A short manual to the art of prosopography

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Introduction

<Why prosopography?>

One of the major problems facing any historian is the question of the representativeness of the source material. In historical research, one always has to beware of drawing conclusions from individual cases and of generalizing from a handful of 'eloquent' examples.

Prosopography may be seen as an attempt to overcome this danger. By subjecting an ideally large number of members from a pre-defined population to the same questionnaire, the particular characteristics of that population as a whole become visible. The use and development of prosopography, therefore, is closely connected to the problem of scarcity of historical data.

A prosopographical study of politicians under the regime of Napoleon III can offer an insight into the 'normal' career of the 'average' French politician under the regime of this emperor. A prosopographical study of members of the guild of butchers at Bruges can offer an insight into the recruitment of that guild, the career patterns of its members, their social, political and economical relations, etc.. A prosopographical study of nineteenth-century school masters may offer an insight in their educational background and social or professional perspectives. And so forth.

<Popularity>

Prosopography is and continues to be popular. It is being used to approach more and more historical questions in an increasing range of themes and various periods in history.

<Aim of this guide >

In this guide, the following questions will be thoroughly discussed:

- What is the prosopographical method? (definitions, history and practice)
- What problems can a prosopographer expect to encounter? (in defining the target population, making a questionnaire, defining and motivating the selection criteria concerning the source material, dealing with missing data and its repercussions for the method used, etc.)
- How useful is prosopography as a method for additional research in a larger research project?

- Acquiring a critical insight in (the) prosographical method(s)
- Acquiring the basic skills needed to conduct prosopographical research

<The etymology of the term prosopography>

The word 'prosopography' is derived from the Greek 'prosôpôn-graphia' ´(προσώπων-γραφία), from '(to) prosôpon'[1] and 'graphia'. 'Graphia' means 'description'. 'Prosôpon' is derived from 'proshoraô' (πϱφοσ-όϱάω: to behold) and literally means 'face', 'that which is beheld', hence the first derived meaning: 'the facial features of a person', and the second derived meaning 'the external individual characteristics' (of men, animals and things). Literally therefore, prosopography is the 'description of external/material individual characteristics.

<Prosopography as a method>

The principles of prosopography are quite simple. In a way we might say that it is rather a research approach than a method *sui generis*; an attempt to bring together all relevant biographical data of groups of persons in a systematic and stereotypical way. As such it is a system for organizing mostly scarce data in such a way that they acquire additional significance by revealing connections and patterns influencing historical processes.

Definitions

0.1) Relations with other subdisciplines and auxiliary sciences

In order to get a better view of the field of prosopography and its place in historical research, we shall start by taking a closer look at the relation between prosopography and other historical (sub)disciplines and auxiliary sciences.

a) Biography

<What is biography?>

Biography studies the particular life histories of individuals. It pays attention not only to material events in the life of a person, but also to his inner characteristics, searching for the *motives* of someone's actions, his *psychology* and *mentality*. When a biographer takes an explicitly psycho-analytical approach, the term psycho-biography is used.

Biographies are written mainly about exceptional or special people and try to achieve a better understanding of their personality.

<Difference from prosopography>

Prosopography is not interested in the unique but in the average, the general and the 'commonness' in the life histories of more or less large numbers of individuals. The individual and exceptional is important only insofar as it provides information on the

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[1] Pl. '(ta) prosôpa', gen. pl. : 'tôn prosôpôn'.

collective and the 'normal'.[2] For a prosopographer, extraordinary people (such as a Caesar, a Shakespeare, a Napoleon or a Bismarck) are less appealing and to some extent even disturbing because they are 'out of the ordinary'.

b) Onomastics

<What is onomastics and how does it differ from prosopography?>

Onomastics is the study of proper names. It studies the origin, the history and meaning of names, their social or cultural connotations etc. Contrary to prosopography (and biography) onomastics is impersonal: the names are studied for themselves.

<Relation to prosopography >

On the one hand, onomastics can offer important additional information for prosopographical research.

Onomastic research can establish whether or not a particular name is typical of a specific social class. A considerable number of typical slave-names has been identified for the Roman world, for example. 97.60 % of all persons bearing the name Autus and 100% of those named Suavis, whose legal status can be ascertained, were slaves or former slaves.[3] When a slave was manumitted he normally took the *praenomen* and *gentilicium* (family name) of his former owner, while his slave name became his *cognomen*. If we find a person bearing a typical slave name as *cognomen*, then we can take this as a strong indication that that person is freed slave.

Sometimes a rare name may give an indication of the origins of a person. Thus, for instance, the name Hyblesios in the Greek world is found almost exclusively on Samos and Colophon.

Onomastics also helps us to know when and where a typical professional name, such as Baker or Cobbler, lost its professional content, becoming transmissible from father to children. For a prosopographer this may be crucial information, because from this moment on such a name ceases to provide information on the professional activities of their bearers.

On the other hand, onomastics also depends on prosopographical research. For instance, only prosopographical research can establish whether or not a particular name is typical of a specific social or occupational class. Thus prosopographical research shows how diminutive forms of names in medieval texts were not only used for children (Jakob – Jakobkin) but also to denote socially inferiors, particularly women.

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[2] C. Nicolet, 'Prosopographie et histoire sociale : Rome et l'Italie à l'époque républicaine', *Annales (ESC)*, 25 (1970), p. 1226; cf. Maurin, 'La prosopographie romaine : pertes et profits', *Annales (HSS)* (1982), p. 825: 'La prosopographie est la recherche des éléments communs et des écarts différentiels présentés par des biographies particulières'.
[3] Cf. R. Duthoy, 'Cognomen est omen?', in : *Mélanges P. Lévêques T. 2: Anthropologie et société*, (Paris, 1989), pp. 183-205.

c) Genealogy

<What is genealogy?>

- Genealogy is the study of pedigrees. Its immediate purpose is to trace a person's ancestors and to reconstruct the development of his family and lineage.

- It is also the auxiliary discipline that studies the origins, the growth and the relations of families and lineages.

<Relation to prosopography>

Genealogy is an important methodological aid for prosopography (and biography). It allows us to evaluate the social background of a person.

d) Sociography

<What is sociography?>

- Research into the composition and the functioning of a society and its institutions (H. DE RIDDER-SYMOENS, *Prosopographical research*, p. 42).

- The methodical description of social groups connected to an institution that is being researched, together with a social history of that institution; the description of its institutional and socio-economic framework (after J.-PH. GENET).

Sociography is the inquiry into and description of various social 'strata', 'classes' or groups in society. What is the composition of specific social group? What are the characteristic features of this group and which part does it play in society as a whole?

⇨ For instance: the order of Roman knights (*ordo equester*), the gentry in eighteenth century England, the 'Junkers' in Prussia, etc.

How can we define these groups? How were they made up? What part did they play in politics or in society at large? How homogeneous were they? Were they real social groups or merely loosely defined categories?

Sociography inevitably starts from a specific sociological or anthropological paradigm (e.g. Marxism, structural functionalism, Weber's 'Ideal types', Pareto's elite theories, Bourdieu's relational sociology, social-constructivism, etc.). It is never, therefore, 'neutral' or merely descriptive.

<Relation to prosopography>

By combining different prosopographies we can achieve a better understanding of which people circulated and operated in different social milieux. We can compare different groups and uncover possible relations and overlaps between them.[4]

Prosopography, therefore, is a potentially important aid for sociographic research.

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[4] Hanno Brand, *Over macht en overwicht. Stedelijke elites in Leiden (1420-1510)* (Louvain, 1966), p. 9.

A good example is Claude Nicolet's study of the order of knights under the Roman Republic. The first part is an extensive research into the order as whole, relying heavily on the second part, which consists of a prosopographical survey of all known *equites romani*.[5]

0.2) Defining prosopography

Now that we know what prosopography is not, we are left with the question 'what is it?' We shall start by looking at a number of existing definitions, and then focus on their key aspects.

a) Definitions

• Prosopography is a *collective biography*, describing the *external* features of a population group that has something *in common* (profession, social origins, geographic origins, etc.). Starting from a *questionnaire* biographical data are collected about a *well-defined group* of people. On the basis of these data answers may be found to *historical questions* (H. DE RIDDER-SYMOENS).[6]

• The prosopographical method consists of describing the *material characteristics* of a *more or less homogeneous* group of persons by collecting 'the largest possible bundle of material elements allowing us to describe an individual, and those spiritual elements which would enable us to go from the person to the personality are excluded. Here lies the difference between prosopography and biography, thought this does not mean that prosopography does not play an essential part in biography and vice-versa'. (N. BULST en PH. GENET, 'Introduction', in : IDEM (eds.), *Medieval Lives*.)

• Prosopography is the inquiry into *common characteristics* of a group of historical actors by means of a *collective study* of their lives (L. STONE).[7]

• By 'prosopography' we mean the *database* and the list of all persons from *a specific milieu defined chronologically and geographically* established preparatory to a *processing* of the prosopographical material from *various historical angles*, though some German historians would distinguish this second stage as 'Historische Personenforschung' (N. BULST).[8]

b) Key concepts

<Biographical aspect>

The definitions of prosopography diverge mainly depending on the 'biographical character' attributed to prosopography. Whereas De Ridder-Symoens emphasizes the '<u>collective biography</u>' aspect of prosopography (although focused on external features),

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[5] Claude Nicolet, *L'Ordre équestre à l'époque républiquaine (312-43 av. J.-C.). I. Définitions juridiques et structures sociales ; II. Prosopographie des chevaliers romains*, 2. vols. (Paris, 1966-74).
[6] H. de Ridder-Symoens, 'Prosopografie en middeleeuwse geschiedenis: een onmogelijke mogelijkheid?', in *Handelingen der Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent*', n. R., 45 (1991), 95-117; id. 'Prosopographical Research in the Low Countries concerning the Middle Ages and the Sixteenth Century', *Medieval Prosopography* 14.2 (1993), 27-120.
[7] Lawrence Stone, 'Prosopography', in : *Daedalus* 100 (1971), 46-79.
[8] N. Bulst, , 'Zum Gegenstand', in *Medieval Lives and the Historian*, eds. N. Bulst and J.-P. Genet., p. 3.

Stone considers prosopography primarily as an investigation into the <u>common characteristics</u> of a population.

<Group aspect >

The definitions of the 'group of persons' under investigation are equally divergent, ranging from a well-defined group with common characteristics, over a specific milieu to a more or less homogeneous group.

<Databank and processing>

By means of a questionnaire a databank is built that enables the researcher to answer certain predefined historical questions.

<External features >

All definitions emphasize in one way or another that mainly external, non-personal features of a group can and must be investigated by means of the prosopographical method.

c) The relation between biography, genealogy, prosopography and sociography

<What do they have in common?>

All these disciplines describe (part of) the course of life of people and from this angle (partially) explain historical processes against the background of a specific social context. They contextualize historical processes and phenomena.

<General differences >

Differences may be found in:
- The research subject: an individual (biography), a family or lineage (genealogy), a specific group or category (prosopography), (part of) society (sociography)
- The degree of individuality of the research subject (highest in biography, lowest in sociography)

Biographies obviously study the entire personality of individuals (<u>external and inner features</u>), whereas prosopography emphasizes the <u>external similarities and differences</u> between individuals within a given population.

<Prosopography, biography and genealogy>

Prosopography, biography and genealogy are largely complementary disciplines. Prosopography illuminates the social context of a family and its members.

<Biography>

In order to understand and explain the career and general course of life of a person better, and in order to appreciate the uniqueness or commonness of a person, one needs to understand his family background and social milieu.

The prosopography of a person's social milieu and family creates the ideal background for an historical biographical study of that person. It allows us to determine

the representativeness of a person and to compare his personal life to the 'typical' life of other members of the particular population he belongs to. Is the course of life of this individual typical or exceptional?

<Genealogy>

Genealogy can be useful for prosopographical research. But a lineage or a family may also be chosen as the subject of a prosopographical study. The difference between a genealogical study and a prosopographical study of a family or lineage is that in the case of a genealogy the internal family relations are prevalent, whereas the research focus in a prosopographical study is on the relations of members of the family with the outer world; the contacts (through functions, services, marriages, networks etc.) they have outside their family and the way how these affect the history and influence of the family. Attention is not only directed towards family members but also towards in-laws, friends, clients, business contacts and so forth. Even one-time contacts may be important.

<Sociography>

The relation between prosopography and sociography, as well, is mutually fruitful. Aside from unveiling connections between members of the social group or category which is being studied, it is equally important to look for correlations with attitudes and actions of other groups. Testing the behaviour and identity of a social group or category is enriched by comparing it to analogous populations or 'groups' with which members of the target population have relations (either peer relations or hierarchic relations).

Conversely, the common features that may be discovered in a prosopographical study, become understandable only when it is clear to which social groups or categories the studied population belongs.

<Microhistory >

Lastly, there is a connection between prosopography and 'microhistory' ('microstoria'), i.e. the microscopic analysis of apparently insignificant events, objects and/or persons in order to understand the complex relations tying individuals into the fabric of a society. The ultimate objective of microhistory is to gain insight into the social structures and processes determining everyday social life.

Both microhistory and prosopography study trends and relations that are not clearly visible. Prosopography can provide an important contribution to microhistory because it makes it possible to place everyday events and phenomena in a meaningful context and to distinguish between what is isolated and exceptional and what is common.

<Singularity of prosopography >

Prosopography integrates more or less large numbers of descriptive individual biographical studies into quantitative and statistic research on the whole of these biographical studies.

0.3) Aims of prosopography

The ultimate purpose of prosopography is to collect data on phenomena that transcend individual lives. It targets the common aspects of people's lives, not their individual histories. The typical research objectives are such things as social stratification, social mobility, decision-making processes, the (mal)functioning of institutions and so forth. We are looking for general factors that help to explain the lives of individuals, for what motivates their actions and makes them possible: families, social networks, patrimonies, etc.

1. Origin and development of prosopography

Introduction

Prosopography was first used as a method in historical research by historians from the Ancient World and by modernists.[9]

Initially it provided a new approach to *political* history. A group portrait of certain political elites was made by using biographical data, focusing on mutual contacts and common interests. Biographical data were collected from the totality of a predefined population and these data were subsequently analyzed.

The sociologist R. K. Merton used prosopography to show a link between Puritanism and a positive attitude toward science.[10] Contrary to the prosopographical research of elites, Merton used uniform variables suitable for measuring statistical correlations, on the basis of a relatively small sample selected randomly from the *Dictionary of National Biography*. This second method was/is mainly used by social scientists dealing with very large target populations.

We can distinguish, therefore, two 'schools' in prosopographical research: one studying elites – consisting of relatively small groups of well documented individuals – and one studying large groups of mostly anonymous or poorly documented individuals.

In studying elites, individual cases and qualitative sources and methods receive more attention. The acquisition of power and personal resources takes pride of place. Methods from social sciences – mostly statistical methods including factor analysis, probability calculations, sampling etc. – play a lesser part. In studying larger 'anonymous' groups, on the other hand, the various characteristic features deemed 'typical' of the group receive most attention. The mechanisms for social mobility and the assignment of social positions are key problems.

This methodological distinction is not rigid. Thus, for instance, the source material for the Ancient World or the Early Middle Ages is so fragmentary that the typical quantitative methods of social sciences are rarely applicable. Even when the target group is very large – such as peasants or the urban poor – too few members are attested to make statistical analysis meaningful.

1.1) Prehistory of prosopography

<Origins of the term and concept of 'prosopography' >

The word *prosopographia* has a surprisingly long history, fully traced for the first time by Timothy Barnes in 'Prosopography Modern and Ancient', which follows here on pp. 000-000.

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[9] R. Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (1939); L. Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George II*, (London, 1929). For the past twenty years, Jean Philippe Genet and Neithart Bulst have used the prosopographical method to investigate the formation of the modern state.
[10] R. K. Merton, *Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England* (1938).

<Nineteenth century >

Nineteenth-century dictionaries explain the word prosopography as a technical rhetorical term indicating the formal description of the material features of animals and people.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the word was more and more used by classicists to denote survey lists of persons with additional summary information.

1.2) Prosopography as an historical research method

<Origins >

Prosopography as a historical research method developed in the late nineteenth century. Until that time the methodology of Ancient History research had been based mainly on philology and the study of law. Prosopography was an attempt to find a new approach to political and social history.

<The pioneers>

Two important prosopographical pioneering studies stand out:

1)   The *Prosopographia Imperii Romani (PIR)*

The first edition of *Prosopographia Imperii Romani* (1897-1898) signified the birth of modern prosopography. The work is a sort of 'Who's who in the Roman Empire', containing all important persons, with summary biographical data (birth, death, parents, children, marriages, etc.) and a survey of their political careers. In the introduction to this seminal work, the great Theodor Mommsen wrote that he was not happy with the term 'prosopography', but had to admit that the word had become common usage.[11]

Despite his lack of enthusiasm for the word, Mommsen was one of the great pioneers behind the development of prosopography as a research method. He – as many others – thought that the political and institutional history of the Roman Republic was sufficiently transparent because the political institutions of the Republic could be studied in their public working.

The imperial government and administration, however, was veiled in secrecy, being dominated by the emperor and his closest associates. Mommsen hoped that through prosopographical studies of the imperial elites – focusing mainly on political careers – the motives and policies behind the imperial administration and decisions would become clear.

The first edition of the *PIR* was finished in 1898. In 1933 work was started on a second, much expanded edition (*PIR²*). Although work has continued ever since, it is still unfinished. The latest volume, containing the names beginning with P was published in 1998. The project, which will soon come to an end, is discussed by Marietta Horster, below pp. 000-000.

2) The *Pauly – Wissowa Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*

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[11] Mommsen, *PIR¹*, p. vi.

The *Pauly-Wissowa Realencyclopädie* is a monumental encyclopaedia, started in 1894 and finished in 1978. In the framework of this gigantic project, all known individuals having played some historical part had to be included. While collecting the information on senators and knights of the Roman Republic the contours unexpectedly emerged of an aristocracy (*nobilitas*), which had built its power base and hierarchy behind the screens of the official institutions. It thus became clear that the analysis of the institutions and official procedures alone was inadequate to understand the political and institutional history of the Republic and that prosopography offered a promising alternative approach.

<Breakthrough >

One of the first to react was Matthias Gelzer. In 1912 he showed, by using prosopographical analyses, that political top positions were virtually monopolized by a small, closed group of families, the *nobiles*, whose influence and power was based on informal patronage, instrumental friendships and family alliances.[12]

The great breakthrough came in the 1920s and 1930s with the works of Sir Ronald Syme, culminating in his magisterial *Roman Revolution* (1939), which showed the vast potential of the prosopographical method to analyze and explain Roman political history.

A similar role was played by Sir Lewis Namier for research in Early Modern History, whose book *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (1929) offered a group portrait of the English members of parliament under King George III (1760-1819).

Once established for Roman and Early Modern political history the use of prosopography quickly spread to other historical periods and social history.

1.3) Preparatory work, tools and aids

Preparatory is here used :

• In the historical sense of the term: work done before the development of prosopography as a method *sui generis*

• In the logical sense of the term: the works and tools one has to rely on to build a prosographical database

a) Onomastica and indices

<Onomastica>

An *onomasticon* is a dictionary or collection of proper names, especially personal ones. Under each name heading are gathered lists of individual bearers of the name with summary biographical data and source references. They are intended mainly as instruments to facilitate finding data in primary source material.

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[12] Gelzer, M., *Die Nobilität der römischen Republik* (Leipzig, 1912); *The Roman Nobility*, English translation (Oxford, 1969).

Although prosopographical lists and databases should not be confused with *onomastica*, the latter were the immediate forerunners of prosopographies and provided the indispensable instruments for the development of prosopography.

The first *onomastica* date back as far as the sixteenth century.[13] The biographical entries in the *Pauly-Wissowa Realencyclopädie* are heavily indebted to the *Onomasticon Tullianum* (1838) by Orelli and Baiter that provides lists of all persons mentioned in the works of Cicero, Varro, Caesar, Sallust, and the scholiasts of Cicero.[14]

<Indices>

The indices to important editions of texts, inscriptions and coin catalogues offer a second indispensable instrument for prosopographical studies. The *Prosopographia Imperii Romani* is to a large extent based on the indices of names in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, the great collection of Latin inscriptions started by Mommsen in 1847. Obviously, any prosopography making direct use of primary source material will be dependent on indices. Most modern editions of textual sources contain indices. In some cases indices have been published separately.

<Relation to prosopography >

Although countless indices and *onomastica* have already been published, much work remains to be done. Millions of documents in various archives have not been indexed yet, and when they are, the index is mostly limited to a selection of the apparently most important names, noted on paper cards. Thousands of ancient inscriptions and papyri are discovered and published each year, revealing the names of hitherto unknown people or yielding additional information on persons already known.

b) 'Fasti' and 'alba', diachronic and synchronic lists of functionaries

<What>

Roman *fasti* were chronological lists of events and magistrates (for instance all consuls of Rome). An *album*, on the other hand, contained a list of names of people who were members of an official institution (e. g., the Roman senate) or of persons who could be chosen to perform specific services (e. g., the *album iudicum* used to select *iudices* for jury service).

Similar diachronic and synchronic lists of members of official organs, institutes and societies are found in other periods of history (members of parliament, lists of prime ministers, lists of aldermen of a city etc.). Where such lists are lacking, historians have tried to reconstruct them.

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[13] Cf. J. Glandorp, *Descriptio gentis Antoniae*, Leipzig, 1557; id.,, *Familiae gentis Juliae*, Bâle, 1576; and the work of his son J. Glandorp, *Onomasticon historiae Romanae*, Frankfurt, 1589.

[14] J. C. Orelli and and J.G. Baiter, *Onomasticon Tullianum* (Thüringen, 1838) originally part 8 of a complete edition of Cicero's work.

<Relation to prosopography >

The reconstruction of Roman *fasti* and *alba*, regrouping the data from *onomastica* and *indices*, served as the direct forerunner of prosopographical research. Gelzer and Münzer used these lists of consuls and magistrates to show the strong tendency towards monopolization of the supreme magistracies in the hands of a few families.

Many such diachronical and synchronic lists for the medieval and early modern period may be found in Master's papers, genealogical or local amateur history publications, and inventories of archives. Using such material calls for some caution. Some of these lists are very reliable, others are of dubious quality.

For nineteenth- and twentieth-century history such lists are available in abundance, although they are not always published and visits to archives or specialized libraries will often prove necessary.

1.4) Beyond prosopography

a) Social groups and stratification

Using indices, onomastica, *fasti* and *alba*, the step to true prosopography became possible, directing attention to social groups and stratification.

<Importance of prosopography for the study of social groups and categories>

The importance of prosopography for our understanding of social classes, estates and orders is huge. It allows us to make a 'spectrum-analysis': who are the members of a particular social class? Where do they come from? How did they become members of that class?

Defining the target group is not always simple. Usually the elite orders are relatively easy to define, but the lower we get on the social ladder, the vaguer and the more insignificant the boundaries between groups become.

In Roman society, for instance, the highest *ordines* are institutionally defined, with clear and unambiguous criteria separating the ins from the outs: the *ordo senatorius*, comprising senators and (under the Empire) their children; the *ordo equester*, comprising those having officially received the title *eques romanus*; the *ordo decurionum*, comprising municipal council members; the *ordo augustalium*, comprising priests and former priests of the imperial cult at the municipal level. These groups have distinctive privileges and use specific signs and symbols to express their dignity (e. g., the toga with a broad purple band for senators, a narrow band and a gold ring for *equites*). The lower *ordines* are still clearly defined, but the relevance of membership is less clear. One may ask how socially significant the differences really were between members of, for instance, the *ordo praeconum* ('order of heralds') and the *ordo lictorum* ('order of lictors'). Outside the framework of the orders the socially distinctive criteria become even more difficult to assess. How socially significant is the difference between a freedman cobbler and a freeborn cobbler? Can we meaningfully distinguish a 'class' of independent artisans?

One of the advantages of prosopography is that it allows us to approach such questions systematically, laying the basis for a sociographic study.

b) Networks and social milieu

Prosopography is useful also to study the social milieu and the contacts of people. The criterion determining the target group in this case is provided by the contacts entertained by individuals or families. Thus a prosopographical study might focus on the correspondents of a particular historical figure or on those receiving letters of recommendation.

Social networks are often very heterogeneous, comprising individuals from very different backgrounds and occupations: the personal network of a typical English MP under George III would have included peers, lords, servants, farmers, merchants, bankers and so forth.

The results from such prosopographical research provide the necessary data for network analysis, determining network densities and specific configurations, offering an insight into the social and political dynamics of a specific society. Political systems favouring patronage, for instance, will typically produce networks with primary star configurations, with the patron (or broker) in the middle and his clients clustering around him.

2. The prosopographical method

2.1) Choosing prosopography

Prosopography has much to offer, but, of course, it is not suitable for all purposes. Whether prosopography is the best choice of method depends on:

a) General research objectives

The first question we have to ask is what exactly we want to investigate and which working hypotheses we shall use. The choice of method depends on the answers to these questions. Prosopography is not always the best choice. Moreover, even when it is, the potential of a prosopographical investigation can be realized only if the questionnaire and database adequately reflect and substantiate a coherent and well-aimed research strategy. Too many prosopographical studies run aground in their questionnaire and limit their 'analysis' to little more than a synthesis of database results: descent, schools, marriage, property, etc. A good prosopography should go further and try to explain these results. This is possible only if we start from a well formulated research objective, with clearly defined research targets determining which questions will be asked. Creativity and innovation are essential in this early phase of the inquiry.

b) Background literature and source material

Although prosopography may in itself be a suitable research method for studying social groups, stratification, and gradual (or sudden) changes in mentality, or aspects of such phenomena, we need a suitable target population to work on. A simple list of persons is not enough. The sources need to provide sufficient information to fill in our questionnaire. Consequently, we need both suitable source material and instruments or methods to locate our target population in these sources.

Furthermore, in order adequately to interpret and analyze research results, we need to be able to put them in their proper context. Prosopography is not suited for a first-ever-approach to the working of a particular institution or organization. We have to be able to rely on previous research and background literature explaining the formal working, composition and procedures of that institution or organization. Prosopography allows us to read between the lines of social and political structures and organizations, but there is no point trying to read between the lines if you do not know what is *on* the lines.

c) Total or partial method

In some cases, prosopography alone may be sufficient to provide a 90% sound methodological basis, but in many other cases prosopography is (or can be) used only to study certain aspects of a more general investigation. Not every research aim fits into a rigid, systematic questionnaire; sources, too, may prove insufficient. Research strategies, therefore, may have to be diversified, integrating different methodologies. Aspects that are usually very suitable for a prosopographical approach (provided adequate source material is available) are career and promotion patterns, power

accumulations, social networks, political influence and other non-institutional aspects of organizations or groups.

Deciding how much to rely on prosopography depends on the research objectives and the available source material.

Thus, if we want to gain insight into the recruitment and social status of members of a particular organization or social movement (e. g., the guilds in medieval England) and we have sufficient source material available, prosopography provides both a suitable and a sufficient method. However, if in addition we want to study the organization of the guild, its regulations, and its religious and symbolic roles (e. g., in the organization and celebration of religious processions), prosopography is of limited use.

2.2) Different stages in a prosopographical research

a) Theoretical model trajectory

- Determine the general research objective and formulate general working hypotheses
- Survey of source material and the general historical and theoretical literature
- Choice of method.

IF ! we choose prosopography as a research method =>

➢ Determine and define the target population (homogeneous if possible, although heterogeneous groups may offer interesting comparative perspectives) and the geographic, chronological and thematic boundaries

➢ Formulate specific working hypotheses and specific historical questions concerning the target group, to translate the general research objective into a specific questionnaire

➢ Build a systematic and uniform prosopographical database, using primary sources and literature.

➢ Analyze the data from the database

- Synthesize the results; not just by separately analyzing the answers in the questionnaire, but by combining and interpreting these data, analyzing sources and literature, sketching the wider historical context and offering explanations.
- Present the research results (sometimes only by publishing the complete database, sometimes only by publishing the synthesis).

b) Practical considerations : planning and time management

Prosopography can be very time-consuming. The labour intensity required will often prove one the main obstacles facing a 'practising' prosopographer (cf. infra). Time management, therefore, should be carefully considered in the planning stages of a prosopographical research project;

Making a reliable assessment of the research time needed, will obviously require making a good prospection of the available material and defining strict criteria for limiting the target

population. To keep a project on track, it is highly advisable to provide a strict time-table and to stick by it.

A major project will inevitably have to be spread over several years. This may pose serious problems of funding. In most cases funding will only be available for a limited number of years. Very few projects can afford to rely on funding extending a time span of 5 years and even this may be over-optimistic. Most projects have a time span of only 2-4 years.

If it isn't possible to finish a project within the time span for which funding is available, an interim evaluation should be anticipated at the end of every funding cycle. This evaluation will not only be crucial to obtain further funding, but will also provide the formal recognition needed for the career purposes of those involved in the project and for institutional assessments.

3. Fields of historical research

The prosopographical method can be applied to the most diverse fields of research. Some examples are the following:

(i) Religious history

Especially ecclesiastical elites or members of a chapter or monastic order.

A prosopography of the members of a church council, of the College of Cardinals who elect the pope (conclave) etc. may clarify the decisions of that council or the choice of a pope.

(ii) Political or institutional history

There has been a lot of research in this field, particularly concerning the formation of the modern state and the tension between modernization and conservatism. This field was one of the first to be entered by prosopographers as a reaction against institutionalism. Until the end of the nineteenth century political life was studied from a legal historic point of view, especially focussing on the constitutional aspects. However, by using a prosopographical approach to analyse personal relationships and contacts, we get a better view of people behind the scenes, of the systems of networks and patronage, of mechanisms of protection. The target groups are among others diplomats, councillors, members of parliament, government officials etc. On the local level city governments or burghers can be studied.

On the basis of a prosopography we can study the evolution of an institution more thoroughly: what was the background of those who gave shape to this institution, which ideas succeeded when there were changes in the structures? Which interests were aimed at: those of the institution or those of the persons (and their relations) working in them?

Concerning political history: how do changes of power take place? What was the role of elites in this process? Furthermore, a prosopography of the opposition, of rebels (especially their leaders and spokesmen: origin, education, social environment, ideology, strategy etc.) can furnish useful historical information. Interesting themes are the mechanisms of commission and career building. All of these themes can be studied for the different historical periods.

(iii) Administration

Research of the members of different administrations, but also notaries or scribes from the chancelleries. It is also possible to construct a 'prosopography' of the hands writing charters because the scribes are often not known by name.

(iv) Social history and the history of mentalities

The study of relationships, connections and structures of a specific group; patronage and clientelism, the structuring of social networks; social identity and social mobility; especially of the elites but more and more also of the lower social classes.

(v) Demography

Prosopography can be applied to investigate the demographic characteristics of a group of persons: the composition of families and households, the average number of children, the age of marriage etc. This is particularly important for the historical period before the systematic conservation of parish records.

(vi) The history of specific social groups: professions, students

A study can be made of the students or professors of a university or of the different 'nations' in a university. Prosopography can also be fruitfully applied to the study of craft guilds, groups of foreign merchants etc.

(vii) Intellectual history and the history of ideas

Intellectual history as well is highly suited for a prosopographic approach. Ideas – philosophic, scientific, ideological or other – don't always have an identifiable 'source', but often they do. Moreover, even when their initial author is unknown, they need to be reformulated and communicated generation after generation. The personal history of the people doing this determines to a large extent which ideas will 'live' and which will 'die'.

Conversely, ideas also have an internal history of their own. Marx' philosophical ideas may reflect his personal history and the history of his time, but they are equally tributary to Hegel's insights, regardless of the latter's relation to Marx. Prosopography makes it possible to assess the impact of ideas and the factors in people's lives determining this impact.

Thus prosopography offers a way to study both the emergence and success of major cultural and intellectual movements (like Humanism, Enlightenment etc.) and the impact they had (and why) on the lives of people.[15]

(viii) Financial and economic history

There has been little research in this field though the possibilities are there. M. Boone has studied the farmers of indirect taxes in medieval Ghent and has exposed financial and political networks by means of a prosopographical study.[16]

(ix) Prosopography as an indirect means of research

(a) 'Prosopographical' research in which the target group are not persons

Strictly speaking this is not a prosopography, but the 'prosopographical' method (or the multivariate analysis) is used in a research that does not study individuals but objects like houses, charters etc.

(b) Prosopographical studies of persons mentioned in a literary work can provide insight in the reliability of an author. For a long time there were doubts on the

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[15] See the model study of Peter Burke on the Italian Renaissance: P. Burke, *Culture and Society in Renaissance Italy*, (Oxford, 1987).

[16] M. Boone, 'Biografie en prosopografie, een tegenstelling? Een stand van zaken in het biografisch onderzoek over Pieter Lanchals (ca. 1430/1440-1488): een bruggeling in dienst van de Bourgondische staat', in *Millenium Tijdschrift voor middeleeuwse studies*, 7 (1993), pp. 4-13.

authenticity of the *Commentariolum Petitionis*, a booklet containing advice on election campaigns attributed to Cicero.[17] In this discussion arguments of style and psychological analysis were used. Prosopographical research of all the names mentioned in the work has shown that in any case the writer was well informed of the society circles in Rome in the years around 60 BC. This definitely excludes the hypothesis that it was a school exercise of the early principality as was sometimes suggested.

(c) The identification of archaeological data

Occasionally, prosopography can help identifying archaeological data. A spectacular example is the wreck of Planier 3. About 50 BC this ship was on its way from Puteoli to Gallia Narbonensis but it was shipwrecked near the island of Planier Southwest of Marseille. Its very diverse cargo consisted of amphorae (oil and maybe wine), terra sigillata, and different colouring matters. Some of these amphorae had the inscription 'M. TULLIUS L. F. TROmentina tribu GALEO'. They were produced in the atelier of Apani, near Brundisium. Intensive prosopographical research has made it possible to identify the producers of these products.[18]

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[17]C. Nicolet, 'Le *Commentariolum Petitionis* de Quintus Cicéron. Etat de la question et étude prosopographique', in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt 1.3* (Berlin/New York, 1973), pp. 239-77.

[18] A. Tchernia, 'Premiers résultat des fouilles de juin 1968 sur l'épave III de Planier', in *Etudes Classiques* 3 (1968-1970), pp. 51-82.

4. The prosopographical population

4.1) The thematic limitation of the population.

The most important criterion to demarcate the population to be studied is the *common and observable feature*. This common characteristic can be sufficiently strict so that, if the sources are available, the demarcation of the target group poses few problems (a function in an administration, membership of an association, a worker in a company). Groups within an organized cadre (a craft guild, a city government, priests etc.) are easier to study: a membership, a commission, a consecration can be the criterion for belonging to, or not belonging to the target group. It becomes more difficult when this common feature is hardly observable in the sources and it is hard to find a selection criterion: a social status (rich/poor, noble, marginal), an origin (Jews, bastards etc.), a conviction (humanists, protestants etc.) In these cases the target group is either too big and too little limited, or it is difficult to justify who does belong to it and who does not (the 'elite', the 'opposition' etc.) This problem of a too 'subjective' group can be partly avoided by using a large prosopographical population and afterwards selecting a specific group within it. One can make a study of poverty and make a prosopography of persons drawing an allowance from the state or from the medieval poor tables. Of course, it is very important to make this criterion explicit in the analysis since the results of the research have to be interpreted in this context.

Paticularly when the population consists of a specific social group and the demarcation of the target group is closely connected with the ideological paradigm of the researcher, it is necessary to state explicitly the criteria that were used and to make use of historical and sociological studies. An example of this kind of discussion is the debate on what being 'marginal' meant in the Middle Ages. Another example is the target group 'elite': there are different and often overlapping elites: a political elite, an economic elite, an intellectual elite, a social and cultural elite. Moreover, the contemporary opinions on what it meant to be part of an elite must be taken into account. The historian will have to pose the question which target group is relevant as a research object in his/her formulation of a problem.

In most cases, however, the target group is not a group in the sociological sense (a unity of persons who have frequent and regular interaction and are mutually positioned in more or less clear positions, and, moreover, dispose of values and beliefs that regulate the behaviour of the members in issues concerning group life). The group is created and analysed by the researcher himself, e.g. the power elite, the marginals, the migrants etc. This is no problem as such but one has to avoid turning the target group into a social group in itself with a distinctive characteristic and 'group solidarity'.

Sometimes, the population that is studied plays an active and dynamic role in social life and social change and it is the central object of the inquiry (e.g. the city government of a town), in other cases the prosopographical method is used to detect social evolutions, social mobility (e.g. university students as a way to study the democratization of education or the gap between different classes in society).

The common criterion and the questionnaire are essential to make the difference between a biographical repertory and a prosopography *stricto sensu* (a collective biography). Most biographical repertories are not based on a strict list of questions.[19] This way it is impossible to verify, for example, if they all had children and so on. They sometimes do provide the raw material to construct a true prosopography. In other cases they do not study a well-defined population (e.g. the different national biographical dictionaries): there are no clear criteria determining who is included and who is not.

4.2) The geographic limitation of the population

For some research themes the geographical demarcation is obvious: the fishmongers of London, the city government of Paris, the members of a trade union in Manchester etc. It becomes more difficult, however, if the population is not made up of members of a specific association or institution but of people who share a common quality: e.g. the participants of the student revolt in Paris in 1968: do we only include those who were registered as students in the Paris Universities or every one who was active during the revolt?

Both from a practical and from a methodological point of view it is important to take into account the geographical limitation of the research object. If the antecedents of the members of the target group are part of the research questions, it is advisable to consider the place of origin as one of the selection criteria of the prosopography. For instance, it is difficult to study the family origins of students in Oxford University in the fifties since they were recruited from all over the country and the records will be scattered. On the other hand, this kind of population is suitable for a study of the university career itself. If, on the contrary, one wishes to do research on the choice of a university it is better to take the students originally from a specific region as a starting point.

4.3) The chronological demarcation of the population

The population to be studied should be limited for an individual researcher. After fixing the dates the research starts and ends with, a prosopographical study should take into account several years before and after these dates to get a full picture. Studying the aldermen of Bruges between 1450 and 1475 also implies collecting data from e.g. the periods 1440–50 and 1475–85. While limiting the time frame one should take into consideration the normal demographic and economic cycles.

The limitation of the period should also be relevant in the context of the formulation of the problem. For some questions (e.g. regime changes) it is important to study crisis years and the years surrounding them, for other questions (e.g. the continuity in a city government), it is essential to study 'normal' years.

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[19] See P. G. Bietenholz and Th. B. Deutscher, *Contemporaries of Erasmus. The collected works of Erasmus. A Biographical Register of the Renaissance and Reformation* (Toronto, 1985-1986): every researcher has collected data according to his or her own insights.

Conclusion

Not all populations are equally fit for a prosopographical study. It is essential that the researcher very explicitly describes and defines the target group and clearly states his/her selection criteria for including or excluding certain persons. Every selection, be it thematic, geographic or chronological, has consequences for the interpretation of the data. Furthermore, the demarcation has to realistic as far as the research time is concerned because prosopography is very labour intensive.

5. The choice of sources and literature

It has become clear by now that the choice of the source material and literature (including both background studies of your subject and relevant general historical and theoretical – sociological, anthropological etc. – studies) is crucial for good prosopographical research. If prosopography serves as the main research method, one should first extract the population to be studied from a number of *basic sources* (preferably one continuous source). Of course, the reliability of these sources should always be checked. If one starts from an existing biographical repertory to compose a database, the quality of this secondary source should first be verified.

After having established the population to be studied one has to look for the sources to fill in the questionnaire. Serial quantitative sources are often a good basis for further research but should be supplemented with qualitative sources. Moreover, it is best to use a range of various sources. Using a single source can lead to erroneous interpretations and one-sided views of the past. On the other hand, working with a single source may in some respects also have advantages, such as the homogeneity of the data.

All kinds of sources can provide information about a certain population. Demographic sources such as parish registers, economic sources such as deeds of sales, fiscal sources such as tax lists, financial sources such as city accounts, administrative sources such as company records, religious sources such as membership lists of fraternities, juridical sources such as sentences etc. Family archives are particularly suitable, especially where the upper classes are concerned, though relatively few family archives have been preserved, even for the nobility. Of course, there will be more information available for those persons for whom a family archive exists and may be consulted. In interpreting the results one should take into account this lack of representativity and uniformity.

Essentially, the available source material poses the following problems for the prosopographer. First of all, a lack of data and sources confronts the historian with the question of representativeness of the source material. How can a historian recognize what is specific or typical for a certain target group if, due to a lack of sources, he does not know what is 'ordinary'? Often, the difficulties differ depending on the historical period: data on the inhabitants of an eighteenth-century district are much more abundant than those for a thirteenth-century district.

A second problem is the fact that an abundance of sources forces the historian to make a selection, which also leads to questions concerning the representativeness of the source material. A selection has to be made critically, taking into account the variety of approaches and the feasibility of the choice.

A third, practical, problem is the accessibility of the sources. The accessibility depends on legal factors, such as privacy legislation, on administrative factors (opening hours of the archives, the presence or absence of inventories and indexes of the archival sources) and on the individual skills of the researcher (language, palaeography etc.) These problems may be avoided by a thorough survey of the available material.

Not all sources are equally suitable for prosopographical inquiries. In the field of Ancient History for instance, the *Annales* of Tacitus are more valuable for our

knowledge of political careers than the philosophical essays of Seneca. Caesar's *De bello civile* is more useful than Lucanus' *Bellum civile*. An honorary inscription with a full career list is more valuable than a votive inscription. Unfortunately, the condition of sources for Antiquity is so fragmentary and limited that the ancient historian cannot but use every type of source. The same is frequently true for other periods as well. As we have already mentioned, prosopography as a method was purposely developed to bring together scarce and isolated data. It was this consideration that laid the foundation of the *Prosopographia Imperii Romani* project, based largely on inscriptions. With the *Realencyclopädie* literary sources were added to this.

For fictional texts the question is more difficult. It goes without saying that fictional persons cannot be the subject of a prosopography. However, not all fictional texts are exclusively fictional: in Horace's *Satirae*, for instance, fictional as well as non-fictional persons are put on the scene. The big problem with such texts is to determine to what extent such data are useful.

The application of strict historical criticism to each scrap of source material is quintessential. To do so requires knowing the prime source from which the data originate. One must always strive to be able to evaluate with what purpose the source provides these data. When two sources contradict each other we can at least choose one or the other interpretation on rational grounds. If historiographical literature is used as a secondary source, one should look even more attentively at the value of the work and at the intention of the author. Did the author want to give this specific information or was it just a detail? Did he not 'mutilate' or 'manipulate' the information?

The same process of survey, selection and historical criticism of sources is imposed as far as secondary literature is concerned. We have already indicated the importance of a sufficient knowledge of the context in which the prosopographical population is situated. If the target group, for instance, consists of the members of an institution, first of all the position of this institution in society should be determined, as well as its relationship to other social structures. Even when one uses sources from very diverse institutions, the institutional and legal history of these institutions have to be taken into account.

To conclude we can say that a survey of sources and relevant historical and theoretical (sociological, anthropological etc.) literature is advisable before starting the actual research. The context of the research has to be sketched using the existing historical literature and there have to be sufficient, suitable and accessible sources to construct the prosopographical database. It is important that a prosopographer knows beforehand what he will do and that he has some idea of the content of the main sources he will use.

6. The questionnaire

All biographies have to be composed according to a single model, based on a questionnaire. Depending on the historical period and on the formulation of the problems and the nature and size of the prosopographical population, the questionnaire will contain 'open' or multiple choice questions. The questionnaire also depends on the purpose of the prosopographical list: is the prosopographical research the main object of the inquiry contained in the questionnaire or does it merely serve as background information (e.g. a filing card on a respondent in oral history)?

The questionnaire will usually be more strictly applied when only one source is used than when a range of sources provide heterogeneous data in which the problems of interpretation are much larger. A strictly applied questionnaire has the advantage that it can be used more easily by other scholars doing analogous research. Moreover, in the case of a strictly applied questionnaire, we may be confident that when a certain question has not been answered there was no answer available in the sources. However, in most cases the realities of research teach us that the questionnaire has to be handled in a flexible way. Especially at the start of a new research project it is preferable to gather as much information as possible without directly standardizing the structure of the answers.

The following elements appear frequently in a prosopographical questionnaire but it goes without saying that in most cases only a limited number of these questions are posed, depending on the formulation of the historical problems and the checking of hypotheses. In addition, one should always take into account the feasibility of the questionnaire: are there any sources that can provide answers to the questions for a specific population in a particular historical period within a reasonable period of time?

6.1) Personal and family life

– naming (if necessary the variants) (in some cases it is advisable to standardize the name)
– life dates (birth, marriage, death) (often these are *termini post* or *ante quem*)
– geographical data (place of birth, place of residence, workshop etc.)
– close family (parents, brothers, sisters etc.)
– extended family
– origin (social origin, legal birth etc.)
– marriage and offspring
– youth and education
– religious conviction
– social milieu and networks (factions and parties, membership of corporations, movements, unions etc., testamentary guardian, witness at marriage, donations given or received...)
– contemporary namesakes (perhaps to discover ties in a later stage of the research)

6.2) Career

– specific preparation for professional life (education, school, university...)

– commission
– age in the different phases
– salary, other forms of allowance and gifts

6.3) Material position (personal and family)

– immovables (houses, land)
– movables (furniture, money, bank accounts etc.)
– capital (transport, machines, raw materials)
– income
– debts

6.4) Culture

– religious foundations
– maecenas, patron
– iconography (family arms, seal, paintings, portraits...)

7. Processing and analysing the data

We shall not go into details concerning the particular database software that can be used (e. g., Microsoft Access, FilemakerPro). We only want to raise a few problems that every prosopographer is confronted with and make a few suggestions about the structure of a prosopographical database.

7.1) The design of the database

When the names and the primary data of the target group are found in the basic sources, a database can be composed for every individual on the basis of the general questionnaire. The disadvantage is that only at the end of the process of introducing the data we can come to a general insight of the population and results can be displayed. Only at that moment gaps in the different biographies become clear and the prosopographer can start new, more focussed inquiries in the source material.

In the first phase the collection of data should be as broad as possible. It is best to collect data also on namesakes (homonyms), or information that does not strictly offer an answer to the questionnaire. Afterwards, while composing the final prosopographical repertory the database can be 'tidied up' and be given a more uniform structure.
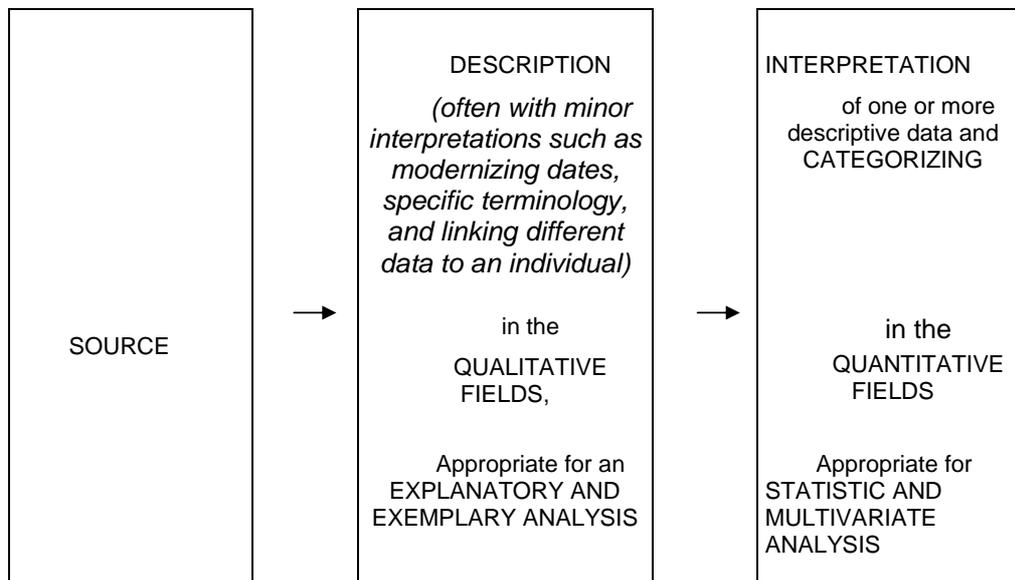
While introducing information in the database it is important to keep in mind the terminology used in the sources. For instance, being a 'burgher' in a medieval city does not only indicate a place of residence but also implies a juridical status that allows one to participate in urban political and economic life. In other words, it indicates the integration of the individual in a collective body. Another example is the acquisition of fiefs: this is an indication of economic wealth and political power but also shows social ties. A third example is ties of kinship: they indicate social as well as juridical relations. The degree of endogamy in a society (the practice of marrying within one and the same group) shows the relative presence or absence of a social group consciousness but can also serve as an indicator for the possibilities of social mobility.

The processing of the data can be done 'manually' and/or by computer. After all, in most cases the interpretation of the prosopographical information can only be done by the researcher himself after having gained more insight in the data. It can be necessary to process the qualitative data in another field of the database or in a separate database in a more standardized form for a quantitative interpretation. In most cases, however, the results of the quantitative processing should be supplemented with qualitative interpretations. It is important to work pragmatically while filling in the database and to further structure the mass of data, allowing us to keep asking new research questions and to combine different sorts of information.

In a prosopography different characteristics of individuals are compared in order to find common elements and exceptions. To save time, especially in the case of an extensive prosopography, it is worthwhile and advisable to work with two databases or to separate clearly two kinds of information within the same database. In a qualitative database the 'fields' should be open and as little standardized as possible in order to enter information in a way that stays close to the sources, possibly using the terminology of the sources, or entering whole or partial verbatim transcripts. In a second

database the information should be entered in codes, using a fixed terminology or symbols, in order to make quantification possible.

Schematically we might present this in the following manner:

	DESCRIPTION	INTERPRETATION
	(often with minor interpretations such as modernizing dates, specific terminology, and linking different data to an individual)	of one or more descriptive data and CATEGORIZING
SOURCE →	in the QUALITATIVE FIELDS,	→ in the QUANTITATIVE FIELDS
	Appropriate for an EXPLANATORY AND EXEMPLARY ANALYSIS	Appropriate for STATISTIC AND MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS

It is important also to enter the data in the qualitative database, in what we might call the 'text fields', as much as possible under the form of a fixed terminology, in order to operate the search function of the database software more easily.

Of course, while processing data with the computer, coding and standardizing are very important. One should not enter the data too specifically (e.g. a 'dressmaker'), nor too generally (e.g. a 'craftsman') but in a way suitable for quantification (e.g. 'a worker in the confection industry'). In order to work adequately with codes one should create a list with standard expressions, codes, abbreviations etc. to be used in the database. A source list with historical-critical notes on the value of each source is also advisable.

Finally, it is necessary to link every fact to a source or reference. It has to be clear which piece of information is reliable (e.g. family ties in a medieval marriage contract) and which is less reliable (e.g. a genealogical manuscript of the early modern period), which fact is derived from a primary source and which is derived from secondary literature. This way, contradictory information can be checked.

7.2) Identification of persons in the sources

One of the most important practical problems a prosopographer is confronted with while collecting data on specific individuals is the identification of persons on the basis of names, functions and titles. How can we determine whether, for instance, 'the lord of X' or 'the chancellor' is a specific person in the sources? Such identifications imply a wide knowledge of different historical problems and should be executed manually

because the automatic linkage of the records of a database can produce too many errors, especially for historical periods when naming was not yet fixed.

We are confronted with the following problems:

(i) homonyms

Different individuals in the same geographical area may have the same names. This is especially true for very common names like Johnson, Brown etc. In addition, especially in noble families there was a tradition to use the same first names over generations. Or the same name was given to a younger brother or sister of a child who died prematurely. This means that when the source does not give additional information such as titles, functions or the name of the father (e.g. Johannes *filius* Judoci), identification can only be done according to the context.

(ii) incomplete and changing names

In most historical periods (until about the end of the *Ancien Regime*) the family name was not yet fixed and one individual could be called by different names in different contexts. The degree to which this is the case depends on social class and gender on the one hand, and one the region of origin on the other.

Down to our own time, married women often bore the name of their husband. In some countries the woman even lost her own surname and the name of the husband became her official name.

Sometimes people were identified with their profession ('John the butcher', 'cripple John'). In some cases, as in the Burgundian Netherlands in the later Middle Ages, Dutch names were translated in French or vice versa. Children's names often occur in the sources as diminutives

(iii) The problem of the mobility of the target group

When we want to follow the life of individuals within a certain space, we have to take into account that in some periods and regions migration was an important factor. The disappearance of an individual from the sources is not always an indication of his/her death.

(iv) The problem of the 'dark number'

As we have already mentioned, one of the biggest problems of the prosopographical method is the lack of data and, as a result, the representativeness of the available data as compared to those which are lacking (the dark number).

Especially for the less privileged layers of society it is often very difficult to fill in the different fields of the database. When the number of persons in a prosopographical research is high enough, this problem can partly be solved with statistic methods and a calculus of probability. Working with sample surveys, random or not, can be necessary but must be used very cautiously.

7.3) Processing the results

The results of the analysis become clearer when they are converted into tables and graphs. It is the task of the historian to explain the results presented this way. A correct

use of statistics is necessary and should be applied prudently, especially in the case of small populations.

The use of prosopography in the analysis of a group cannot be described as a unique method. How it is handled in practice depends on the formulation of the research questions and the sources.

The *tabular* method is very common: relevant criteria are outlined in a table to calculate percentages. The choice of relevant criteria depends on the research questions. Very common as well is the use of *cross tables* to find correlations between different factors.

If the target group is limited in number a sociogram can be used, showing the interactions and the frequency of relations between different individuals. Sometimes the historian is able to demonstrate the existence of social networks (with central figures, members in different degrees, network density, intensity etc.) The analysis of social networks, however, though closely related to prosopography, is a historical-sociological method in itself.[20]

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[20] Discussed in the papers by Camarinhas, Graham/Ruffini and Verbruggen in this book.

8. Representing research results

The term prosopography is used both to denote the collective biography – i.e. the systematic description of the lives of all individuals in the target group by means of a questionnaire – and to denote the processing and interpretation of these data.

As far as the representation of the results is concerned, we can sometimes choose between presenting only the synthesis of the interpretations (rather than the complete or parts of the collective biography), and presenting both the prosopographical database (and possible synoptic tables) and the interpretations. The former may be advisable if the prosopographical investigation is only (a secondary) part of a more general research strategy.

It is important to realize, however, that the prosopographical database in itself – even when we add synthetic tables and summaries – cannot be considered as the final stage of an historical investigation. To put it differently, the database does not speak for itself. It is meant to answer questions that transcend the simple clear-cut answers in the questionnaire. Only when it is successful in doing so, can we conclude that the choice for prosopography was justified and that it was conducted in a scientifically correct way.

9. Evaluation of prosopography as a research method

9.1) Advantages

(i) Heuristic

At the heuristic level, prosopography offers clear advantages. It is eminently suited to make sense of incomplete data.

Hence prosopography may be used to make up for lost archives, such as in the field of Ancient History. Greek and Roman (city-)states kept important archives, where – among other things – registers listing the status, wealth, family composition and so forth of citizens and tax-payers were deposited. These would have been ideally suited for demographic and economic research. Unfortunately, with the exception of a few scraps in Egyptian papyri, these registers are all lost. A prosopographic approach using various textual sources (literary texts, inscriptions, papyri) will not, of course, reproduce the original registers, but can to some extent make clear which specific biographies are typical – and therefore fit for generalization – and which are not.

Prosopography may also be helpful to unveil recurrent patterns, shedding a light on seemingly irrelevant data. The choice of a particular school or college may in itself seem irrelevant, until the prosopographical database shows a clear link between that particular school and subsequent choices determining a persons' further career in life (e. g., an excellent enthusiastic history teacher motivating his students to go and study history at university).

(ii)   Understanding historical persons

Prosopography – provided of course it is well planned and executed – improves our understanding of the 'actors' of history; not so much insofar as their individual actions are concerned, but insofar as their behaviour and motives in group actions are concerned. By taking a collective approach to human action, exceptional individuals and exceptional actions are filtered out, making it easier to distinguish patterns and to generalize. Anomalies and incidental variants become visible.

(iii) Understanding formal and informal relations between historical actors

Another advantage of a prosopographic approach is that we gain insight in to both formal and informal relations between members of the target population. It helps us to understand how and which relations are typically formed in a particular milieu. Thus, prosopography provides a good and in some cases essential basis for a sociography because it shows the social dynamics of a particular society at work.

(iv) Interdisciplinarity

Prosopography almost by definition requires interdisciplinarity. In studying a set of individuals in a particular context, the traditional border lines between different historical specializations (history of law, institutional history, church history, economic history, etc.) disappear and models and explanations from other human and social

sciences (sociology, anthropology, psychology, political sciences, etc.) have to be called in.

(v) Teamwork

Prosopographical research projects can often easily be organized as teamwork. Different members of a team may study comparable target populations (e. g., members of a specific guild) in different regions or periods. Alternatively, various aspects of the same target population can be assigned to different researchers: one collecting data on schooling, another on careers, yet another on family relations etc. Comparison of different social groups or categories (e. g., professional categories) is facilitated if the same or an analogous questionnaire is used by different researchers for a prosopographical study of the groups in question.

Examples of such research projects are the Dutch urban elite research for various cities covering the period 1700-1780[21] or the research into the members of the council of Flanders and the Auditor's office of Lille (1419-1477) and the study of the council members of the Court of Holland and the masters of the Auditor's office of The Hague (1446-1482).[22]

More and more prosopographical research is being conducted by international research teams. This offers considerable perspectives for the future, although one has to beware not to forget the different institutional and practical contexts of each investigation (e. g., the availability and the nature of suitable source material).

9.2) Limitations related to the source material

a) Qualitative limitations

(i) Social bias

Prosopography is possible only for individuals on whom we have relevant information, i.e. mostly the elite and their dependents. This often makes interpretation difficult. For instance, Suolahti noted that we know approximately 1 to 2 % of all 'junior' officers (*praefecti* and *tribuni militum*) in the Roman Late Republican army.[23] Among these family members of important senators and members of the equestrian top elite are over-represented. The unanswerable question is, therefore, whether the results of Suolahti's study (career perspectives, political influence etc.) are valid for all 'junior' officers, or only for those belonging to the elite.

For the lower classes, prosopography is often pointless, unless as part of a much larger and methodologically different research project. The problem is acute for the Ancient World and the Early Middle Ages, but is relevant for all periods, including the

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[21] M.R. Prak, *Gezeten burgers. De elite in een Hollandse stad. Leiden 1700-1780*, Amsterdam/Dieren, 1985. (on Leiden); J.J. de Jong, *Met goed fatsoen. De elite in een Hollandse stad. Gouda 1700-1780*, Amsterdam/Dieren, 1985. (on Gouda); L. Kooijmans, *Onder regenten. De elite in een Hollandse stad. Hoorn 1700-1780*, Amsterdam/Dieren, 1985. (on Hoorn).
[22] M. Damen, *De staat van dienst. De gewestelijke ambtenaren van Holland en Zeeland in de Bourgondische periode (1425-1482)* (Hilversum, 2000); Dumolyn, *Het hogere personeel van de hertogen van Bourgondië in het Graafschap Vlaanderen (1419-1477)*, Doctoral thesis, University of Ghent, 2001
[23] J. Suolahti, *The Roman Censors. A Study on Social Structure* (Helsinki, 1963).

twentieth century. The poorest and most marginal groups in society are hardly ever well documented.

How to deal with this problem

- Firstly by critically evaluating the sources used, making clear on which groups (or sub-groups) the sources provide reliable information and on which groups (or sub-groups) the conclusions apply.

- Secondly by diversifying the research strategy, using prosopography as only one of various methods to achieve the objectives set.

Approached in this way, prosopography often turns out to be useful even for marginal groups such as prostitutes, illegitimate children or peasants, by using fines, legitimization letters and lease contracts.

(ii) Reliability of a text

Texts from the Ancient World – and many medieval texts – are usually not preserved as originals. In most cases we have manuscripts resulting from repeated manual copying, century after century. Names (and numbers) are particularly vulnerable for copying errors. In many cases we are forced to 'correct' names; thus a 'Maximus' may hide a M(arcus) Axius, a Habonius (an otherwise unattested name) should perhaps rather be read as a Rabonius. Obviously such corrections are always hazardous.

In the case of original texts, as inscriptions or papyri, this problem is less acute, but the fragmentary nature of most of these texts often makes reading and interpreting difficult.

b) Quantitative limitations

(i) Tabulation versus statistics

Prosopography is based on putting data in series. The information we want does not comes not from part but from the whole set of data under investigation A prosopographer usually tabulates his accumulated data according to various criteria, calculates percentages, and in some cases adds also a graphic representation. The technique in question is a basic form of multivariate analysis, studying the interrelations between different variables.

Prosopographical research by Nicolet, for example, has shown that the honorary qualification *splendidus* given to some knights in the Late Roman Republic, occurs only for knights having senatorial family members or themselves holding important military or administrative positions.

Although this approach approximates to a statistical analysis, the number of individuals on whom we have relevant data available is often statistically inadequate, or the sample data are not representative for all aspects of the target population (cf. supra Suolahti on the junior officers in the Roman army), and therefore the results of the tabulation are statistically irrelevant.

The importance of tabulation is that the characteristics of the whole set of individuals become clear. In other words, tabulation is a method to structure and thereby clarify an otherwise disparate and unclear aggregate of data. The projection of the percentages calculated in the tabulation to historic reality is not unproblematic.

(ii) One-sidedness

The risk is always real that we focus too much on those aspects that are well documented (e. g., political functions, schooling, residence etc.) and too little on aspects that may be less documented, but are not necessarily less important — e. g., (instrumental or real) friendships, or unlawful sources of income like smuggling. Prosopography is not always the best option to study these aspects, and it may be necessary to diversify research strategies in order understand their contribution.

9.3) Problems of interpretation

Prosopography is more than construing and building a databank from which answers to research questions flow forth automatically. Interpretations are unavoidable from the very beginning when we start reading our historical documents. Of course, this is the case in any historical investigation, but because prosopography is based on the collection of stereotypically arranged data and tabulation, primary interpretations tend to get lost in the individual biographical records.

Typical in the case of prosopography is that (fragmentary) biographical data are collected from various sources and linked to each other. This linking of data is itself a form of primary interpretation.

Carney compares the process to building a brick wall, in which the stones represent the 'factual' information held together by mortar representing interpretations.[24]

We have to beware of typical pitfalls:

Correcting unreadable texts or impossible readings

Literary sources from the Ancient World and the early Middle Ages are often problematic because the versions we have are the result of manual copying over the course of many centuries. Copyists make mistakes and names are particularly vulnerable to copyists' errors. In some cases, texts are consciously manipulated and names are inserted or changed to enhance the status of a particular family or lineage. Sometimes, when names are merely spelled wrongly or single letters have been changed, it is possible to emend the text, but not always. The general rule must always be to refrain as much as possible from correcting apparently wrong or impossible texts and to prefer the *lectio difficilior*, even when it means acknowledging that the text is worthless.

Narrative interpretations

Prosopography is a research method concentrating on individuals and their life histories. This often makes prosopography a pleasant method to work with, but it also entails the typical risk of narrative history, viz. that we fabricate a story with its own dynamics and logic. The story sometimes has little to do anymore with the available facts but springs from a subjective interpretation by the historian based on empathy. In the case of prosopography narrative interpretations easily become inconspicuous

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[24] Carney, 'Prosopography. Pitfalls and payoff', *The Phoenix*, 27 (1973), 156-79.

because they are invisible in the tables synthesizing the database results and used in the thematic analysis

Faulty logic: perhaps – probably – undoubtedly

The characteristic stratified structure of prosopographical research (first, biographical repertory – secondly, tables and analysis of common characteristics) can also hide weaknesses in the argumentation used. Sound arguments have to respect the laws of logic. Logical reasoning in historical analysis rarely yields absolute certainty. In most cases, the best we can hope for are probabilities or (mutually enforcing) possibilities.

For instance, personal status (freeborn – freed) in Roman inscriptions, is mostly not explicitly mentioned (through *filiatio* – son/daughter of X – or *libertinatio* – freedman/-woman of X). Indirect indications are nevertheless often available, but are rarely 100% certain. Some functions like that of *sevir augustalis* (a priest in the emperor-cult at local level) are mostly filled by freedmen, some *cognomina* are typical slave names. Greek *cognomina* in Rome and Central and Northern Italy are mostly confined to former slaves. But, in these cases there is always a margin of error. Around 80 % of all persons bearing the *cognomen* Fortunatus, whose legal status can be ascertained are former slaves, 20% are freeborn. Such statistical margins of error are easily smoothed out in tables and thematic chapters.

The narrative approach also easily metamorphoses possibilities into probabilities and thence into certainties. Thus, much of the earliest biographical records in the *Pauly-Wissowa Realencyclopädie* (cf. supra) are prone to conclude close family relations between aristocrats bearing the same name and to identify feuds and alliances between families from recorded single conflicts between individuals.

Circular reasoning

Prosopography proceeds on the basis of a uniform questionnaire applied to a target population. The target population has been predefined and the questionnaire has been formulated in view of specific research objectives. The risk inherent in such an approach is that the criteria used to select the sample population are confirmed as crucial to the composition of that target population. For instance, if in the case of a prosopographical investigation into the composition and dynamics of a particular elite, we select our population on the basis of having fulfilled political or military functions, such functions will obviously emerge from the database as 'typical' and common for that population. Likewise the uniform structure of the questionnaire, will only show the role of those variables included in the questionnaire (e. g., profession of father, schooling, military exploits, etc.) and none other. For instance, formal education (at schools and universities) is easily detectible and easily fits a questionnaire, informal education or formal education by private teachers is less easily detected and requires a more nuanced questionnaire.

Correlation versus causality

Establishing causal relations between data is often difficult. Correlations between features found for individuals in the sample population and/or between features of

members of the sample population and outsiders are essential in a prosopographical study and have an important place in the analysis of the data. But 'statistical' correlations do not necessarily imply actual connections, let alone causal connections. One must beware of interpreting every correlation between data as an effective link. The correlation may derive from external factors invisible in the database (for instance because they were not included in the questionnaire), or may even be purely incidental. A famous – although probably fictitious – example *ex absurdo* of the latter is the supposed statistical correlation between the disappearance of the church owl in the Low Countries and the sexual revolution in the 1960s and 70s.

Moreover, even when clear relations can be established between individuals sharing the same features (e. g., political convictions), it does not follow that these relations were the effective channels through which these features spread. In other words, the 'naked' results of the processed data from the prosopographical database provide arguments to explain historical phenomena, but are not in themselves explanations.

If, for instance, we find a correlation between men having successful careers in public administration and marriages with women from the upper classes, it does not necessarily imply a causal connection. It may be that they owed their career to their marriage, or it may be that the marriage was made possible by their career.

Chronology is, of course, quintessential in solving such questions. The risk of losing sight of such chronologies is not imaginary, due to the thematic approach of many prosopographies.

Technical insufficiencies

Being good at finding and puzzling together biographical data is not the same as being good at interpreting them. Some erudite scholars are very good at finding raw data; they know the primary and secondary sources very well and master the tools and methodology to extract information from them perfectly. It does not mean that they are equally good in interpreting the data, for which they may rely on intuition and subjective appreciations.

The analysis of data requires skills other than those needed in the heuristic phase of an investigation. Even the most perfect biographical repertory needs further analysis to produce a study methodologically based on prosopography. No matter how good the questionnaire, the answers needed to achieve the initial research targets never spring forth automatically from the tables synthesizing the database results.

All too often prosopographers start from an adequate questionnaire and database, but rely on too few of the available techniques (e. g., multivariate analysis, theoretical modelling, sociograms etc.); or they rely on unsuitable techniques, such as using extensive quantitative techniques on a population of only a few dozens of people, or finding correlations between data which are uncertain and thus multiplying the margins of error. Sometimes they use concepts from various social sciences (sociology, anthropology, psychology, etc.) wrongly. A typical example is calculating statistical percentages for samples that are too small for statistical purposes.

9.4) Limitations related to the prosopographical method

a) Relevance of the features being studied

The option, inherent to prosopography, of _focussing on external features_ of individuals, limits the application of the investigation. Psychological and other factors are easily neglected. It should be noted that this is not necessarily always true or even desirable. 'External' here refers to the requirement that the features must be susceptible to an unequivocal description in order to be meaningfully included as criteria in the questionnaire. Thus for instance 'belief in miracles' is not a very suitable criterion for inclusion in the questionnaire, while 'donations to a particular church or convent' are suitable. The former implies a judgment on the inner convictions of an actor, while the latter merely records an observable fact or act.

Obviously the beliefs and emotions underlying such (f)acts are an interesting object of study in themselves and prosopography can be instrumental for instance to map acts of devotion. However, the relation between beliefs, emotions and dispositions on the one hand and acts on the other is very complex. Acts of devotion or (in the ancient world) of public generosity primarily attest social expectations. The inner motivations of their actors remain hidden and may very well have been blurry even to their contemporaries: status considerations, emotional attachments, sincere beliefs, strategies etc. may even come into play simultaneously.

An interesting 'grey zone' appears when we look at ascribed feelings or beliefs. For instance, a prosopographical study of convicted rapists could map claims made at the trial in court by prosecution and defence regarding the accused's emotions or beliefs with respect to sex, violence, morals, religion etc.. The practical problem with including such 'attributed qualities' in a questionnaire is that they emanate not from the members of the target population but from 'third' parties whose motives remain largely invisible in the database.

The same is true for non-individual constraints and influences, such as cultural prejudices or the involuntary dynamics of a demographic regime or climate changes (e. g., the Medieval Warm Period or the Little Ice Age). Whereas institutional structures are relatively easy to take into account in the final analysis, the importance of the less visible cultural, social or other (human and non-human) structures, processes, and dynamics are often hard to assess. While many prosopographers attempt to take personal motives and non-person-bound variables into consideration, the difficulties involved can be considerable and time-consuming. The lacunary state and the biased nature of many textual sources easily exaggerate or, on the contrary, minimize the true relevance of the person-bound characteristics included in the database.

A related risk is that priority is given to _internal explanations_, i.e. answers that may be found within the target population, neglecting influences from outside that population. This risk is further aggravated by the inclination to look for explanations in those features that are found to be common for or characteristic of the target population.

Practically speaking _irrelevant and irregular data_ can pose a problem because of their number. It can be difficult to avoid this, because it is not always obvious

beforehand which data are relevant and which are not. Data that may be irrelevant in themselves may turn out to be relevant in combination with other data. Very often, therefore, the heuristic phase will produce more data than needed, laying a useless claim to scarce research time. The only way to avoid or at least temper this problem is by making a careful prospective study of the institutions and social milieu of the target population.

b) Set of persons versus social group

Prosopography by definition concerns phenomena that are supra-individual. In order to achieve its aims, (more or less) large groups of individuals are studied. Prosopographical research, therefore, presupposes that 'sets' of individuals are defined on the basis of one or more master-criteria, the characteristics of which are then analysed. Such 'sets' may be seen as aggregates of individuals, showing distinctive features transcending the individuals composing them. However, not every set corresponds to an actual historical social group and the notion of 'social group' itself is often ambiguous.

For instance, a prosopographical study may concern all (recorded) inhabitants of a village at some time of its history, analysing their degree of schooling, their careers, their origins (inside or outside village), their marriage patterns and so forth. Obviously such a 'group' can be extremely heterogeneous, comprising rich and poor, young and old, farmers, shopkeepers, doctors etc.

Another example is provided by prosopographical research of personal networks, such as all those persons mentioned in the letters of Erasmus as personal contacts. Although the target population can be clearly and unambiguously defined, it does not constitute a social group. Presumably, many of the individuals in the chosen 'set', (e.g., personal contacts of Erasmus) will have no direct contacts between each other at all and will belong to widely different social and geographic backgrounds.

c) Individuals as the line of approach

Prosopography strives to understand phenomena that transcend the level of the individual actors. However, it tries to do so by studying the external features of individual lives. The supra-individual is approached through studying individuals. Inevitably, prosopography focuses on what motivates and drives individuals and on the immediate causes of particular life courses (schooling, profession, social background etc.). The non-individual, often structural, aspects of groups are left out, because they cannot – in most cases – be integrated in the questionnaire.

Thus, the prosopographical approach of Roman Republican politics that was extremely popular following Gelzer's and Syme's work has come under serious attack since the 1980s because it leaves little or no room for non-individual aspects of politics, such as the part played by the people in setting political agendas. Most scholars now agree that apart from personal connections and ambitions, 'issues' (constitutional issues, like the role and privileges of the assemblies of the people versus those of the senate and magistrates; social issues, such as the desirability of distributions of land and free or subsidized grain; moral issues, such as the struggle against corruption, and so forth) and formal procedures played a pivotal part in Republican politics.

d) Nature of prosopography: inductive reasoning

Prosopography is a typical inductive method. It starts from concrete data extracted from primary sources concerning individuals and individual behaviour and aims at understanding general phenomena. Any inductive method has to cope with the problem of the reliability of generalizations. As we noted right at the start, prosopography is at heart an attempt to solve this very problem. But there are limits to what prosopography can achieve. Especially when we are dealing with insufficient or unrepresentative data, the reliability of the general results is inevitably limited. In such a case, diversification of research methods is advisable.

e) Difficulties of motivation- and action analysis

Prosopography has traditionally been used to study political actions and faction formation. One of the aims is to put isolated political actions (e. g., political trials) into a meaningful context and to identify coalitions and alliances. The potential of prosopography in this field is very large, but not unlimited.

Motivation analysis reaches into the psychology of historical actors. The biographical data needed to do this are often insufficient. For instance, how can we distinguish actions taken to satisfy personal obligations towards political allies ('friends') from temporary alliances ('friendships') forged to make political actions possible, especially in view of the fact that different parties in an alliance may be moved by different motives?

f) What's in a name?

A considerable – sometimes unsolvable - problem when collecting prosopographical data is how to interpret names. Very often all we have to go by to identify family relations are names. Obviously two or more different persons can bear the same family name, without even being necessarily (closely) related to each other.

Nevertheless, in many cases the inclination to assume family connections for individuals sharing the same family name is often very real. Thus for instance, Münzer's biographical articles in the *Realencyclopädie* are often implicitly based on two premises:

First, solidarity among family members was strong, therefore the relationship between two family members is as general rule stable and close.

Second, the aristocracy of the Roman Republic comprised relatively few families (roughly a few hundred); therefore, persons founding bearing the same name are considered family.

Likewise, if we find two texts mentioning the same person name, we are easily inclined to assume that we are dealing with the same individual recorded in two different texts, rather than with homonyms.

Roman onomastic practices, for instance, are often confusing, because usually the oldest son is given the same praenomen as his father, intentionally creating homonyms covering multiple generations.

In other cases naming practices make it extremely difficult to identify family relations. Thus ethnic Greeks – like many other people – had only one name. A family name as such was inexistent. A person was usually denoted as X son/daughter of Y.

g) 'Labour intensity'

One of the main practical problems facing a prosopographer is the labour intensity of prosopographical research. Source material is often spread out over different archives or document types. The time needed to bring together all relevant source material and recording it in the questionnaire format is considerable.

Hence, the great importance of publishing prosopographical repertories. In many cases the collected material will prove useful for further prosopographical research. If a good repertory is lacking and we need to extract our data directly from the primary sources, it will mostly only prove viable either to select a small sample population or to form a team with other scholars.

9.5) Conclusion

There is no ready-made ideal prosopographical method to study the past; all we had to offer in this manual were guidelines that have to be adapted to specific research objectives and to the available source material.

Sometimes prosopography is simply not the best method to obtain results; because the available source material is inadequate, or because the institutional, political or economic framework is insufficiently understood, or because the target population is too small or too big, etc. Sometimes prosopography is useful only as part of a more general diversified research strategy integrating various techniques and methods.

Prosopography is no miracle drug or *deus ex machina*. It provides a useful way to answer some questions, but is not suited for others. It is basically a historical research technique based on the systematic analysis of biographical data of a selected group of historical actors.

The efficiency of prosopography depends on the general research objectives and the specific questionnaire on the one hand and on the available sources and literature on the other. The research objectives determine whether or not a prosopographical approach is methodologically advisable; the source material determines whether or not such an approach is possible; the relevant general historical and theoretical literature is needed to enable results to be put in a more general context.

Whether or not these conditions are met (and to what extent) is a question that has to be decided for each research project separately.