

# PROGRESS OR PERVERSION?

## Current Issues in Prosopography: An Introduction.

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Have you noticed how many times a week our television or radio newscasters breathlessly inform us of this ‘historic’ event or that ‘historical’ occasion? Whatever your definition of history, or your views about who decides when what is genuinely ‘historical’, it is clear that these words are mostly being used as if one of them were spelled *h y s t e r i c a l*. How many journalists know the true meaning of the words ‘mercy’, ‘mayhem’ or, ‘refute’? Their now highly misinformed audiences would be astonished and resentful to be told that they routinely use these words in a way that displays complete ignorance of what they actually mean. Despite what is an increasingly respectable history of its own, until fairly recently prosopography was a word that few people could spell and even fewer could define. Modern prosopography originated in the work of nineteenth-century Classicists, refined in the early twentieth century by other Classicists and by Sir Lewis Namier’s élitist work on the eighteenth-century House of Commons. In the 1970s and 80s it was still possible to get a degree in Modern (i.e. post-Classical) History without having heard of prosopography, despite the enormous amount of work that was starting to be done by historians of all periods. The situation has changed dramatically in recent years, both because of increased appreciation of the power of prosopography as a tool in historical analysis and the rapidity of the technological revolution of the last twenty years which has made computers and databases an integral part of life.

But as with all pendulum swings from one extreme to another, there have been losses as well as gains in this process. Prosopographers seem to have spent of lot of time over the last century trying to devise a definition, or even a set of definitions, of what prosopography is and what it attempts to do. Initially, the originality of the discipline required attempts at definition; latterly, the ever-expanding capabilities increasingly revealed by exponents of prosopography demand that definitions are constantly revisited and refined. This is not to suggest that the meaning of the word is vague and the definition sufficiently elastic that it can be made to cover almost anything. And yet, unfortunately, that is just what is starting to happen. Students can now confuse attempts at reconstituting individual biographies with prosopography. Family historians, whose views of historical genealogy are rather narrow, are beginning to confuse their pursuits with prosopography. In fact, the best of them, in providing carefully prepared collections of genealogical data, can perform a real service to the prosopographer, but without themselves having engaged in true prosopography. Summary lists of individuals and associated dates are starting to appear in serious works under the heading of prosopography, when they are in fact functioning in the same way as the list of *dramatis personae* in a printed play. Prosopography will never be a word to trip lightly off the tongues of men on the Clapham omnibus. If there is growing confusion and laxity in the use of the word prosopography, and there undoubtedly is, then it is because historians have failed to be clear about what they mean when trying to explain it to others, especially their students.

The problem of meaning and definition is a real one because it is not merely the reflection of a lexical or semantic reality, but rather of the evolving experience of different

practitioners over a long period. This has in turn been influenced by the changes in the sorts of questions specialists want to ask of their data, and the development of separate methodologies and technologies by which to achieve the answers. Some of the inherent difficulties and tensions, as well as certain fundamental points of agreement, can be seen in recent definitions. Take, for example, what Dion Smythe wrote in his article on the CD of the Prosopography of the Byzantine Empire for a special issue of *History and Computing*, vol. 10, part 1, published in 2002, which I edited with Matthew Wollard:

‘Prosopography (as it is known best to Classicists and Ancient Historians), group-biography (as it is known to modern historians) or career-line analysis (as it is known to social scientists) is a well-established ancillary discipline to history. Lawrence Stone has provided the clearest and most complete definition of prosopography:

Prosopography is the investigation of the common background characteristics of a group of actors in history by means of a collective study of their lives. The method employed is to establish a universe to be studied, and then to ask a set of uniform questions – about birth and death, marriage and family, social origins and inherited economic position, place of residence, education, amount and source of personal wealth, occupation, religion, experience of office and so on. The various types of information about the individuals in the universe are then juxtaposed and combined, and are examined for significant variables. They are tested both for internal correlations and for correlations with other forms of behaviour or action.

Stone sees a two-fold historical purpose in the use of prosopography: to establish the social roots of political action or to examine and account for social structure and social mobility. Prosopography as ‘group-biography’ is misleading, as it is not the study of life histories in groups (nor indeed the biography of groups) but rather the study of biographical detail about individuals in aggregate. Whilst prosopography is not averse to statistical analysis, nevertheless the individuality of each actor is preserved.’ [DION SMYTHE, *History and Computing* 12.1, p. 85]

As Paul Magdalino succinctly put it: ‘Biography and prosopography are obviously related and they overlap, but the one is not simply the plural of the other’. [PAUL MAGDALINO]

In the same volume David Pelteret, of the Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England, wrote that: ‘In essence Prosopography can be interpreted as the study of identifiable persons and their connections with others for the purpose of enabling the modern student to discern patterns of relationships.’ [DAVID PELTERTET, *History and Computing* 12.1, p. 13]. Pelteret was reacting in this article to an older view of prosopography which saw it as primarily concerned with social élites. This concern was legitimate in its time, and pretty much imposed itself on Classicists and medievalists initially, because their sources for the most part decline to discuss peasants and other hoi poloi in any detail. As George Beech observed in 1976: ‘Prosopographers have usually concentrated their attention on the most powerful or influential people in a society, but their methods can perfectly well be extended to take into account individuals of lesser importance.’

In my introduction to the special issue I observed that: ‘The raw materials of prosopography are plural, prosopa, or persons. Its function is to record information about individual persons in order to analyse a collection of such records in certain ways. Two

major definitions were made in the 1970s. Claude Nicolet defined prosopography's objectives as pertaining to the history of groups within the context of social and political history; it works by isolating a series of persons with a common characteristic or characteristics of social or political organization, thus preparing the ground for a series of analyses aimed at discovering constants and variables among the data'. Karl Ferdinand Werner observed that prosopography permits the combination of political history, the history constructed around a series of events, with the more anonymous social history concerned with evolutionary change over the long-term, because it links the study of persons who sustained both. The emphasis of these definitions is on compiling data relating to individual persons in order to analyse persons as groups. German scholars have talked about Personengeschichte - the history of individuals. Others talk about collective biography, but these terms require nuance and are ultimately unhelpful in understanding prosopography. Although the study of individuals is a pre-requisite of prosopography, prosopography is not about individuals. The study of individuals is the province of biography or genealogy and is very limited. Prosopography is about what the analysis of the sum of data about many individuals can tell us about the different types of connexion between them, and hence about how they operated within and upon the institutions - social, political, legal, economic, intellectual - of their time.' [KEATS-ROHAN, *History and Computing* 12.1, p. 2] Still rooted in the core distinction between one individual and other, the subjects of prosopography are no longer being defined in terms of social status, or confined within closed groups. Instead, they now belong to the expanding universe of networks.

Prosopography is a multi-layered approach to the analysis of whole societies in defined regions and times. The requirements of the technique vary little from period to period, but the methodology in each case will be determined by the type of source material available. What results from the exercise will be a research tool described as 'a prosopography'. Both prosopographical research and the resulting prosopography are capable of perpetual motion. The more that is learned through prosopographical research, the larger and richer the prosopography that results, which in turn spurs further research, and so on. A prosopography is based upon a minute examination of its sources, to which it forms a series of detailed footnotes. Such inquiry is led by an evidential network in which information is often drawn from many types of source, which are corroborated and consolidated or in some way refined by constant comparison of the different sources. The resulting prosopography functions as a new source, a metasource, in which some of the defects of the base sources are remedied. Sources are the very essence of prosopography and prosopographies and cannot be taken for granted in thinking about and defining them. A primary duty of the prosopographer is to make his sources transparent, making them available to others by transcription and editions where necessary.