PROSOPOGRAPHY: PAYOFFS AND PITFALLS

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WHAT *is* PROSOPOGRAPHY?

IN HIS BY NOW CLASSICAL STUDY of Prosopography, Stone defines it as investigation of the common background characteristics of a specified group of historical actors via a collective study of their lives.[1] A uniform set of questions is asked—about kinship, socio-economic position, residence, occupation, etc. Findings are then correlated, to test hypotheses about the said historical actors' behaviour.

Now this isn't a definition of a *technique* as such. It's just a set of guidelines:[2] "You are to ask such and such questions of such and such data and check to see what goes with what in your findings." Nothing is said about *how* to pose the questions, or how to do the cross-checking. To perform the latter operations methodologically, certain specific techniques have to be used.[3] Above all, there is no suggestion, in this definition, that prosopography provides a "scientific" means of analyzing motivation. It's certainly not a licence to commit character assassination upon one's historical characters.

In practise, there are two main schools of prosopographers, namely those who study élites and those who study masses. The élitists—Stone might term them "Syme Incorporated"[4]—focus on the genealogies, business interests, and political activities of power élites. Kinship is regarded as being of critical importance. But this type of prosopographer goes in for case studies rather than social science methods. He assumes that history is made by élites and that, by and large, power drives spur

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[EDITOR'S NOTE: The following article is the full version of a paper read at the annual meeting of the Classical Association of Canada in Montreal in June, 1972. At the time it excited a good deal of discussion, and the view was expressed by many that this discussion should continue, and that it would be encouraged were the paper to appear in the pages of *Phoenix*. It is with this hope, and particularly with the aim of eliciting reasoned comment, that *Phoenix* here publishes "Prosopography: Payoffs and Pitfalls."]

[1]L. Stone, "Prosopography," *Daedalus* 100. 1 (1971) 46–79 (since reprinted in F. Gilbert and S. R. Graubard [eds.], *Historical Studies Today* [New York 1972]).

[2]"Use a computer," for instance, isn't the prescription of a specific technique. Unless you can yourself do the programming, it's effectively a recommendation to get someone else to do your analytical thinking for you.

[3]It's possibly worth noting that these techniques don't seem to be overwhelmingly in evidence in the kinds of prosopographical studies produced by most ancient historians.

[4]He terms the prosopographers who work on the eighteenth century "Namier Inc.": "Prosopography," 51.

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élites on. He aims to probe for the unseemly realities behind the façade of political life.

The prosopographer of mass movements operates rather differently. He is much given to social science methods and tries to reconstruct "ideal type" group portraits. He assumes that social forces are what shape history, and that a *variety* of drives contributes to the shaping process. He is much given to tracing social mobility. And he is much less in evidence among ancient historians.

Now views on prosopography vary. At one extreme there are those who see the technique as *the* way of producing scientific, interdisciplinary, methodological history. At the other extreme are those who consider it a manifestation of paranoia, inasmuch as the technique seems to require a world in which accidents, altruism, and humour never occur. Most people seem to assume that the claims for the technique simply involve pretentious overstatements. Such statements are, after all, usual when any emergent subspecialty is trying to make its way in the disciplinary market place. As with the new-found "science" of numismatics or the psychoanalytic preciosities of the "new" lit. crit. approach, for example. Anyway, some see such claims as our discipline's equivalent of the TV commercial.

Just how much salt *should* one in fact take prosopography with? Let's look at the way the technique works when applied to ancient history. We'll consider basic, elementary approaches, then go on to more sophisticated applications of the technique. It's easier to grasp what's involved if specific examples are discussed. So I'll illustrate by considering, mostly, books on Roman Republican history. This, after all, is the period with which the technique has probably been most prominently associated. Also, it's a period that I know something about, so I can cite illustrative examples with more confidence.

Basic/Elementary Applications

Firstly, then, basic or elementary approaches. These involve identifying and then describing trends in relatively abundant data. One of these approaches is generally to be found in studies which trace recruitment or promotion patterns, or which work out career sequences. Suolahti's study of the junior officers in the Roman army of the Republic is a good illustration of how studies in recruitment and/or promotion are conducted.[5] Suolahti shows how out-groups advanced to fill these posts, especially in the late Republic. On career sequences, Badian's study of Caesar's *cursus*

[5] See J. Suolahti, *The Junior Officers of the Roman Army in the Republican Period: A Study in Social Structure* (*Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae*, Series B, Tome 97, Helsinki 1955).

leaps to mind. It shows that a special dispensation of Sulla's allowed patricians a two-year advantage in the minimum ages at which they were eligible for senior magistracies.[6] There are many other examples of such uses of the prosopographical approach. These two are cited because they sprang immediately to my mind when I cast about for illustrative examples. Readers will no doubt be thinking of other examples that come equally clearly to their minds. But these two are neat illustrations of what we're talking about.

Now basically, what's involved in these studies is correlating data to check hypotheses. The actual technique used is multivariate analysis.[7] Twenty-four tables of such correlations occur in Suolahti's work,[8] and the analytical infrastructure of his book can be readily rendered in one such all-encompassing table. Figure 1 illustrates what's meant. Badian's study likewise involves correlations. After examining a series of possible explanations, he proceeds to compare patricians with plebeians in terms of the ages at which members of each group respectively attain various offices. Again, a form of multivariate analysis is involved. As a matter of fact, multivariate analysis is the *only* technique we've got for checking how one variable is related to one or more others. Hence forms of prosopography cast in terms of multivariate analysis are basic in a very elementary sense. They're our only way of disinterring these kinds of findings.[9]

But the millennium has not dawned for prosopographers, for the simple reason that this technique can only be used properly when data are fairly abundant. And the kinds of data the technique requires are generally far from abundant, where antiquity is concerned. The (relative) abundance of inscriptional data on the officials of the Roman Empire constitutes an exception, a form of data-bank unique among ancient source materials. Let's briefly consider what the—more usual—paucity of information entails for those engaged upon this form of prosopographical inquiry.

[6] E. Badian, "Caesar's *cursus* and the Intervals between Offices," *JRS* 49 (1959) 81–89.

[7] For a simple exposition, see chapter 7 of my *Content Analysis: A Technique for Systematic Inference from Communications* (Winnipeg 1972).

[8] See 61, 69, 73, 76, 81, 97, 98, 107, 108, 110, 142, 143, 172, 221, 226, 234, 244, 245, 252, 253, 255, 277, 278, and 289. There are also two maps (at end) providing another format for the setting out of the data obtained by multivariate analysis, and a diagram summing up those data (298).

[9] This is *not* to imply that the only legitimate form of analysis involves quantification(!). The approach here discussed does require it, however. For an excellent critique of the superficiality of analysis which can result from over-reliance on statistics, see B. Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston 1966), Appendix ("A Note on Statistics and Conservative Historiography").

FIGURE 1

TIME-PERIODS

	I 500–134	II 133–49	III 48–14 (A.D.)
PREFECTS	Local Origin — Social Mobility		
MILITARY TRIBUNES			
MONETALES			

Firstly, in general it's only the tiny élites of antiquity for whom we have data. Even the middle echelons of antiquity's societies are only poorly documented in surviving source materials. For instance, in spite of appropriately Herculean efforts, we just don't know very much about the *scribae* and *officiales* who were probably the part of officialdom with which the majority of Romans had most to do. Besides, the data we *do* have tend only to concern a limited range of human activities and interests for most societies in antiquity.

Consider the Republic, for instance. Census data provide some skimpy economic detail. We know *something* about family trees. Official careers and political *imbroglios* are relatively well documented. We get occasional pieces of information relating to longevity, religion and education—but this kind of data is patchy and often hard to disinter and interpret.

The unpalatable facts are that we cannot reconstruct the personal or business affairs of even *ONE societas*, still less a *conventus civium Romanorum*. There is not a single Italian or provincial élite family on whose affairs we have anything that remotely approaches good documentary coverage. We don't even have detailed intergenerational coverage of the business and other private affairs of any of the major *Roman* extended families, come to that. A higgledy-piggledy conglomeration of cursory asides relating to such matters culled from a dozen sources and hundreds of years of Republican history cannot make up for such deficiencies. Such gleanings provide only a travesty of the kind of data required to write multifaceted social history.

Contrast the Republic with another era on which the prosopographers

have been busy: seventeenth century England. The latter period is, quite
simply, in another league, in terms of abundance and variety of data.[10]
How can we tell what is extraordinary about the people and events in our
period, when we know so little about ordinary everyday things?[11] How
can we pick out "faces in the crowd"—the social origins, ages, aims and
occupations of members of a crowd? Historians of the eighteenth century
have police-, poorhouse and hospital records to draw on, and they can
cross-check these against local registers of births, marriages (sometimes)
and deaths.[12]

Stone's contention is valid. Until the proliferation of source materials
brought about by new forms of communication in the sixteenth century,
writing social history via prosopography is mostly pretentiousness.[13] This
is why the social history of antiquity is so poorly developed, in spite of
prodigies of effort. And it's why studies of antiquity's élites have proved
so much more rewarding, in various ways.

There's another basic, elementary form of prosopography, too. This
involves the reconstruction of army lists, or the tracing of the movements
of army units (in a war, or over a period of time), or the delineation of
administrative zones or suchlike. In this form of prosopography, the
analyst aims to reconstruct the pattern in cases where *some* kind of
pattern is known to be there, but its precise configuration is not known.
Typically, some form of plotting out of data on to a map is involved. The
analyst operates by tracking down incidental references to his subject
matter occurring in sources focused on other things. He then pieces his
snippets of information together until the resultant patchwork allows the
pattern to stand out. It's rather like putting the pieces of an incomplete
jigsaw puzzle together.

This approach merely involves routine military intelligence work.[14]
Indeed, stories of Classicists, who had worked on elucidating the history
of Roman army units, being taken, in 1939, into British military intel-
ligence to do the same for the contemporary German army, are part of the

[10]See discussion in Stone, "Prosopography," 48–49 and notes 4–5, p. 74.

[11]Unless the sample from which data are drawn is representative, little reliance can be
placed on the data so drawn. Suolahti, for example, carefully draws attention to the fact
that *his* sample (646 men in all) only represents between 1 and 2% of the *tribuni
militares, duumviri navales* and prefects of the Republic and that aristocratic elements are
enormously over-represented within it (*Junior Officers,* 301–302).

[12]For a discussion of "faces in the crowd" in these terms, see G. Rudé, *The Crowd in
History, 1730–1848* (New York 1964), especially the Introduction ("The Subject and Its
Problems") and Part Two ("The Pre-industrial Crowd").

[13]Stone, "Prosopography," 58–59 (and cf. 69–70).

[14]See, e.g., L. Farago, *War of Wits: The Anatomy of Espionage and Intelligence* (New
York 1954), 45–47.

folklore of Classics. As a well known instance of this kind of prosopographical approach, Parker's *The Roman Legions* springs to mind.[15]

SOPHISTICATED APPLICATIONS

Let's pass on from these basic approaches to the more sophisticated applications of prosopography mentioned earlier. These sophisticated applications produce studies of institutions or of processes. They have to employ more complicated forms of prosopographical inquiry to do so. As to institutions, Szelmer's work on the Roman priesthoods springs to mind.[16] The work we must all be thinking of, however, in this connection, is Badian's master work on *clientela* as a process.[17] This book is a splendid illustration of how to use prosopography, and we can learn much about the strengths—and weaknesses—of the technique by looking closely at it. Let's do so, briefly.

First of all, as you'd expect, patronage is a phenomenon that changes, over time, with changes in its host society.[18] The following figure, Figure 2, indicates some of the diversity which typically ensues. Given such diversity, Badian's probings are well directed. Also, the Republic was a society composed of a (gradually decreasing) number of pyramids of social power—unlike the three-tier class-stratified society of our Western industrial age. This is a patronage, not a class, society. Badian has, in fact, focused upon the most important form of social relationships known to the Republic. So he has a wealth of data to work with.

This means that he can validate findings in one area and from one lot of evidence by comparing them with other findings, from another area and another lot of evidence.[19] He can analyse the semantic field of concepts

[15]H. M. D. Parker, *The Roman Legions* (Oxford 1928; repr. Cambridge 1958), e.g. chapters 2, 3, and 5.

[16]See G. J. Szemler, "Religio, Priesthoods and Magistracies in the Roman Republic," *Numen* 18.2 (1971) 103–131.

[17]E. Badian, *Foreign Clientelae (264–70 B.C.)* (Oxford 1958).

[18]There's an excellent discussion of this in E. R. Wolf, "Kinship, Friendship and Patron-client Relations," in M. Banton (ed.), *The Social Anthropology of Complex Societies* (Association of Social Anthropologists, Monograph 4, London 1966) 1–22.

[19]This is a basic technique for cross-checking on the validity of one's inferences. If you use a different set of source material but analyse that set with the same technique as you used in the first place, what you're doing is called multiple confirmation. You might, for instance, compare a multiple career line study of Roman élites (Latin sources) with a similar study of contemporary provincial élites (Greek sources). It's known as multiple *operationalism* if you employ a different technique, as well as using different source materials, to do your cross-checking. This is the kind of procedure discussed in the text. Using it, you might, for example, first run a multiple career line study on Roman élites using epigraphic, numismatic, and literary data. Then you might study changes in the

FIGURE 2: THE RELATIONSHIP OF PATRONAGE TO FAMILIAL AND POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK	ORGANIZATIONS OF KIN-GROUPS OR COMMONALITY		
	Strong Kin/Family Groups	Well Organized Groups among the Commonality	No effective Groupings, Kin or Commonality
Strong and Ramifying	[Not possible to have strong kin groups here.] Legal/moral clientship leads to family influence.	The patron relates the group to power positions and power plays within the machinery of government.	Patrons sponsor clients, but clients shift allegiance at need.
Weak and Only Partially Covering the Society	Aristocratic or feudal controls over followerships of clients.	The patron uses his following to intervene in politics or effect a coup.	"Big man" style patronage (i.e., prestation builds followings which last for the prime of a man's life).

related to the core concept *clientela* and, via historical semantics, observe changes in the semantic field.[20] He can relate changes in the political regime, process, and institutions to changes in that semantic field (and to one another). He can study the regime by multiple career line analysis of members of the élite. He can study the political process in terms of élite and mass practices, values and operational codes (where relevant). And he can note changes in the institutional structure and relate them to the above inquiries.

Clearly, this is a powerful and skilfully directed use of the technique. This subject matter could not, in fact, be studied with equal effectiveness by any other technique. But it should be noted that what is involved is a trend study of a descriptive nature. Moreover, Badian's procedure cannot be simply applied without further ado to any and all other societies in antiquity. It suits the Republic, dominated by the politics of aristocrats. The Empire and the politics of bureaucrats are another matter.[21] Aristocratic societies in antiquity are at no far remove from the reciprocity normal in tribal societies.[22] With the Empire, a different mode of inter-relationships, involving redistribution, came to prevail.[23]

One can't simply assume that some unspecified but unchanging norm of patronage relationships will be everywhere and automatically operative in antiquity. One has to do what Badian did: *find out* just what *was* happening in the period in which one is interested. And some societies and periods aren't nearly so amenable to prosopographical analysis as is the one studied by Badian. Social structure and/or data base may be far less suitable for such a form of investigation.

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semantic field of terms grouped around *clientela*, focusing on different sorts of literary evidence via this use of historical semantics. In either case—with multiple operationalism or multiple confirmation—your aim is to see how well the two sets of resultant findings agree with one another.

[20]See Badian, *Foreign Clientelae*, Introduction, and, e.g., chapter 2, section 3 (on *fides*).

[21]On the politics of bureaucrats, see S. N. Eisenstadt, "Political Struggle in Bureaucratic Societies," *World Politics* 9 (1956) 15–36, and chapter 2 ("The Politics of Bureaucrats") in my forthcoming book *The Shape of the Past: Models and Antiquity* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1974).

[22]For an excellent review of current anthropological thinking on tribes and tribesmen, see M. D. Sahlins, *Tribesmen* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968). The concept of reciprocity is discussed in chapter 5 ("Tribal Economics"). Sahlins also has a brilliant chapter ("On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange") in M. Banton (ed.), *The Relevance of Models for Social Anthropology* (Association of Social Anthropologists, Monograph 1, 1965) 139–236. Anyone interested in the working of patronage in preindustrial, traditional societies really should be familiar with this work of Sahlins'.

[23]The empire-states of antiquity operated via redistribution (rather than reciprocity or the free market system): see K. Polanyi *et alii* (eds.), *Trade and Market in the Early Empires* (New York 1957) chapter 13 ("The Economy as Instituted Process").

Prosopography, then, can be appropriately and meaningfully used to study institutions and processes. But some kinds of institutions and processes constitute good subjects for study; others—as we'll see shortly—don't. And there's no one "ideal" form of prosopography. The guidelines have to be adapted as the question and source materials under study indicate. For maximum effectiveness, a *combination* of techniques seems indicated.[24] Collection of data on multiple career lines is only *one* component technique. In itself it does not constitute prosopography, which involves the meshing together of several such component techniques.

THE CUCKOO IN THE PROSOPOGRAPHERS' NEST[25]

So far, we've considered subject matters and modes of employment which, albeit within rather restricted limits, suited the technique. This has meant ignoring the cuckoo in the prosopographers' nest. This is quite a feat, since the latter is, appropriately, bigger and lustier than the other nestlings. For the form of prosopography possibly most in evidence is that which involves analysis of the motives of a given historical actor, or actors, in a specific set of circumstances.

This form of prosopography involves interpretation of motivation, often via a single-shot study, rather than explication of trends in series data. It's enormously difficult to perform such studies of motivation in a way that's methodologically sound. This is the case even when one has the abundant socio-psychological data which simply don't exist for antiquity. So even prosopographers working on more recent periods tend to avoid studies of this kind. A study of *antiquity* employing this kind of prosopography thus runs a great risk of becoming progressively, in terms of its methodology, more and more unreliable. Let's see why.

For simplicity's sake, let's conceptualize the decision-making process in terms of the flow of events depicted in the accompanying Figure 3. It's the one most in use for such things, and can be used to examine either individually-made or group decisions. The scenario goes like this. There's an outcry about something or other. A number of interested parties take up the cry. The decision maker notices that something's up, hits on a way of coping, and swings into action. Simple enough, in outline.

[24]Szemler, like Badian, uses a range of analytical techniques and produces converging findings, to validate his conclusions, by analysing different bodies of source materials with first one, then another of this range of techniques.

[25]The cuckoo referred to is the European bird. It lays its eggs, one at a time, in the nests of smaller birds. The young cuckoo is thus bigger than its fellow nestlings. So he engrosses the attention of his foster parents (who act on the assumption—as do some academics of their departments—that bigger is better). So the other fledglings first of all have their share of the food taken from them, and then are ousted from the nest.

But actual details of what happens are quite complicated, as the revised Figure 4 shows. The decision maker acts on his perception of the situation[26] and responds as his values, etc., indicate.[27] This stimulus-*perception*-response business enormously complicates analysis. Here's why. To demonstrate his subject's motivation and intent, the prosopographer has to show:

(a) his subject's "real" intention;

(b) how the subject interpreted the situation;

(c) precisely what it was he did (or caused to be done); and

(d) whether the consequences were as intended or unanticipated.[28]

The prosopographer, that is, must *demonstrate* that his subject consciously strove for a specific set goal; that the subject thought that he knew of a means of reaching that goal; and that he believed he ought to proceed to do so. The prosopographer thus has to be able to show three things:

(a) when a professed intention was not the *actual* intention;

(b) when the subject's subjective rationality differed from
    what was objectively the case;[29] and

(c) which consequences of his subject's action were the ones
    that were according to the latter's plan.

All kinds of difficulties are, obviously, involved in showing these things. Consider our elaborated diagram. There's the reality which occasioned the outcry, the reality perceived by those crying out, and our decision maker's perceptions of *their* perceptions of that reality. There is also our man's perceptions of the reality itself. None of these perceptions need coincide very neatly. Besides, the prosopographer has to show why *his own* perception of the original event (which is always, somehow, shrewder and more penetrating than that of the man on the spot) "equals" its "reality" 1 to 1 (Figure 5).

It is fairly essential, too, that the prosopographer should be able to indicate the ways in which the lines of communication current at the time

[26]If you want to find out how the world looked to a given historical actor, prosopography won't help. The technique used for revealing "the world of so and so" is content analysis. On the latter technique see Carney, *Content Analysis* (above, note 7).

[27]On perception and values, the "psycho-milieu," see H. and M. Sprout, *The Ecological Perspective on Human Affairs* (Princeton 1965), 28–29, 119, and 122–140. This book is a must for anyone who wishes to free himself or herself from the commonplace assumptions which most of us unthinkingly hold on the subject of decision making.

[28]There is some first-rate discussion of the problems of the analysis of motivation in R. F. Berkhofer Jr., *A Behavioral Approach to Historical Analysis* (New York 1969): see chapter 3 ("Behavioral Categories of Historical Analysis").

[29]On the constraints imposed by the circumstances, the "operational milieu," see the Sprouts, *The Ecological Perspective*, 30, 42, 120, and 135.
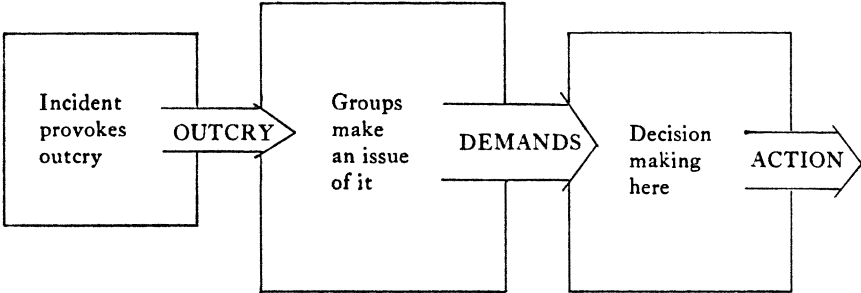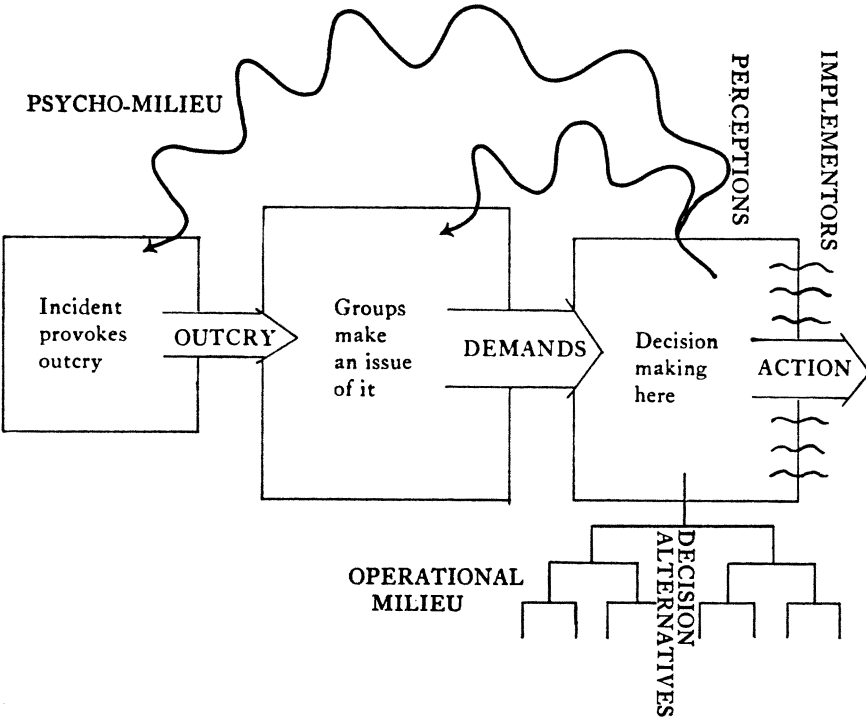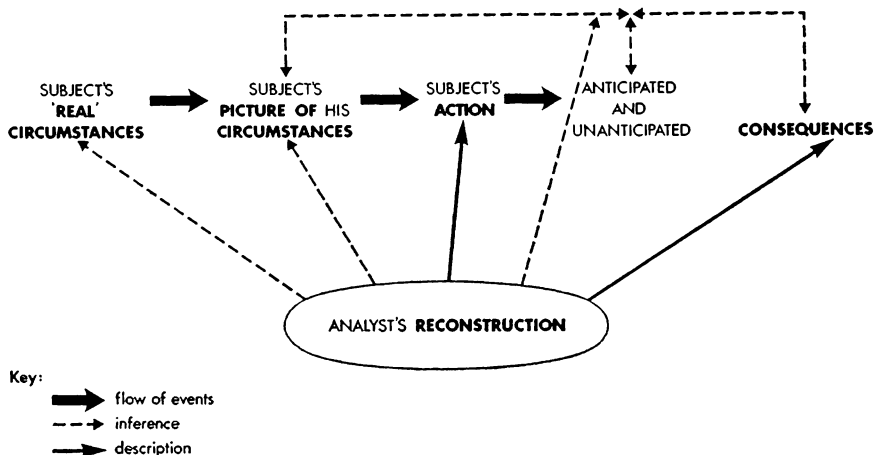
FIGURE 3

FIGURE 4

FIGURE 5

Key:
➡ flow of events
- - ➤ inference
—➤ description

functioned to pass on information (and *mis*information).[30] After all, as people act on what they perceive as reality, those perceptions are a social fact. Relevant others—our decision maker, in this case—take the people's perceptions into account when they themselves react. Besides, there's one almost invariably consistent finding arising from actual case studies of how men communicate. What happens is *never* quite what "common sense" would lead one to suppose would happen. So it just will not do blandly to assume that one's guesstimate of "the obvious" is what in fact happened.[31]

Our prosopographer also has to second-think the man on the spot. He has to penetrate his subject's unconscious. Otherwise he cannot
    (*a*) identify the latter's version of rationality;

[30]Public opinion in industrialised society is a phenomenon wholly unparalleled in antiquity. So one cannot assume one knows how the masses thought in antiquity. One must state explicitly what one believes that the communications among the mass were like in one's portion of antiquity, giving reasons to justify one's belief. See L. W. Pye (ed.), *Communications and Political Development* (Princeton 1963), chapter 1 ("Models of Traditional, Transitional and Modern Communications Systems").

[31]A fleeting aside by a *later* source, making a sweeping generalisation about, e.g., a politician's popularity or unpopularity, is *not* the same thing as a study of public opinion. It must inevitably over-simplify (e.g.: With which groups was this politico unpopular? How intense was this feeling against him? How wide-spread? How long-lasting?). The generalization reflects an incalculable amount of the ancient writer's own highly selective perceptions. Such a statement from a similarly placed modern writer commenting on a modern situation would be regarded as of little worth until independently substantiated. Why should things be different for antiquity?

(*b*) analyse his risk-taking proclivities;[32] and

(*c*) demonstrate his need for power, or whatever.[33]

Now the prosopographer's decision maker is a member of the élite. He acts *through* others—a clique, or his sub-élite. These "others" implement the decision maker's instructions as *they* deem advisable. This may not produce quite the result the decision maker anticipated. Attributing responsibility in such a welter of cross-purposes is not an easy thing to do. Hence an insidious tendency to oversimplify reality, as follows.

Prosopographers seem always, somehow, to find themselves analysing a world wherein whatever one of their subjects gains, another of their subjects loses. Now, in real life, such zero-sum games aren't the only ones available. There are games in which, by cooperating with someone else, the pair of you can both win—at a third party's expense. Or you may *aim* to lose a particular game, so as to win another game which is more important to you and yours. These games of indirection are known as variable-sum games. The trouble with variable-sum games, from an analyst's point of view, is that they're so very difficult to analyse.

The world of naked unrelieved competition implicit in the zero-sum game is much easier to calculate. You *can* say "if *x*, then *y*" of the strategies involved in zero-sum games. An iron logic prevails. This may be why prosopographers love such games—and, if they *don't* love them, why do they create so many of them? However, it must be *demonstrated* that a particular game really was a zero-sum game. Merely to assume that it was isn't "scientific." It isn't even social scientific. It's an instance of the analytical pathology known as the drunkard's search.[34] This is the equivalent of a drunken man's losing his wallet in a dark alley, then going to search for it under a street light—because the light is better there.

[32]The classical study on this topic is probably N. Kogan and M. Wallach, "Risk Taking as a Function of the Situation, the Person and the Group," in G. Mandler *et alii*, *New Directions in Psychology 3* (New York 1967), 11–278.

[33]For most students of antiquity, "psychology in history" seems automatically to be related to Freud or, at any rate, some form of psychoanalytical approach (e.g., Erikson's ego-psychology). It may well be, however, that neither the models of personality nor the techniques of analysis which usually go with literary psychoanalysis are particularly suited to antiquity. For other models and techniques, which can be shown to be relevant, see the following studies: E. E. Hagen, *On the Theory of Social Change* (Homewood, Illinois, 1962), Part II ("Personality and the Stability of Traditional Societies" [authoritarianism is involved in this case]); D. C. McClelland, *The Achieving Society* (New York 1961), chapters 4 and 8 ("Achieving Societies in the Past" and "The Spirit of Hermes" [need achievement is what's involved here]); and N. Adler, "The Antinomian Personality," in K. Westhues (ed.), *Society's Shadow: Studies in the Sociology of Counter-cultures* (New York and Toronto 1972) 76–85 (antinomianism is involved in this case).

[34]The term is A. Kaplan's; see *The Conduct of Inquiry: Methodology for Behavioral Science* (San Francisco 1964), 11 and 17–18.

Strategies of indirection—normal in variable-sum games—are noto-
riously difficult to work out with certainty. Beyond the third stage of
counter-thinking an infinite regression of possibilities sets in. At this
point analysis merely results in vertigo. The "counter-uncovering move,"
for instance, involves the following sequence of counter-thinking, one
common enough in everyday (e.g., university departmental) intrigue.[35]
Goal *A* is adopted knowing that the opponent's surveillance will spot it.
The opponent thus "uncovers" goal *B*, hidden behind goal *A*. But goal *B*,
too, involves a feint, adopted in the hope that the opponent will consider
it one's "true" goal (which is actually goal *C*). Should the opponent
assume that goal *B* is *also* meant to deceive, his computational faculties
will overload. Goal *C*, too, in this case could also be a feint . . . .

It is impossible that such elementary tactics of indirection were never
employed in the sophisticated factional intrigue of the Republic. Yet they
rarely occur as hypotheses in reconstructions of the data. This omission is
partly due to the unsatisfactory nature of the data. But it is also due, in
part, to the analyst's inability to handle the computations involved. Thus
failure to consider a whole range of possibilities results from a deficiency
in the analytical process. This oversimplification, that is, is a failing in the
analyst, not a characteristic of the data. The analyst simply can't probe
as he would have to, in order to make his questions operational (i.e. able
to result in substantive findings). So he doesn't allow for the—quite
real—possibilities.

Naturally, all these difficulties are compounded if the decision maker is
not one person but a group. Acts planned by individuals may each indi-
vidually transpire as the individuals hoped. But their totality of inter-
acting consequences may, for all that, produce a result quite unexpected
by those individuals. Such may also be the case with the coordinated
actions of a group.[36] In fact, all kinds of things happen when people
interact as a group. There's the Risky Shift effect: together the group acts
with a daring that no one component member on his own would evince.
Besides, any well entrenched power group tends to build up a sort of
operational code. If this isn't known, and for antiquity it generally isn't,[37]
motives behind group behaviours are almost impossible to assess.

[35]See E. Goffman, *Strategic Interaction* (Philadelphia 1969), 19 on the "counter-
uncovering move." Actually, all of Goffman's first chapter—"Expression Games: An
Analysis of Doubts at Play"—is highly relevant for the study of intrigue.

[36]Berkhofer has some penetrating comments on the subject of analysing group
motivation and intent; see chapter 4 ("A Basic Orientation to Group Behavior"), *A
Behavioral Approach*. The basic work, currently, on collective behaviour is N. J.
Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behavior* (New York 1962); on groups, see S. Verba, *Small
Groups and Political Behavior: A Study of Leadership* (Princeton 1961).

[37]Not a single work—memoir, autobiography, biography—written by *any* of the élite
of the second century of the Republic, that heyday of senatorial power, survives. Not a

Prosopographers seem to expect lesser mortals to take for granted that "we all know" what "the" (!) rules of faction fighting are. Actually, a certain amount *is* known about the costs of coalition formation.[38] Not by the prosopographers who reconstruct ancient history, perhaps, but it is known. And there is a certain amount known about how factions operate in non-industrialized societies.[39] Reconstruction of the factional goings-on in Republican Rome would be enormously improved by taking the insights generated by such work and applying them to the analysis of Roman factional life. Merely to assume that some unspecified but self-evident and immutable "laws" of faction fighting are operating throughout antiquity is to operate at the level of simple folk wisdom.

When it comes to the analysis of decision making in antiquity, the limitations imposed upon us by the dearth of source materials are crippling. Studies of the intent and motivation behind decision making presuppose extensive autobiographical source material. Name three autobiographies surviving from the Republic. Only in a very tiny number of cases do we know *anything* about the childhoods of even élite figures. Large areas of social life for most levels in ancient society are barely documented at all. Information of the sort given by the equivalent of committee minutes—even at the level of the *acta senatus*—is all but non-existent. Detail on the *minutiae* of how major administrative feats were carried through is equally poorly documented. It isn't even possible to run voting studies or roll-call analyses, as is done by historians of more recent and better documented eras. We don't know, for instance, who constituted the voters in a given Republican *tribus* for a given election, or how which groups of constituents voted, and why. We can't even sum over the voting records of individual senators in any given period.

We Classicists are not alone in being thus restricted by the inadequacies of our source materials, of course. Others, however, show less inclination to rush in where treading is known to be so dangerous. Domhoff's recent *Who Rules America?*, for instance, specifically opts out of decision-making analysis. The imponderables, even with contemporary levels of evidence, involve such subjectivity as to make any findings questionable.[40] Dahl

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single work written by a Latin historian of the second century survives either, for that matter. This dearth of evidence has not, however, prevented reconstructions of the attitudes and values of the senatorial élite of the second century. Expectably, opinions vary as to the worth of such reconstructions.

[38]See C. R. Adrian and C. Press, "Decision Costs in Coalition Formation," *American Political Science Review* 62 (1968) 556–563. The basic work is probably W. H. Riker, *The Theory of Political Coalitions* (New Haven 1967).

[39]F. G. Bailey, *Stratagems and Spoils: A Social Anthropology of Politics* (Oxford 1969) is of the utmost importance in this regard.

[40]G. W. Domhoff, *Who Rules America?* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1967); cf. 6–7.

was able to do it, after a fashion, for a much more limited inquiry.[41] Investigating a city, he looked at various issues (urban redevelopment, schools, party nominations) and found out who initiated or blocked key proposals. He then checked on overlaps among these initiators and blockers in terms of social status and interaction. All kinds of problems came up. The activists, for example, might be merely the "leg men" for power figures who dominated the action without ostensibly participating in the decision making at all. For what epoch in antiquity do we have the data to perform a study like this one of Dahl's?

If the data aren't there, one can't use the techniques which enable one to avoid impressionistic intuitivism. Take the simplest case, that of two persons, A and B, involved in contention. Six personae are involved, as each participant is

    (i)   the person he appears to be;

    (ii) the person he thinks he is; and

    (iii) the person he actually is.

Moreover the person's own interests and those of the group he represents may not be identical (so he will be available for side-games). Besides, A's perception of the issue may not be at all like B's perception of A's perception of the issue. B's perception of A's perception of his—B's— perception of the issue will also be in there, further confusing things.

Now there are ways of analysing such spiralling relationships (called "dyadic interactions"). One is interaction process analysis;[42] the other is the interpersonal perception method.[43] But such techniques require (preferably) participant observers, or (at the very least) full records of the interaction plus abundant related correspondence. These conditions cannot be met, for antiquity.

Another way of probing the data of group interaction is by sociomatrices. A sociogram, for example, can map out who interacts most/least

[41]See R. A. Dahl, *Who Governs?* (New Haven 1961). Dahl discovered a variety of forms of faction fighting: concealed leagues of noteworthy figures; a "grand coalition of coalitions" centred around a key power wielder; a coalition of clique leaders; cliques fighting to achieve control of various specific spheres of influence—or coexisting, more or less peacefully, each in control of its "own" sphere. And, when you think of it, it's quite unlikely that any *one* form of faction fighting prevailed throughout Republican history (or was uniformly operative across the board at any one period, come to that). Any limitation of the range of factionalism attributed to Republican politics is thus more likely to be a function of the prosopographer's analytical limitations than a characteristic of the actual situation.

[42]See now T. W. Madron, *Small Group Methods and the Study of Politics* (Evanston, Illinois, 1969), chapter 6 ("Interaction Process Analysis"). The classic in this field is R. F. Bales, *Interaction Process Analysis: A Method for the Study of Small Groups* (Reading, Massachusetts, 1950).

[43]On the interpersonal perception method see R. D. Laing *et alii*, *Interpersonal Perception: A Theory and a Method of Research* (London 1966), chapter 5.

frequently with whom. Then various characteristics can be plotted on to the "map," to identify common denominators of interacting cliques shown therein.[44] One can even characterise the features of a social network: its anchorage point; first- and second-order "stars;" reach; density; range; directedness; content; durability; and intensity.[45] Via a "dendrogram" (family tree to us Classicists) as a map, one can plot in various socio-economic characteristics.[46] Once elaborated, such dendrograms can be compared, to ascertain differences between different familial groups.

Again, all of these techniques require more data than is generally available to students of antiquity. They could be used, however, if only in rather limited ways. Their use would take some of the rampant impressionism out of what is currently going on in prosopographical studies of factional politics. But try naming five such studies in which you've seen them used.

What *does* go on in our field? We're all too wearily familiar with the kind of "argument" that runs: "so and so has the same name, so maybe he's a member of the *gens*. If he's a member of the *gens*, then it's probable that he had the same policy as another, later member of the *gens*. So his motives at *this* time will have been such and such." After the foregoing disquisition on the difficulties of proving motive and/or intent, it may be possible to see why modern historians regard ancient historians as writing a different and much less methodically sound form of history. A quick glance through a study of the sociology of leadership—the socio-economic characteristics of a given élite—will demonstrate what is being done in other fields.[47] When one has some such base-line for comparison, it's much easier to assess what's going on in our own field.

To form such an assessment, one needs a good example from our own

[44]For a simple explanation of the technique of the sociogram see L. Broom and P. Selznick (eds.), *Sociology: A Text with Adapted Readings* (New York 1963), 170–175. This technique can be employed on data other than that generated via a questionnaire. It could be used to assess the acquaintance networks revealed by Cicero's correspondence, for instance. For an illustration of the technique in operation see E. E. Maccoby *et alii* (eds.), *Readings in Social Psychology* (New York 1958; or any later edition), 534–543.

[45]On these networks see J. C. Mitchell (ed.), *Social Networks in Urban Situations* (Manchester 1969), especially chapter 1 ("The Concept and Use of Social Networks").

[46]On the dendrogram, see C. R. Bell, *Middle Class Families* (Boston 1968), chapter 5 ("Ceremonial").

[47]Domhoff (*Who Rules America?*, pp. 5–7) opts for a "sociology-of-leadership" approach. This focuses on the sociological characteristics (socio-economic class, religion and race) of the leadership group under analysis. W. B. Quandt, in his study *The Comparative Study of Political Elites* (*Sage Professional Papers in Comparative Politics*, ed. H. Eckstein and T. R. Gurr, Beverly Hills; Series 01–004, vol. 1, 1970), limits himself to age, occupation and education. These variables are known to be meaningful; and data is uniformly available on them in his sources. Few studies of the élites of antiquity, based on *far* skimpier data, are anything like as cautious (or as methodical).

field. Probably the book most prominently and recently associated with this kind of prosopographical interpretation of Republican factions is Gruen's *Roman Politics and the Criminal Courts*.[48] Gruen uses the political trial as the key with which to unlock the riddle of Republican politics.[49] By dint of reconstructing the motives, intent and consequences of one trial after another, trials for which (as Gruen states) often only the flimsiest evidence survives, an overall picture has been built up. The book is thus set, fairly and squarely, in precisely that area of prosopographical inquiry outlined in this section. Gruen works with meticulous care and is well read in the primary source material and secondary literature pertaining to the history of the Roman Republic. Readers may care to look at his book. This will provide a practical test, enabling you to judge for yourselves how valid are the contentions contained in this section of my case.

A Prosopographical Check-list[50]

If you are considering some prosopographical study or other and wish to try it before you "buy" it, you may find the following *Consumers' Guide*-lines useful. As of now, six methodological failings have been evolved. However, it's not unlikely that, once critical interest in the methodology of prosopography has been aroused, others will add considerably to this list.

First of all comes *Textual Perversion*. This, to a prosopographer, is the equivalent of Textual Emendation. It is based upon a practical appreciation of the fact that, the skimpier the evidence, the more elaborate the theories that can be spun around it. Textual perversion assumes that super-ingenuity and hyper-subtlety, when applied to inadequate data, will guarantee new findings which will be definitive.[51] RATING: about as

[48]E. S. Gruen, *Roman Politics and the Criminal Courts, 149–78 B.C.* (Cambridge, U.S.A., 1968).

[49]Trial as key: 6 (see the Introduction in general); for analysis of the motives and effects of these trials, see especially chapters 4 ("The Emergence of the Metellan Supremacy"), 6 ("Popular Politics and the Judicia"), 7 ("The Building of Crisis"); see also the Appendices. But the whole book merits reading in this connection.

[50]The check-list idea is just an adaptation of the frame of reference commonly used in propaganda analysis (e.g., "Card-stacking," "Glittering generality," "Just Plain Folks," "Bandwagon"). See W. Hummel and K. Huntress, *The Analysis of Propaganda* (Hinsdale, Illinois, 1959), chapter 4 ("Propaganda in Action," dealing with "The Rhetoric of Propaganda"). What is involved is an oblique approach to the study of historical method. The aim is to establish what is wrong in current practices, so that faulty procedures can henceforth be avoided: see D. H. Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York 1970), xvii (this book is widely and generally relevant to my argument as a whole and should repay reading).

[51]Cf. Gruen's remarks on the identity of "Manlius" at 52–53 of *Roman Politics and the Criminal Courts.*

dependable as textual emendation, *Quellenforschung* of non-existing texts, and the lead-ballasted lifejacket.

Second comes *Journalese*, a style of expression often favoured in prosopographical studies. Terse, emotively (if acridly) worded, tough-minded and cryptic, it requires acquiescence in a dreadfully knowing and fashionably unflattering view of human nature.[52] Translated into ordinary English, with all assumptions and hypotheses spelled out and "justified," the same case will appear far less compelling. RATING: the literary equivalent of talking out of the side of the mouth.

Third comes *Technique Short-fall*. Prosopography involves a combination of two things. Firstly, there are some guidelines: the analyst has to look out biographical data, then correlate the background characteristics of the group studied. Secondly, there are techniques: multivariate analysis, modelling, sociograms, dendrograms, multiple operationism and so on. A study which has the guidelines but not the techniques is selling you short. Not everyone can data-grub for biographical facts; it often isn't easy.[53] But suppose our analyst can data-grub. The question still remains: how competently can he analyse the data he has uncovered? Off-the-top-of-the-head psychologizing about personal motivations, group dynamics and public opinion is mere ho-hum impressionism. RATING: as scientific as Hitler's Aryan super-race theories.

Fourthly, there is the matter of the *Implausibility Structure* of a prosopographical study. As with all writing of historical novels, the details and manner in which the plot is constructed are of central importance. Four features predominate: the Chain of "Might-be's," Inference from Non-circumstantial Evidence, the *Cursus Somniorum* and Meretricious Presentation. Let's briefly consider each feature.

Here is one (not overly imaginary) illustration of a Chain of "Might-be's:" "It's likely that this Memmius is Quintus Memmius' brother. It's not impossible that he was Tribune in this or the next year. Probably their policy, like their family, was the same. If this is so, it should provide clear evidence of the clique in action." Each "might-be" compounds the odds against the likelihood of the case which is being, so to speak, argued. Wishful thinking sets in with the second "might-be." Fantasy

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[52]For such expressions see Gruen, *ibid.*, 180: "the Marian juggernaut" (shades of Orwell!); 182: "motley coalition"; 187: "that did not stop the ambitious agitator"; etc. (e.g., 194, 205, 207, 226, 251, 276, and especially 199 and 210).

[53]For instance, some dissatisfaction has been expressed about the validity of the data which Suolahti handles so competently in *The Junior Officers of the Roman Army*. In general, see Fischer's comments, *Historians' Fallacies*, 40–41.

takes wing with the third. With the fourth and following "might-be's," we are freaking into the world of pure delusion.[54]

Inference from Non-circumstantial Evidence involves arguing from the facts that "there are no other known or previous examples;" that "such a man would not have entertained such a thought".[55] For the argument from silence to be valid, one must have a superabundance of evidence. When based upon an almost total lack of evidence, this line of argument, while often artistic, is rarely logically compelling.

The *Cursus Somniorum* is a sub-variety of the theory spinning involved in the Chain of "Might-be's." This variant involves such *somnia* as the following: "He will have been governor of [Afghanistan] in [143 B.C.]." "He may well have been so and so's quaestor, in such and such a province, in the year dot." "He may—or may not—have been such and such".[56] Who says scholars of antiquity are limited by the fact that they can't generate fresh "data" to prove or disprove a theory?

Meretricious presentation involves the following line of, as it were, reasoning. "Of course, the evidence does not allow of any degree of certainty. But it is not impossible [that pigs might fly]. And, in this connection, there *is* one interesting piece of evidence that it could, in *this* case, have happened [viz., pig droppings on roof]." (Narrative now proceeds on implicit assumption that this particular pig somehow got airborne.)[57]

[54]For some illustration of this mode of argument, where a case is built cumulatively from several hypotheses, one resting on another, see Gruen, *Roman Politics and the Criminal Courts*, 26 (on the year 145): 52–53 (on the connections of the Fulvii); 84–86 (on the *lex ne quis indicio circumveniretur*); 112–116 (on Scaevola); 133 (on Piso); 145 (on Bestia); 146 (on Cato); 148 (on Scaurus); 159 (on Caepio's law); 216–217 (on the passing of the *lex Varia*); 232 (on Carbo); and 238 (on Servilius).

[55]On the argument from negative evidence, see Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies*, 47 ff.; on "such a man would not have entertained such a thought," see Fischer, *ibid.*, 209 ff. (especially 212). For instances of the argument from silence, see Gruen, *Roman Politics and the Criminal Courts*, 86 (bottom) and 236.

[56]Fischer (*Historians' Fallacies*, 53 ff.) calls this "the fallacy of the possible proof." For some examples see R. Syme, *Sallust* (Berkeley 1964), 12–13: "Sallust's family may (or may not) have incurred damage"..... "Amiternum might have stood with the party of Marius".... "Sallust may have had... personal reasons for a... grudge against Sulla." Similar conjectures appear in Syme's *Tacitus* (Oxford 1958): "it may be pure accident that" (2.599—of Laberius Maximus); "if inferences from nomenclature are permitted" the names Domitius or Pompeius—alone—"prove" a man to be a provincial (590); "— if the son of the consular" (599, n. 3; cf. Appendix 32, p. 683).

[57]For instances of passages of argumentation wherein the first statement would seem seriously to undermine all that follows, see Gruen, *Roman Politics and the Courts*, 20–21 (following "It is prudent not to press these conjectures too far"....); 23–24 (following "It would be wrong to make an a priori assumption"....); 63 (following "Details of the proceedings defy reconstruction"....); 77 (following "It would be a mistake simply to see the trial in terms of factional politics"....); 120–122 (following "That these associations endured cannot be proved"....); 149–150 (following "Much speculation about

Following such lines of argument past the first statement is a pursuit recommended only for those with a taste for creative writing.

RATING of Implausibility Structure: longevity of house and of cards not guaranteed. Outperformed by soap bubbles.

Closely akin to Meretricious Presentation is our fifth methodological failing, that of *Having One's Cake and Eating It*. We all of us tend to argue away inconvenient evidence that tells against a favoured hypothesis, of course. But it's far easier to do it, and fail to note that one has done it, amid the complex welter of *minutiae* that normally go into arguing a case prosopographically.[58] RATING of Having One's Cake and Eating It: low. It makes such confections hard for others to digest.

Sixthly, there is the matter of the overall economy of construction of prosopographical case building. The *"Weeping Brick"* style involves the following form of construction. Each as it were "brick" of data is lavishly bedaubed with "mortar," in the form of an elaborate psycho-social interpretation on the above lines. The resultant wall of data-bricks presents a very arresting pattern (of squished-out mortar). Trends in the overall pattern are now analysed to demonstrate the validity of each individual piece of construction. Complete circularity is thus ensured. It was the interpretation in each case that produced the "mortar" overlay that made the overall effect. So naturally the overall effect and the individual parts are alike. They are both created by the same "historical forces." These historical forces are the contribution of the prosopographer's interpretation, which is quite separate from the actual *data* employed.[59] RATING: provides attractive façade; does not hold weight well.

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this case is unwarranted"....); 187 (following "scarcity of evidence forbids a detailed reconstruction"....); 275 (following "evidence on the case is tantalizingly slender"....); see also 101–102, 110–111, 153–154, 166–167, 198, 212, 251, and 258–259.

[58]See Fischer's comments on "the fallacy of statistical special pleading" (*Historians' Fallacies*, 110 ff.). For some illustrations, see Gruen, *Roman Politics and the Courts*; compare the comments on parties and factions at 2 with 106, 107, and 181; the comments on Cinna's consensus at 240–242 and 251 with 245 and 249; and the comments on Sulla's enlightened constitutional reform at 252 with 253, 269, and 277. Thus factions can be seen as the genuine stuff of politics (1); but, when it suits the argument, protagonists don't follow party(?) lines (35), or "don't consider consistency a virtue" (117). Trials are better than the evidence from electoral results; they do much(?) to illuminate the course of politics (5–6; cf. 76, 112, 194 and 286). Yet, on occasion, an adverse verdict has "little significance" (127; cf. 149), or the results of a trial are "nebulous" (196), or the picture is "more complex than it appears"—so can be "interpreted" (171).

[59]Thus, for Gruen, factional politics, centred on *dignitas* and *potentia*, are predominant in shaping and explaining Roman politics (*ibid.*, 279). "Patterns there were" (279), in the "matrix"(?) "of Roman politics"—"familiar patterns," "undulating patterns" (281).

"One Tool to Rule Them All, One Tool to Find Them"?[60]

Prosopography, claims Stone, has the potential to unify history's present loose confederation of topics and techniques into an empire. It can bind constitutional, institutional, and biographical history into one.[61] One can admire enthusiasm without being convinced by it. Prosopography is, after all, only a set of techniques, like content analysis or modelling. It investigates one area—an important area, true (élites and/or social mobility). But, still, this is only *ONE* area, out of several. Prosopography cannot provide an overall picture. In this it contrasts with any of the systems approaches.[62] Let's see how.

The comparative politics approach[63] is set within the "structured space" of a systems framework. You can move about from one level to another (cross-sectional analysis), trace processes in train (flow analysis) or radical discontinuities (via transformational matrices). You can insert other techniques and their findings (e.g., cross-cultural studies on bureaucracy). You can analyse decision making, communications, effective capacity, and power. Sets of change points to look for, and likely trends in crisis development are suggested. A variety of models and social indicators is included to help check and cross-check your assumptions and

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Yet, patterns and matrix notwithstanding, the "structure of Roman politics remains difficult to grasp" (4); the shifts are "dizzying" (279). For—as Gruen keeps telling his readers—new issues and men of principle arose, operating without regard for factionalism (78); "old allegiances" *kept* being shaken (236); "factional rivalries were rendered obsolete by civil war" (p. 240); and so on. Now multiform phenomena are notoriously intractable to monocausal explanations. So anyone who tries to comprehend the last century of the Roman Republic in terms of one main explanatory structure is going to have difficulties of comprehension. He will indeed feel that his explanation involves dizzying shifts. For example, Gruen's account at 281–282 suggests a *non*-factional causal explanatory principle: issue-oriented politics (agrarian and army reform; the Social and Civil Wars). Page 283 suggests yet another: foreign crises intervening so as to start up issues in domestic politics. Contemporaries appear to have thought such things important, whereas—as Gruen admits (3)—they make little reference to the importance of factions.

[60]The next two lines of Tolkien's poem, from which this subtitle is adapted, are also à propos. See any edition of *The Lord of the Rings*.

[61]Stone, "Prosopography," 73.

[62]Who can say what *the*(!) book on systems theory is? Still, L. von Bertalanffy's work is epochal, so his *General System Theory: Foundations, Development, Applications* (New York 1968) would represent a reasonable starting point. Readable (as these books go) is E. K. Berrien, *General and Social Systems* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1968); see chapter 1 ("The need for General Systems Theory").

[63]Possibly the best general handbook on comparative politics is G. A. Almond and G. B. Powell, *Comparative Politics: A Developmental Approach* (Boston 1966). I have attempted to present the approach in a form specifically adapted to the needs of "our" part of antiquity in my book on models. See *The Shape of the Past*, chapter 7 ("An Analytical Model for Comparing Societies in Antiquity").

working procedures. The systems enthusiasts thus seem more believable when they argue that *they* own the overview.

But the importance of *any* technique can only be a matter of degree. Everything depends on the question you wish to pose and the sources to which you wish to pose it. It's quite useless, for instance, to use prosopography to find out how a man viewed his world—and that is what much biographical writing is, after all, about. When the sources are skimpy, *no* technique, no matter how good, will get results, if that technique needs abundant data before it will work.

Which brings us to Stone's claim that prosopography "is ideally fitted to reveal the web of sociopsychological ties that bind a group together".[64] This can only be true, as Stone indicates, when abundant socio-psychological data are available for the technique to work on.[65] Such abundance is very, very rarely the case in antiquity. Still, the technique, when used appropriately and with discretion, can glean a modest assortment of new findings on the societies of antiquity for us. These findings are likely to be of critical importance. Apart from them, we have so little that's really firm to go on. The guesstimates produced by traditional impressionist approaches have a nasty habit of proving fallacious.

Besides, sometimes a bystander *can* see more of the game than the individual player can.[66] It's logically quite conceivable that prosopography can reveal social trends, or patterns in factionalism, which were simply too big to be seen by contemporaries. And, for some forms of investigation, as we've seen, prosopography is the *best* technique that we've got. It's easy to be so over-critical of its weaknesses, or of the excesses with which it's sometimes associated, that one is blinded to its virtues. The facts are that important discoveries have been made by scholars who have used this tool-kit. Even if its usefulness is circumscribed, the technique, within its limits, outperforms any competitor.

The operative terms are, clearly, "within its limits." Currently, prosopography seems to be regarded as *the* major technique in ancient history. (Try naming three competitors for this title, if you doubt that this is so.) Because prosopography is, supposedly, the only 'scientific' technique available, it is over-used and over-esteemed. This is an instance of Kaplan's "Law of the Hammer:" give a small child a hammer, and

[64] "Prosopography," 66.

[65] See note 13, above. Readers of Stone's article cannot but notice that he does not, in the case of antiquity, cite strings of books on specific economic, political, or social issues as illustrative examples. Syme's *Roman Revolution* reigns in appropriately unique splendour. One looks in vain—and not only in Stone's bibliography—for works by students of antiquity dealing with other matters than élite feuding (e.g., with religious radicalism). Our information on the texture of life in antiquity is just not adequate enough for prosopographical studies of others than its political élites.

[66] See Bailey's comments: *Stratagems and Spoils*, 7.

he'll find that *everything* needs to be hammered. What we should hammer into our heads is that we need to have other techniques to offset and complement this one. Then it can be seen in proportion and put in its due place—which is on *tap*, not on *top*.

The aim of this paper is to help in providing a frame of reference for those wishing to discuss the technique of prosopography. Such a frame would involve identifying the guidelines, probe-zones and key operations which fall within the terms of reference of the technique. Once this is done, we'll all have a language of debate/conceptual tool-kit. Then discussion can proceed with discrimination. We'll be able to distinguish between discussion of the interpretation of a given event by a specific practitioner, and criticism of the operation of the technique as such.

Clearly, this paper can only be the first step towards providing such a framework.[67] It will act as a kind of chopping block—quite possibly for the writer's own head! So I'll finish, to let the axes be sharpened and the hatchet work begin.

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[67]Expectably, it will be criticized for its failure, in, e.g., the check-list, to employ appropriate academese—some form of social science terminology. Had it in fact used such terminology, it would have been condemned for using pretentious jargon. This is an example of the basic critics' law of *non potes vincere*.