandiose. So Antoninus Pius had every right to celebrate his victories, even if it was by negotiations that he secured peace and prosperity for his country.

The antitypes of Pius' REX QVADIS DATVS coin also reinforce the peaceful resolution of the conflicts. A denarius minted in 61 B.C. by Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, depicts his ancestor in a toga crowning Ptolemy V from behind (Fig. 7).<sup>46</sup> This



Fig. 7. (Photo: RRC-AN00623636\_001\_l.jpg)

41 STRACK 1937, 66; R.-ALFÖLDI 1999, 91.

42 Vita Veri 6, 9 - 7, 3; Vita Marci 8, 12.

43 Vita Hadriani 13, 9; 21, 13; Vita Pii 9,6. In particular Pharasmenes, the king of the Hiberi is mentioned, because he refused to visit Hadrian, and only later came to Antoninus Pius. On the same ruler see Cassio Dio 69, 15, 3.

44 Vita Pii 5, 4.

45 Vita Pii 9,6-10. This respect is also expressed by Pius' PARTHIA reverse, where she is holding the *aurum coronarium*. RIC III 586.

46 RRC 419/2.

alludes to a diplomatic mission in 201 B.C. to the court at Alexandria, which is explained by the legend M LEPIDVS TVTOR REG PON F MAX. Another reverse minted in Cappadocia Caesarea shows Germanicus crowning Artaxias with a tiara from behind (Fig. 8).<sup>47</sup> Although Germanicus is dressed in military attire holding a lance, it was a peaceful diplomatic mission.<sup>48</sup> Both coins have in common that the Romans and foreigners stand on the ground, like on Pius' reverses.



Fig. 8. (Photo: 8 - [http://www.acsearch.info/ext\\_image.html?id=296341.jpg](http://www.acsearch.info/ext_image.html?id=296341.jpg))

Not just coins were used to propagate the emperors' diplomatic achievements. One only has to recall the main scene of the statue of Prima porta. It depicts the handing over of Roman legionary symbols by the Parthians in 20. B.C.<sup>49</sup> These sacred symbols were lost by Marc Anthony and Marcus Crassus, but Augustus managed to recover them not by force, but by his diplomatic influence.<sup>50</sup> Here again the Romans and their barbarian counterpart appear as equals, which is extremely rare in Roman art.

The probability of diplomatic success is furthermore enhanced by the fact that Pius' coins are only sesterces. This could imply that the achievement wasn't as prestigious as that of Trajan and Lucius Verus. Trajan issued the REX PARTHVS and REGNA ADSIGNATA coins in gold and sesterces, like Lucius Verus his REX ARMENIIS DATVS, but he also produced it in *dupondii*. Trajan and Lucius Verus were both repeatedly acclaimed imperators for their Eastern campaigns.<sup>51</sup> As mentioned above, Pius had only received this honour in 142 after the expansion in Britain, which occasion was frequently issued on reverses of every denomination.<sup>52</sup> The inauguration of kings was also regarded as a success for the Roman Empire, so it was suitable to be propagated on coins. Nonetheless, diplomatic victories could not receive the same attention and extent, as the ones that were won by hard-fought battles. R. Göbl points out that the question of denominations is important because the different types served different purposes.<sup>53</sup> Gold coins could travel long distances even to foreign territories, whereas bronze was only for the local use of the civil population.<sup>54</sup> Gold on the other hand meant that there were great expenses, like e.g. wars, but these coins weren't issued in silver, so they weren't intended for the soldiers.

There is also an explanation why Trajan issued the REX PARTHVS and REGNA ADSIGNATA coins in gold, while the REX PARTHVS DATVS only is sesterces. The latter one was minted to commemorate an occasion that, prestigious as it may seem, Trajan was forced into. At the end of his reign there were rebellions all over the Empire, so he needed to consolidate Parthia by placing a vassal king there.<sup>55</sup> It was "a clever stroke of diplomacy

47 The dating of the coin is debated; the BMC dates it to 37–38, while the RPC to the reign of Claudius, with some reservation. RIC Caligula 59; BMC I 104; RPC I 3629–3630; HEITZ 2006, 183–184.

48 The event is recorded by Tacitus. Tac. *Ann.* II, 56.

49 ZANKER 2009 192–195. Abb. 148a-b.

50 Suet, Augustus 21,3; Tiberius 9.

51 KIENAST 1990, 123, 144.

52 In fact this was his second imperial acclamation. The first one was when he ascended the throne, which was habitual. ECK 1999a, 30; R.-ALFÖLDI 1999 93.

53 GÖBL 1961, 79–80.

54 According to R. Göbl Pius' *rex datus* coins didn't leave the territory of Italy. GÖBL 1961, 79; SZAIVERT 1986, 197.

55 Cassius Dio, 29, 4–30,3; Vita Hadriani 5, 1–4.

rather than a triumphant conclusion to a military campaign".<sup>56</sup> The difference between this diplomatic victory and the one Antoninus Pius achieved is that Trajan had a whole army on the spot, while Pius had them behind Roman borders.

The REX ARMENIIS DATVS reverse was also linked to an inscription, as proof of war that anticipated the inauguration of the Armenian king. The text mentions L. Neratius Proculus as *ad d[e]ducen[d]as vex[i]llationes in Syriam ob [b]ellum [Par]thicum*.<sup>57</sup> On the inscription Antoninus Pius is referred to by his normal titles, and not as *divus*, so while he was still alive. But, as A. Gebhardt points out, there are several cases, where the dedications bear the name of already deified rulers with their normal titles, as if they were still alive.<sup>58</sup> It is much more logical to date Priscus' mission to the very end of Pius' reign, which would better correlate with his own *cursus honorum*. Thus an eventual preparation for the Parthian war or at least tensions between them and Rome is very likely. This is also suggested by his *Vita* that says "*Alienatus in febris nihil aliud quam de re publica et de iis regibus quibus irascebatur locutus est*".<sup>59</sup>

If this reasoning is correct, then the last argument for a war in the time around Hadrian's death and the early years of Pius' reign was denied. For Aelius Caesar's campaign in 137 must only have been of a minor scale, and had only propagandistic reasons, i.e. to prove the suitability of the heir to the throne. On the other hand T. Haterius Nepos did not receive his *ornamenta triumphalia* for his deeds in Pannonia, but for his role in the suppression of the Bar Kochba revolt. Despite the fact that the *rex datus* coins all signify the same thing, the inauguration of a foreign king by Rome's approval, there are major differences not only in their depictions but also in their meaning. The ones of Trajan and Lucius Verus are almost identical, since they bear the same message: a military victory. Antoninus Pius had to create a new reverse design, because he managed to appoint kings through diplomatic negotiations. These are, however, regarded as minor successes, compared to the military ones, so these are not mentioned by the literary sources. In what way did the inauguration of the Quad king contribute to the Marcomannic wars is still unknown.

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56 RIC II, p. 239–240.

57 STROBEL 1994, 1318. note. 11; ILS 1076 = CIL IX 2457.

58 GEBHARDT 2002, 125–126. Especially p. 125. note 2.

59 *Vita Pii* 12, 7. see also *Vita Marci* 8, 6.

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