CONSIDERATIONS ON THE ROMANS' NAMES

Mădălina STRECHIE
University of Craiova

ABSTRACT

The Romans had three names, tria nomina, *made up of* praenomen, nomen gentile (*first representing the kin of the individual and then designating his family*) *and* cognomen *or the surname. In many cases*, *the* tria nomina *combine with the name of the tribe the person belonged to*, *fact proven by the Latin epigraphic texts discovered in the Italic Peninsula perimeter. The first name*, praenomen, *was in most cases the parents' first name or diminutival name. Kinship names*, nomen gentile, *was the most important because it designated the social or military status of Romans.* Cognomen, *the surname*, *is extremely interesting for Roman mentalities. Generally speaking*, *the surname used to express a quality*, *physical weakness*, *an ability*, *a profesion or the name of a place. Roman names prove once more the greatness of the civilisaton founded on the seven hills.*

Key words: *tria nomen*, *praenomen cognomen*, *nomen gentile*, *Latin epigraphic texts*, *Roman mentalities*

Studies about Latin onomastics studies in our country are relatively few. However, many foreign scientists studied this complex phenomenon of Latin names, among whom mention: B. Salway, M. Kajava, O. Salomies, J. Kajanto. Unfortunately, their studies were not translated into Romanian and they are quite difficult to find in the Romanian libraries.

This study aims escribe the main characteristics of the Roman names, illustrating the assertions epigraphic texts, while demonstrating the importance and the support of the Latin epigraphy to the linguistic studies.

The Romans had *tria nomina* with the following structure: *praenomen*, *nomen gentile* or kinship (initially it represented the respective person's kin after which he named the family) and *cognomen* or surname (we don't use the term of nickname because it has a pejorative connotation in Romanian language). We notice that *cognomen* includes the root *cog-* which can come from the verb *COGNOSCO*, *-ERE*, *-GNOVI*, *-ITUM* vt. and vi. 1. *to know*, *2. to find out*; *3. to recognize...*[1], therefore, the best interpretation of the cognomen would be the name by which a person gets recognized.

In most of the cases, to these *tria nomina* is added the name of the tribe the person belonged to, which can be noticed especially from the Latin epigraphic texts in the Italic Peninsula perimeter.

It can also be noticed the mentioning of the father's first name or the filiation, which can be seen both in the masculine and the feminine names.

[1] Gh. Guțu, *Dicționar latin-român*, ediție revăzută şi completată, Bucureşti, Editura Ştiințifică, 1993: 83.

BDD-A3780 © 2008 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 03:00:48 UTC)

Because of the limited space of the epigraphic materials, Romans used the abbreviation to mention the names of those to whom the inscriptions were dedicated. The affirmations above will be illustrated by an epigraphic text:

C.I.L.X 6006

L(*ucio*)*. BVRBVLEIO. L*(*ucii*)*. F*(*ilio*)*. QVIR*(*ina tribu*)*. OPTATO LIGARIANO. CO*(*n*)*S*(*uli*)*...*[2]

To Lucius Burbuleius Optatus Ligarianus, *son of Lucius*, *of the Quirina tribe*, *consul*... (trad.n.)

As it can be noticed from the inscription, the character's names were: *Lucius* (*praenomen*), *Burbuleius* (*nomen gentile*), *Optatus* and *Ligarianus* (*cognomina*, *Quirina* (the tribe). It is also mentioned *Lucius*, father's first name, which is identical to the first name of the person in the inscription. In the analysis of several inscriptions it can be noticed that father's first name was given most of the times to the first child, regardless of sex. This aspect will be exemplified by the inscriptions below:

C.I.L.V 5239; P.M.E. G. 15

[L](*ucius*) *MINUCIUS L.*(*ucii*) *F*(*ilius*)*. OUF*(*entina tribu*)*. EXORATUS TR.*(*unus*) *MIL.*(*ilitum*) *SIBI ET GEMINIAE C.*(*aii*) *F*(*iliae*)*. PRISCAE UXORI.*[3]

(*Lucius Minucius Exoratus*, *son of Lucius*, *of the Oufentina tribe*, *military tribune*, *he had the inscription made for himself and his wife*, *Geminia Prisca*, *daughter of Caius-trad.n.*)

The *tria nomina* of the masculine personage are: *Lucius Minucius Exoratus*, son of *Lucius*, of the tribe *Oufentina.* The feminine personage is mentioned here by two names: *Gemina Prisca*, her filiation being mentioned, too: daughter of *Caius*. Her *nomen gentile* is not written, but being the wife of *Lucius Minucius Exoratus* she got the name of her husband's kin.

C.I.L. I, **1374**

C.(*aio*) *MINICIO C.*(*aii*) *FILIO VELINA ITALO...*[4]

(*To Caius Minicius Italus*, *son of Caius*, *of the Velina tribe...*)

In this inscription the mentioning of the filiation and the tribe can be noticed again. Furthermore, it can be noticed that the surname of our personage is actually a former adjective: *italus* (Italic) which suggests his birth place, too.

The most known names of the Romans were related to:

a) gods'names and their derivatives: *Marcus*, *Marcelus*, *Martinus* from Mars, the god of war and the father of Romans;

---

[2] Mădălina Strechie, *Antologie de texte epigrafice latine*, Craiova, Editura Universitaria, 2006: 25.

[3] Mădălina Strechie, *Condiția femeii în cadrul familiei romane de origine ecvestră în perioada Principatului*, Craiova, Editura Universitaria, 2008: 163.

[4] Idem, *op.cit*.: 27.

BDD-A3780 © 2008 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 03:00:48 UTC)

b) former ordinal numerals (which probably had designated the children's order in the Roman families): *Secundus*, *Quintus*, *Sextus*, *Septimus*, *Octavius and Octavianus*, *Decimus*, etc.;

c) former adjectives: *Felix* (*the happy*), *Firmus* (*the strong*, *the powerful*), *Flavius* (*the blond*), *Honestus* (*the honest*), *Niger* (*the black*), *Probus* (*the good*), *Rubius* (*the red-haired*), *Silvius*, *Silvinus* (*of the forest*), *Tiberius* (*tiberin*, *who belongs to the Tiber*), etc.

The most frequent abbreviated Roman first-names are[5]:

Latin first name	Abbreviation	Latin first name	Abbreviation	Latin first name	Abbreviation
Aulus	*A.*	*Lucius*	*L.*	*Servius*	*S.*
Appius	*AP.*	*Marcus*	*M.*	*Sextus*	*SEX.*
Caius	*C.*	*Manius*	*MN.*	*Spurius*	*S.*, *SP.*
Cnaeus	*CN.*	*Numerius*	*N.*	*Tiberius*	*T.*,*Ti.*, *TIB.*
Decimus	*D.*	*Publius*	*P.*	*Titus*	*T.*
Kaesso	*K.*	*Quintus*	*Q.*	*Vibius*	*V.*

Kinship was very important because it also designated the social status of the person and basing on it the persons had a civic role, too. Among the most well-known kinship were: *Aelius*, *Aemilius*, *Antonius*, *Aurelius*, *Claudius*, *Cornelius*, *Flavius*, *Horatius*, *Iulius*, *Pompeius*, *Sempronius*, *Sergius*, *Tullius*, *Ulpius*, *Valerius*, etc. We mention among the most important characters who made history in these families: the Emperor Hadrianus was from *Aelia* kin, Appius – the famous initiator of Appia grape vine – belonged to *Claudia* kin, Scipio – Hannibal's victor – belonged to *Cornelia* kin, *Horatia* gave the author of the Roman Odes – Horatius, Caesar and Augustus brought *Iulia* kin to the forefront of the Roman politics, *Pompeia* was the kin of the great victor of the pirates and the artisan of the first triumvirate – Cnaeus Pompius Magnus, *Sempronia* was the kin of the Gracchi brothers, *Sergia* was the kin of the plotter Catillina, *Tullia* – the kin of the great scholar Cicero, *Ulpia* – the kin of the best of Roma's emperors, Traianus, etc.

Most of the times in the Latin epigraphy the name or *nomen gentile* is abbreviated. The most usual abbreviations are:

Nomen	Abbreviation
Aelius	*AEL.*
Aemilius	*AEMIL.*, *AEM.*
Antonius	*ANT.*
Aurelius	*AUR.*

[5] *Apud* Constantin. C. Petolescu, *Epigrafia latină*, Bucureşti, Editura Ars Docendi, 2001: 25.

BDD-A3780 © 2008 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 03:00:48 UTC)

Claudius	*CL. CLAUD.*
Cornelius	*COR. CORN.*
Flavius	*FL.*, *FLA.*, *FLAV.*
Horatius	*HOR.*
Iulius,	*IUL.*
Pompeius	*POMP.*
Sempronius	*SEMP.*
Sergius	*SER.*, *SERG.*
Tullius	*TULLI.*
Ulpius	*ULP.*
Valerius	*VAL.*

From the study of the Latin epigraphy we can notice that in order to designate the *nomen gentile* for twins or brothers it is used the plural and we exemplify by the inscription from below:

C.I.L.VI 2133; P.M.E. F. 50

FLAVII SILVINUS ET IRENUS POSUERUNT
FL(*aviae*) *MAMILLIAE V*(*irgini*) *V*(*estali*) *SOROR*, *A MILITIIS.*
(*The two from the Flavia family*, *Silvinus and Irenus*, *fullfilling their equestrian military service*, *put the sister Flavia Mamillia*, *maiden from the vestals' college*)[6]

The surname was the most interesting at Romans and it became hereditary. At the beginning, it designated a quality, a physical defect, an attribute, an occupation or the origin from a locality:

Atticus, adj. from *Attica*
Balbus, adj. stammerer
Brutus, adj. heavy, without judgement
Caecus, adj. blind
Caesar from *caesaries*, *-ei*, plaits
Catilina, s. dish, plate
Cato from *catus*,*-a*, *um*, adj. deft, smart, intelligent
Catulus, puppy
Censor, who has fulfilled the magistrature of census
Cicero from *cicer* – chick pea
Claudius, adj. lame
Crassus, adj. thick, heavy, coarse, rude
Flaccus, adj. soft, lop-eared
Hadrianus, adj. from Hadria (a region near the Adriatic Sea)
Longus, *Longinus* adj. long, tall
Magnus, adj. big
Maximus, adj. the biggest
Quietus, adj. quiet

[6] This inscription is also published in our PhD thesis, previously quoted from: 162.

BDD-A3780 © 2008 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 03:00:48 UTC)

Paetus, adj. squint-eyed
Pius, adj. devout, faithful
Probus, adj. honest, of good quality
Pulcher, adj. beautiful
Superbus, *adj.* haughty, etc.[7]

Sometimes, children's first names are actually diminutives of the parents' names. This is found mostly in the feminine first names: *Antonilla* (little Antonia) from Antonia; *Domitilla* from Domitia, *Flavilla* from Flavia, *Iuliola* from Iulia etc.

A special case is represented by the names of the slaves or the affranchised slaves. Most of the times, the affranchised slaves had two names, their *nomen gentile* being taken after liberation and it belonged to the former master or their liberator. The slaves had only one name, usually a *praenomen* which most of the times was an adjective designating their ethnic origin: *Antiochus*, *Brittanus*, *Dacus*, *Dalmatus*, *Gallus*, *Graecus*, *Tracus* etc.

Latin onomastics is a source for numerous linguistic studies. Our study has presented only general considerations. We didn't insist on the imperial entitling which will be the subject of another study, or on the polynomial of some important characters in the Latin history – the generous subject of another study. Romans' names prove once again the greatness of the civilization founded on the seven hills.

ABBREVIATIONS

C.I.L. – *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*
P.M.E. – *Prosopographia militarum equestrium quae fuerunt ab Augusto a Gallieno*

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cagnat, René, *Cours d'Épigraphie Latine*, suplément á la troisième édition, Paris, 1904.
Guțu, Gh., *Dicționar latin-român*, Ediție revăzută şi completată, Bucureşti, Editura Ştiințifică, 1993.
Petolescu, Constantin C., *Epigrafia latină*, Bucureşti, Editura Ars Docendi, 2001.
Rusu, I.I., Pippidi, D.M., *Inscripțiile Daciei Romane*, vol. I, Editura Academiei Române, Bucureşti, 1975.
Sandys, John Edwin, *Latin Epigraphy. An Introduction to the Study of Latin Inscriptions*, London, 1927.
Strechie, Mădălina, *Antologie de texte epigrafice latine*, Craiova, Editura Universitaria, 2006.

[7] Cf. Gh. Guțu, *op. cit.*

BDD-A3780 © 2008 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 03:00:48 UTC)

Strechie, Mădălina, *Condiția femeii în cadrul familiei romane de origine ecvestră în perioada Principatului*, Craiova, Editura Universitaria, 2008.

SOURCE

http://www.noctes-gallicanae.org/Epigraphie/tria%20nomina.htm.

BDD-A3780 © 2008 Editura Sitech

Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 03:00:48 UTC)