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DOI: 10.4000/books.pcjb.2670
Published on OpenEdition Books: 30 March 2020
Electronic ISBN: 9782918887881

http://books.openedition.org

Electronic reference

This text was automatically generated on 6 April 2020. It is the result of an OCR (optical character recognition) scanning.
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AUTHOR’S NOTE

This article is an unaltered version of the paper delivered at the table ronde. Given the limited time available, the theory presented here is merely outlined in very broad terms. What may be lost in nuances is, I hope, gained in clarity. For their critical reading of the manuscript I warmly thank Peter Garnsey, Ittai Gradel and Jens Erik Skydsgaard.

1 In her article The ordo of Pompeii Mary Gordon in 1927 put the question: «How far had the ordo become penetrated with servile blood, and what was the effect on its quality?» (Gordon 1927, 181). Her préoccupation with the influx of new families, often of servile extraction, into the ordo was primarily of a moral character, sometimes even with a socio-biological taint. An instance is the passage where she describes the case of the Popidii, whose noble house had been taken over by freedmen. Here she found that the portrait busts of the new owners were «not aristocratic in type», while other busts of «more dignified appearance» apparently represented «the true Popidii, who had had to make room for the upstarts» (ibid.). Though Gordon’s approach may seem outdated today, her rigorous distinction between aristocrats and parvenus is still relevant for discussion, as it is vital to the idea of social disorder in the last decades of Pompeii’s existence.

2 Since the works of Della Corte, Rostovtzeff and Gordon were published in the twenties, the Neronian age has been seen as an economically and politically turbulent period, characterised by the decline of a landed aristocracy which had previously exerted a Virtual monopoly of power, and by the emergence of a new commercial bourgeoisie, partly of servile origins, which made its entry into the ruling class of the ordo. These profound changes in the social structure were dated by Amedeo Maiuri to the years

Les élites municipales de l’Italie péninsulaire des Gracques à Néron
after the earthquake in 62, which he supposed had brought about an economic boom favouring new commercial upstarts at the expense of the old nobility (Maiuri 1942). As a tangible reflection of the social upheaval of the time, he identified the conversion of noble houses into shops and industries, as revealed by archaeology.

Maiuri’s interpretation of the economic consequences of the earthquake was questioned by Jean Andreau, who claimed that an economic boom would have been a most unlikely result of an earthquake, hardly likely to cause major changes in the existing social order (Andreau 1973). Andrew Wallace-Hadrill has recently raised further doubts on Maiuri’s interpretation of the archaeological evidence (Wallace-Hadrill 1991). Not only was the number of domus converted after 62 in fact rather unimpressive, but the theory of a patrician decline derived from these instances seems to rest on the assumption that aristocratic lifestyle, on the one hand, and petty commerce and manufacture, on the other, are incompatible opposites. Wallace-Hadrill rightly questions this assumption, declaring: «that we have been too ready to identify the ideology of the Roman elite with that of a country gentry to which urban commerce was alien and repulsive» (Wallace-Hadrill 1991, 243). Urban investments, he argues, may have been quite acceptable for an agriculturally based nobility, who would in any case have found it difficult to avoid any involvement in local trade.

In making these observations Wallace-Hadrill follows the example of Ettore Lepore who had already in 1950 questioned the picture of the elite as entirely agrarian in its economic investments and interests (Lepore 1950). He also drew attention to the dependent status of freedmen, and denied that they could have formed a class able to oust the elite. Other scholars, such as John D’Arms and Jens Erik Skydsgaard, have followed a similar line of argument, the latter emphasizing that the clientela system might have had an economic aspect and had a diffusionist effect spreading the interests of the elite into smaller units run by freedmen and other clients personally bound to their patron (Skydsgaard 1976; D’Arms 1981; Mouritsen 1990).

By this interpretation, the supposed growth of urban commerce and production in Pompeii’s last decades would not necessarily have represented a threat to the old nobility. Equally important, there is no need to posit a clash of interests between landowners and commercial groups, since these groups, if not exactly identical, would at least have been tightly interwoven by personal and financial bonds. There are wide implications for our view of the political climate in especially the Neronian age. The following reflections attempt to trace some of these consequences, emphasizing the need for a new conceptual framework to evaluate the composition of the Pompeian ordo.

The supposed decline of the old nobility, as we saw, assumes the existence of two competing groups with different economic attitudes and behaviour. Thus, an increase of commercial activity in the second half of the 1st cent. B.C. is held to have led to the emergence of a wealthy class of traders who in time demanded an equal share of local honours and influence. Correspondingly, the landed nobility, economically overtaken by the bourgeoisie, was ousted from their traditional position in the ordo and had to make room for members of new families often descended from freedmen. This picture is undermined if the old nobility had strong interests in urban commerce and did not in fact find their economic position and political leadership threatened by growth in that sector. The disappearance of the nobility is still to be explained, even if the idea of a “commercial bourgeoisie” created by an economic boom is accepted.
Alternatively, it has been suggested that the old families may have retired to their landed estates as a reaction to the damages wrought by the earthquake and also the disturbed political atmosphere of the period. The argument evokes the later Roman empire when decurions are held to have abandoned the towns and the local magistracies which had lost their earlier appeal. This image, however, seems anachronistic for the Pompeii of the Neronian and Flavian age, where public office still appears to have been highly attractive to members of some of the most distinguished families. Thus in 68 the Lucretii Satrii seem to have conducted an expensive campaign in order to secure the election of D. Lucretius Valens to the aedileship and several other families traditionally represented in the *ordo* also maintained their engagement in local politics in Neronian-Flavian times. The attractiveness of these posts to at least some of the families implies that they were still regarded as prestigious by the elite as a whole; if some of these families moved their domicile out of the town in 62, this may be supposed to have been only a provisional measure forced on them by the earthquake and not representing a final abandonment of political activity.

While the socio-economic explanation of the political changes in the last period outlined above thus seems open to serious doubt, the political changes themselves still appear to be an epigraphically demonstrable fact. This Paradox should direct our attention to the epigraphical evidence itself, where two interrelated tendencies can be invoked as indicative of a shift in economic and political power: firstly the existence of a considerable number of wealthy freedmen in this period, and secondly the numerous members of new families, often of servile origins, featuring as candidates and magistrates.

From the last decades of Pompeii’s existence an impressive list of wealthy freedmen can be drawn up. It includes among others the owners of the casa dei Vettii, Popidius Ampliatus, who rebuilt the Temple of Isis in the name of his five years old son, Cornelius Tages, presumably the owner of Casa dell’Efebo, Fabius Eupor called *princeps libertinorum*, Cerrinius Restitutus, Calventius Quietus and Munatius Faustus all buried in ostentatious tombs along Via dei Sepolcri, in addition to all the freedmen occupying prominent positions as witnesses in the tablets of Caecilius Jucundus. The significance of this group was to a large extent determined by their relations to their former masters. Some of them may belong to a class of “independent freedmen” envisaged by Peter Garnsey either by virtue of their manumission *ex testamento* or because their master had allowed them to buy themselves free of any economic obligations (Garnsey 1981). However, the majority of freedmen will probably have had more or less intimate connections with their *patronus*, who will often have contributed to their initial capital. As noted by Skydsgaard, fides could also have the practical meaning of credit and lending (Skydsgaard 1976). Such bonds would render it difficult to see their wealth as a general threat to the ruling class. Equally important for the supposed late Pompeian crisis is the question whether the existence of rich freedmen was in fact a new phenomenon first encountered in this particular period.

Most of the wealthy freedmen known to us belong to the Neronian-Flavian era, but we must bear in mind that the sources for that period are much more plentiful than for the earlier part of the century. Thus the tablets of Jucundus, an invaluable prosopographical source, only cover the years 52-61, and in general *programmata*, graffiti and amphora inscriptions would not have survived for more than a few decades. One consequence is that identification of house occupants is possible only for
the very last years of Pompeii. Thus, the distribution of the sources in itself favours the identification of prominent freedmen from the later period. In fact, up to ca. 50 our only source for identifying rich freedmen is funerary and dedicatory tituli. In the latter a large number of freedmen and slaves are shown performing the functions of magistri and ministri in the imperial cult. This will have required at least some economic means. Some wealthy freedmen are documented in funerary inscriptions but not as many as in the later period, where the evidence includes the costly tombs of Augustales and others. That office, involving considerable expenses for the holder, is attested in other townships already under Augustus. Given the known pattern of imperial cults in Augustan Pompeii, it seems probable that the town had Augustales in this period. The fact that they have left no trace might in principle be an accident of survival\(^5\). But “changing epigraphical habits” may also explain their earlier absence and later appearance. That is to say “internal” epigraphical arguments may largely explain the preponderance of rich freedmen from the Neronian-Flavian age. In any case, we are hardly dealing with a new category in Pompeian social structure even if their wealth was increasing in this period.

11 Among the candidates documented in the programmata recentiora a large number of families appear not previously represented in the ordo. These include the Suettii, Vestorii, Lollii, Calventii, Ovidii and Samellii, to mention only a few of the families that made their entry into municipal politics in the very last period. A considerable proportion of these homines novi have been identified as freedmen’s sons, while several of the other candidates carrying the name of an old curial family are alleged to have descended from less distinguished or even servile branches of the families (Castrén 1975, 118-121; Loś 1987).

12 Firstly, it must be noted that without explicit evidence identification of members of collateral branches amounts to hardly more than guesswork. Often there is nothing more to go on than the incidence of a praenomen different from that carried by previous magistrates of the family. Although there is a tendency for praenomina to be inherited this cannot be termed a general rule\(^6\). Moreover, in the case of the extinction of a main branch, a collateral branch would be the legitimate heir to fortune and prominence. Therefore, any attempt to divide gentes into more, or less, distinguished freeborn branches would be an exceedingly risky procedure.

13 The freedman’s son in municipal politics has been a disputed category for several generations of scholarship (Gordon 1931; Garnsey 1975). In Pompeii several candidates and magistrates have more or less tentatively been given this classification. This has been done on the basis of two criteria, onomastic and prosopographical. Cognomina, it has long been recognized, may in some cases be a useful indicative of servile background. However, the candidates almost exclusively carry Latin cognomina and the social connotations of these names seem far more uncertain than in the case of the Greek cognomina. Although some of the Latin names were certainly more commonly used for slaves, their use was not entirely restricted to this group. Thus individual candidates bearing such names cannot on these grounds be identified as freedmen’s sons. Moreover, the criterion can only be applied in cases where freedmen chose servile cognomina for their sons; presumably such cases would not include the heirs of more ambitious freedmen.

14 Several members of new curial families or of supposed minor branches have been identified as descendants of prominent freedmen from the previous generation.
(Castrén 1975 and Łoś 1987). The method is questionable, and the main problem lies in the fact that in spite of its apparent richness the Pompeian prosopographical material is both lacunous and chronologically and socially unevenly distributed. As noted above, the sources by their very nature favour the freedmen at the expense of noncurial freeborn families. Even a cursory survey of the Pompeians known to us reveals the predominance of two distinct groups, freedmen and magistrates and candidates, the latter being most fully recorded in the last period after the earthquake. The freeborn population is in other words highly underrepresented in the sources, which means that Neronian-Flavian candidates and rich freedmen from the previous generation cannot be easily linked. The method implies that a coincidence between freedmen and candidates in successive generations cannot be fortuitous, but since the epigraphical evidence throws light on only a narrow section of Pompeian society there is no justification for arguments *e silentio*.

In short it is my impression that, leaving aside imperial freedmen, a special case, we have very little chance of identifying descendants of freedmen. It does not follow that they were totally absent from the *ordo*; it is not in itself implausible that descendants of wealthy freedmen in the course of time reached the decurionate. But there is an implication that Pompeian politics and society in the last decades of the history of the city, can no longer be described as particularly anti-aristocratic, i.e. featuring greater numbers of decurions of servile origin than in earlier periods.

Also the vigorous social mobility, which has been identified as an important characteristic of late Pompeii, does not seem to have been confined to the post-earthquake period. As already noted by Paavo Castrén new families made their entry into local politics not only after 62 but in the previous decade too (Castrén 1975, 108–110). The beginning of social unstability was dated on these grounds to ca. 50 after a supposed “Claudian crisis” where no magistrates are known7. The exceptional situation in Pompeii will thus have lasted almost 30 years, which makes it appear very much like normality. Moreover, if one examines the period from the death of Augustus to 40 A.D. an almost identical pattern emerges, since members of new families make up no less than 58% of magistrates to be compared with 54% of the last period8. As the record of candidates and magistrates in the last decades is more complete, it is likely that some of the “new” families of that period figured among the unknown half of the Augustan and Julio-Claudian magistrates. The percentage of new families will therefore have been even lower in the last period than has been estimated. The inadequacy of the Republican sources makes the composition of the Augustan *ordo* more difficult to evaluate, but since many of the apparently new families from this period share the same characteristics as the later newcomers they can probably be put on a par with them. New families thus tended to keep their seat in the *ordo* for only a short period and the representation of these one-generation-families is relatively weaker than that of the old *gentes* and those maintaining their position.

In short, the large influx of new families was not peculiar to the last period, but can be traced all the way back to the turning of the era. Like the emergence of wealthy freedmen it has been connected solely with the final phase. The concentration of epigraphical material in this period has influenced this interpretation; but the concepts of order and disorder in municipal politics may also have played a role.

It has usually been assumed that the *ordo* under normal circumstances would form a stable structure. A body consisting of landed aristocrats with solid economic
backgrounds would be expected to experience only minor changes in its composition. Any considerable influx of new families would therefore be a sign of disorder, reflecting the rise of a new commercial class challenging the position of the old nobility. If we start with the idea of the ordo as a stable aristocratic power structure then we almost inevitably describe social mobility in terms of antagonism between classes.

However, the existence of a class opposing the nobility is open to serious doubt. Today there is general agreement on the fact that commercial groups and wealthy freedmen did not develop class-consciousness or form a bourgeoisie in the modern sense of the word. Such speculations are now dismissed as products of modernising economic history, and the whole conflict between aristocracy and bourgeoisie thus acquires a taint of anachronism, recalling the social history of 18. and 19. century Europe. Moreover, since the economic attitudes of the nobility may have been far less aristocratic than it is often assumed, it becomes difficult to maintain a dichotomy between agricultural and commercial groups in Pompeian society. If, as argued above, the landed aristocracy also had interests in commerce and manufacture, the differences in economic outlook which have been attributed to old and new families lose their plausibility.

As an alternative to this antagonistic perception of social mobility I would suggest a model that sees nobles and newcomers as complementary parts of the same structure. By this interpretation a continuous renewal of the ordo is perceived as a logical consequence of the demographical structure of the elite and the way it constituted itself as a governing body.

Keith Hopkins has shown convincingly how an apparently stable aristocratic assembly that was the senate of the Roman Republic was in practice far more dynamic in its familial make-up than had hitherto been believed. As important factors promoting this regular renewal Hopkins points to the high mortality rate in preindustrial societies combined with the Roman practice of partible inheritance. Consequently a family’s economic position would be undermined if several children survived and split the fortune up between them. Only the survival of a single male heir would preserve the family name and keep its fortune intact. Given the mortality rate no family could safely aim at this objective. Therefore at every generational change many families will have navigated in the dangerous sea between a Scylla of social and economic ruin and a Charybdis of complete extinction. It seems likely to assume that some of them did not evade the reefs, but vanished or fell, at least temporarily, into obscurity.

The picture of stable, self-contained municipal elites therefore needs to be modified. Curial families will frequently have disappeared or declined, giving way to others. These in turn will often have been descendants of local families of freeborn or servile origin which had reached a respectable level of wealth and social esteem. An element of geographical mobility might also be taken into account. New families were drawn from other parts of Italy to prosperous Campania. In addition leading families within the region also seem to have extended their political activities beyond the boundaries of their hometowns. C. Vestorius Priscus, who was probably a member of the important Puteolan gens Vestoria held the aedileship in Pompeii at the age of 22 (Ngc, 1910, 402). The inner dynamics of the social structure was effectively promoted by the political organization of the townships. In the republican and early imperial periods the decurionate had not yet become hereditary, but was still largely recruited from ex-magistrates. This means that membership of the ordo had to be maintained in each
generation in a competition with other families. For old curial families with a strong
economic basis and strong cliental ties it may have been a formality, but the system will
nevertheless have been very sensitive to changes in the families’ relative strengths. The
competitive structure would have allowed economic and demographical fluctuations to
be immediately reflected in the membership of the council which constituted the
official nobility. The decurionate was therefore a realistic objective for ambitious new
families, especially if they could forge social ties with the old nobility.

However, a considerable proportion of the new families that reached the decurionate
did not succeed in maintaining their seat in the ordo for more than one generation.
These were presumably more liable to displacement than more established families.
The case of L. Caecilius Jucundus may illustrate their situation; according to the
estimate of Jean Andreau, he possessed at least 100 000 HS, and a decurionate would
thus have been within his reach (Andreau 1987, 385 sq.). But if there were two sons,
Sextus and Lucius, then a fortune far greater than the basic census decurionalis would
be required if the family was to maintain curial status. If winning a seat in the ordo was
difficult for new families, passing it on to the next generation was harder still.

The implication is that the real Pompeian nobility was considerably smaller than the
number of decurions. An invisible dividing line split the Pompeian ordo into two
different types of decurions: those descending from the old economically stable
nobility and those belonging to the ever changing group of new families. The ordo thus
united two social strata in one institution, thereby giving a broader section of the
population a share in the outer privileges of the nobility.

Mary Gordon asked what was the effect of servile blood in the ordo. The answer must be
that it had a stabilizing effect on society. Some of the newcomers may have been of
servile origin, but these did not represent a rival social structure, any more than the
novi homines as a whole did, and their entry cannot therefore be perceived as a sign of
disorder. After a process of selection controlled by the old nobility they received the
places at the bottom of the high table – often for a period of time only too brief and
finite.

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NOTES


3. For this campaign see Gradel/Mouritsen 1991.

4. Thus e.g. the prestigious old gentes Gavia, Herennia, Holconia, Vettia, Vibia, all represented among the candidates of the last period.
5. The earliest documented Augustalis in Pompeii seems to be P. Vesonius Phileros, Porta Nocera 23 OS, datable to the first half of the first century A.D.


7. For a discussion of this theory see Mouritsen 1988, 94-99, 117.

8. For the evidence underlying these figures see Mouritsen 1988, 70-112.

9. Most recently the idea of a Pompeian “bourgeoisie” has been countered by Jongman 1998.


ABSTRACTS

The paper attempts to draw attention to some of the conceptual and evidential problems attached to the prevailing theory of a social disorder in late Pompeii, supposedly a period characterized by the decline of the old nobility and the ascendance of new commercially based families, often of servile origins. The underlying assumption of trade and agriculture being incompatibles is questioned, and weaknesses in the prosopographical evidence adduced in support of a political change are pointed out. As an alternative to the antagonistic class perception of social mobility, the appearance of new families among the decurions - not merely in the last decades but throughout the first century A.D. - is seen as a logical consequence of the demographic and institutional structure of the Pompeian elite.

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