

ROMAN GENEALOGICAL CONTINUITY AND THE “DESCENTS-FROM-ANTIQUITY” QUESTION

A Review Article

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We have long been taught to divide Western history into periods punctuated by great upheavals—wars, revolutions, and invasions—which swept away one regime, empire or culture, and supplanted it with another. The worst of these upheavals are thought to involve the extinction of an old elite and its replacement by a new ruling class—just as dinosaurs gave way to mammals. But were the greatest historical disasters really so cataclysmic for the elites that witnessed them? This is an important question of specific historical and genealogical interest. Historians have long distrusted such oversimplifications such as the “Fall of Rome,” pointing out that such “falls” were not all so cataclysmic as they are usually made out to be, but were complex transitions in which much of an old way of life was transformed, not obliterated, under a new regime. In recent years, historians have been involved in scrutinizing these cataclysms to better understand their impact on the people of the time—both rulers and ruled. Genealogists scrutinize the same alleged historical disjunctures with the goal of extending modern traceable lineages back into new and earlier territory (the “Descents From Antiquity” question, discussed below).

The greatest of these historical discontinuities in the pre-modern West are well known. In the Middle Ages, there are the two great “ages of invasions”: The first was the fall of Rome in the West and its supplantation by the Germanic kingdoms of Dark-Age Europe in the fifth century. The second is another “age of invasions”: those of the Viking, Saracen and Magyar predators who facilitated the collapse of the Carolingian empire in the ninth and tenth centuries. This last juncture set the stage for the advent of a new social order, in which “new men”

(and women) carved out territorial principalities, founding the great royal and noble families of late-medieval and modern Western Europe (though just how “new” these men and women were is another question). The Ancient world has great disjunctures of its own, perhaps most notably in the Roman Empire’s “Crisis of the Third Century,” where conventional wisdom has described a century of political instability and military putsches, from the time of Commodus (d. 192, and not quite in the manner depicted in the film *Gladiator*) to that of Diocletian (acceded 284). This age of chaos is supposed to have resulted in a fundamental change of personnel in Roman politics: the elites and senators of the Late Empire were in no way connected with their predecessors in the Republican and early Imperial senate.

SETTIPANI’S *CONTINUITÉ*

Christian Settipani’s new book, *Continuité gentilice et continuité familiale dans les familles sénatoriales romaines à l’époque impériale*, is a concerted and ambitious challenge to this old orthodoxy of disjuncture in the Roman senatorial aristocracy. Briefly put, *Continuité* seeks to demonstrate the continuity of the senatorial elites from the Republic (first century BC) through the Late Antique period (fifth or sixth centuries AD).¹ Like M. Settipani’s other important works in medieval and ancient genealogy, it is a stunning compendium of detailed information and a bibliographic gold-mine.² *Continuité* is the distillation of years of careful work in primary and secondary sources.³ It presents a comprehensive survey of the field of Roman genealogy, offering both a wide-ranging introduction to the method and current questions, and a series of detailed monographic reconstructions of individual families.

The book is chock full of valuable and diverse material. The introduction runs to eighty-two tightly-packed pages. It quickly covers such important subjects as the syntax of Roman naming conventions, Latin terminology of kinship, a general introduction to the sources for classical prosopography, a brief introduction to the use of onomastics in reconstructing pedigrees, a passing discussion of Roman conventions of adoption, the *cursus honorum* (customary

¹ This is not an entirely new thesis in historical terms: Settipani cites considerable scholarship from the last thirty years, demonstrating continuity in specific lines. His work combines synthesis of existing reconstructions with much new work.

² Christian Settipani’s other books are: *Nos ancêtres de l’antiquité: études des possibilités de liens généalogiques entre les familles de l’antiquité et celles du haut moyen âge européen* (Paris, 1991); *Les ancêtres de Charlemagne* (Paris, 1989); and, with Patrick van Kerrebrouck, *La préhistoire des Capétiens* (vol. 1, part 1 of the *Nouvelle histoire généalogique de l’auguste maison de France*) (Villeneuve d’Asq, 1992).

³ This work has been a long time coming; we are to thank Don Charles Stone, of Philadelphia, and the Unit for Prosopographical Research at Linacre College, Oxford, for supporting its publication.

career path of Roman public offices), summary tables of senatorial *gentes* and their apparent longevity, an extended discussion of genealogical pretensions and claims, and, finally, a brief essay on the general question of global dynastic continuity. While each of these sections is useful, some are so brief that they may be inadequate for those who are not already acquainted with the terminology or methodology of Roman genealogy.

The bulk of the book consists a series of monographic reconstructions of Roman senatorial lineages (something over four-hundred pages). There are six large clusters of genealogies of senatorial clans or *gentes*, further subdivided into discussions of individual families, either branches within the *gens* or families allied to it. Separate sections discuss a number of families related to the imperial families of Augustus and the Antonines, and finally a section on diverse “Eastern Nobilities”; both of these sections step somewhat outside the strict methodology of reconstructing Roman senatorial *gentes*. The volume ends with a sixty-four page bibliography (of perhaps 2,500 entries) and a twenty-four page index (perhaps 5500 names).⁴

The genealogies are the heart of the book, and it is very satisfying to follow the labyrinthine reconstruction of a *gens* and its various branches and allies. But here again, the sheer denseness of the volume takes its toll. In the first place, the organization within each chapter, with various sections treating different branches and allies, is not readily apparent. The hierarchical subheadings are difficult to interpret, even with recourse to the table of contents. Within each chapter, more attention should have been paid to orienting the reader to the various ramifications of that *gens* and its allies, and in better summarizing the data at the end. This degree of textual economy is clearly evident within the genealogical discussions themselves, where the argumentation is so concise as to be almost telegraphic. But to take the reader more thoroughly through each step of reasoning, to review more clearly the dissenting reconstructions by other scholars, and, not least, to have laid out each page with larger type and clearer subheadings, would have taken, perhaps, two additional volumes. The denseness of the genealogical discussion makes the book difficult for a casual reader to browse. The index, too, would be much more useful if there were separate alphabetized entries for each name element (rather than simply indexing on the first *gens* in an individual’s compound name), though this, too, would have involved much more effort and space.

While the presentation of this material will not suit the taste or needs of every reader, the book is nevertheless a major achievement. Even if the individual

⁴ The bibliography is not complete, in the sense that many uniquely cited items are simply cited in full in the footnotes and omitted in the bibliography. Yet there are some items to be found in the footnotes cited only by author–year (as if in reference to a bibliographical entry) which are *not* in the bibliography: an oversight, but a potentially frustrating one.

reconstructions are later contradicted, Settiani's thesis of genealogical continuity is amply proven in historical terms. One interesting observation is buried in two sections in the introduction: a summary table of senatorial continuity in the imperial period appears in a chart on pp. 25–27, noting the first and last attested members and consuls in each great senatorial *gens* (from among all those with attestations spanning five generations or more). In contrast is a briefer section, elsewhere in the introduction, on patrician continuity in *Republican* Rome, demonstrating much longer lines, on average, than those provable for the imperial period.⁵ If these data had been presented together, they would underscore the relatively modest nature of the continuity that Settiani has argued, contrasted with the earlier period; but it is still obvious that M. Settiani, with his specific reconstructions, has made a strong case for genealogical continuity among senatorial families in the Empire.

ONOMASTICS, PROSOPOGRAPHY AND RECONSTRUCTION

Continuity or not, Rome did indeed *fall*; and the records she left behind are frustratingly sparse and fragmentary. Faced with a fragmentary record, virtually all work on ancient genealogies consists of deductive and speculative reconstruction: piecing together pedigrees out of short interlocking segments of attested filiation or kinship. These are patched together with a good deal of guesswork involving patterns in the inheritance of names, and, to a lesser extent, continuity of property or office (both civil and ecclesiastical). Just how does one argue for genealogical continuity over centuries in the Roman Empire? The method is basic enough: it is founded on the continuity of names.⁶ The Roman senatorial aristocracy was organized into great clans (*gentes*), each distinguished by a clan name (*nomen gentilicium* or *nomen*), which was the second element of the standard three-part Roman name (*praenomen*—a given name; *nomen*—the *gens* name; and *cognomen*—a family within the *gens*). But the patrilineal transmission of *nomen* and *cognomen* is never absolutely regular: throughout the period, there are creative recombinations of these names based on maternal inheritance as well as the strict patriline. Furthermore, the use (or at least the systematic recording) of the three-name system eventually broke down in the Late Empire, to be replaced with more creative compounds of two or more individual and family names. But overlapping periods and vogues of these later names can be found which permit the plausible tracing the representatives of an earlier *gens* in a later period—and this is the heart of Settiani's work.

The disciplines of onomastics (the scrutiny of naming patterns) and prosopography (the systematic compilation of names and data for attested individuals) are

⁵ Settiani, *Continuité*, 53–58.

⁶ For Settiani, “the continuity is, above all, that of the name” (*Continuité*, 76).

therefore vital for establishing and fleshing out these reconstructed pedigrees. By systematically reviewing all attestations of individuals with certain characteristic names one can look for coincidences of station, property or locale which suggest family continuity and not just a coincidence of name choice. The fundamental references for ancient prosopography are those great compendia which list, alphabetically, *every* attested individual in *all* ancient sources. Such compilations exist for different periods of the Roman Empire and its Byzantine successor, and are among the great achievements of nineteenth- and twentieth-century prosopographical scholarship.⁷ At different times, similar comprehensive published works have been projected for Early-Medieval Germanic Europe, but none has yet been produced.⁸ Because of the ambition of its coverage, *Continuité* contains one of the most up-to-date single-volume bibliographies of such prosopographical references for the Ancient world.

It may be useful to delve further into the style and limits of the genealogical method at work here. In even the most conservative genealogical reconstructions from a fragmentary record base, there is considerable subjectivity in making a pedigree out of what may be, at best, a vaguely hinted relationship between two individuals more than a generation apart. Confronted with a gulf between two apparently related individuals, one simply makes an educated guess about the *precise* nature of the link between them. Cumulatively, the probability swiftly falls that an entire pedigree is *exactly* as reconstructed, though in broad terms the likelihood of the continuity of a family over time remains tangible, given the interlocking inheritance of characteristic names, or some other index of kinship (for example, contemporary testimony that a particular person is descended from a certain earlier family). But personal style will influence how one constructs a pedigree out of a chain of conjectures, and it is not surprising that different researchers arrive at different conclusions when confronted with the same fragmentary evidence.⁹

⁷ Settipani lists the major prosopographical references in his introduction (*Continuité*, 9). Chief among them are the *Prosopographia Imperii Romani*, 3 vols. (Berlin, 1897–98), with a second edition in progress, 7 vols. to date (Berlin, 1933–); and the *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1971–92), covering AD 260 to AD 641.

⁸ See, for example, Karl Schmid and Joachim Wollasch, “Societas et Fraternitas: Begründung eines kommentierten Quellenwerkes zur Erforschung der Personen und Personengruppen des Mittelalters,” *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 9 (1975), 1–48. This and other computer-based prosopographical databases have been commented on from time to time in the academic journal *Medieval Prosopography* (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1980–).

⁹ Thus for example, we have two different reconstructions of probable Gallo-Roman descendants of the Anicii: T. Stanford Mommaerts and David H. Kelley, “The Anicii of Gaul and Rome,” in *Fifth-Century Gaul: a crisis of identity?*, ed. John Drinkwater and Hugh Elton (Cambridge, 1992), 111–21; and Christian Settipani, “Ruricius, premier évêque de Limoges, et ses alliances familiales,” *Francia* 18(1991):195–222. Settipani leaves the “Ruricius” connection aside in *Continuité*, as he postulated a female descent (while Mommaerts and Kelley had speculated on a male-line descent). This example of divergent reconstructions has been showcased by Marshall K.

One hidden shoal in this reconstruction process is the Roman custom of adoption (*arrogatio* and *hereditio*), in which a man may adopt another as his heir, with the beneficiary assuming the name as well as the station (property and sometimes offices) of the benefactor. Settipani makes the point that these adopted heirs were often closely related—perhaps as maternal nephews—and therefore often had a prior justification for passing on a distinctive *gens* or family name.¹⁰ But this cannot always have been the case, and, while some allowance can be made for possible blood connection in *known* cases of adoption, how many other onomastically-suggested genealogical links may actually have been by adoption rather than by blood?

Another potentially significant issue casts light on the Romans' own ideas about ancestry and descent, but it is disquieting when trying to reconstruct a pedigree. Romans habitually made genealogical *claims* of descent from a distant historical, mythological, or even divine predecessor in the remote past.¹¹ Ironically, specific (false) claims, when reappearing in more than one place, can themselves be used as an index of kinship. Yet if extravagant claims to ancient or divine descent were common—even fashionable—should we not be wary of trusting more mundane statements of kinship when building a pedigree?

DESCENTS FROM ANTIQUITY

Despite these observations on presentation and method (the latter of which will be the bases by which conservative historians may reject Settipani's work as too liberally speculative), the value of *Continuité* is self-evident. In the first place, the massive and sweeping nature of the book makes it a gold mine for serious readers who would like to examine this genealogical method in depth, or those who are involved in their own reconstruction of a specific Roman family. In the second place, it offers (cooly, without trumpeting the fact) very fertile soil for tracing longer *continuités*: that is, the ongoing genealogical quest for plausible links between the later, traceable European aristocracy and the Ancient World, known in the trade as “descents from antiquity.”

The field dates back to a 1975 essay, “Bridges to Antiquity,” by the late Sir Anthony R. Wagner, posing the question of whether descents can be traced from the medieval world back into Antiquity, and surveying various possible routes.¹²

Kirk, to whose excellent presentation “Ancient Ancestry, Fact, Speculation and Fiction,” at the Sesquicentennial Conference of the New England Historic Genealogical Society in July of 1995, I owe my first exposure to this particular branch of genealogical scholarship. It has also been noted by Don Charles Stone in a forthcoming contribution to *New England Ancestors*, “What Are We to Make of Ancient Lineages?” (I thank Mr. Stone for sharing this piece with me).

¹⁰ Settipani, *Continuité*, 34–36.

¹¹ Settipani, *Continuité*, 37–48.

¹² Anthony Wagner, “Bridges to Antiquity,” in *Pedigree and Progress: Essays in the Genealogical Interpretation of History* (London and Chichester, 1975), 50–77.

M. Settapani himself is no stranger to this sort of genealogical prospecting. His contribution to the field dates from his useful 1989 book on the ancestors of Charlemagne, in which he introduced a speculative line traced back through the family of the Gallo-Roman bishop Ruricius of Limoges, who was stated by poet Venantius Fortunatus to descend from the Roman senatorial *gens Anicia*. This was expanded in an article on Ruricius's genealogical connections published in 1991.¹³ Even more widely known is Settapani's other published speculative "descent from antiquity," *Nos ancêtres de l'antiquité*, which bypasses senatorial Rome, moving from the Byzantine Middle Ages back into the Hellenistic Near East through Armenian and Persian royalty.¹⁴ Others have taken up the call, both developing speculative descents and disseminating such work in compilations.¹⁵ One notable complement to Settapani's work is a divergent reconstruction of the Rurician–Anicii link published in 1991 by David H. Kelley and T. S. Mommaerts.¹⁶ From a sociological perspective, the postulation and scrutiny of such long, continuous descents is extremely valuable, whether or not the families involved retained any awareness of the descent.¹⁷ The most important hurdle to be overcome is apparently not that between Augustan Rome and the Late Empire, but that which separates later Romans from the medieval continuum represented by the Merovingian aristocracy and the known ancestors of Charlemagne.¹⁸

¹³ See above, n. 9.

¹⁴ See above, n. 2. Settapani does not recapitulate that work in *Continuité*, but there are several collateral tie-ins in the chapter on "Eastern Nobilities."

¹⁵ A series of charts with the title *Descents from Antiquity*, bringing together speculative ancient lines from various sources, was circulated in 1986 by the Augustan Society (Torrance, Calif., 1986). Don Charles Stone's *Ancient and Medieval Descents Project* (Philadelphia, 1996–) represents a much more selective and careful presentation of possible descents. I discussed a very dubious but widely-circulated Davidic descent to medieval French nobility in "Saint William, King David, and Makhir: A Controversial Medieval Descent," TAG 72(1997):03–21.

¹⁶ See above, n. 9. Dr. Kelley, whose genealogical career extends for more than 50 years, published on the likely connection of the Gallo-Roman senator and consul Flavius Afranius Syagrius and his family to Charlemagne in 1947 ("A New Consideration of the Carolingians," *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 101[1947]:108–12. *Continuité*, 379–80, makes a case for Syagrius's possible descent from the senatorial *Flavii*).

¹⁷ Settapani discusses the general phenomenon of dynastic longevity in the West at the end of the introduction to *Continuité*, with limitation to the self-identified dynasties and not maternal descents (77–82).

¹⁸ This is tied into the general sociological question of the "newness" and continuity of early medieval European elites. This question has recently been magisterially reviewed by one of the masters of the field, Dr. Karl Ferdinand Werner, *La naissance de la noblesse: l'essor des élites politiques en Europe* (Paris, 1998). Dr. Werner is Settapani's mentor in the field; see his introduction to Settapani's *La préhistoire des Capétiens* (above, n. 2), and his important discussion of the onomastic method for early medieval genealogy, "Liens de parenté et noms de personne: un problème historique et méthodologique," in *Famille et parenté dans l'Occident médiéval*, ed. Georges Duby and Jacques Le Goff (Rome, 1977), 13–18, 25–34.

While such efforts are not the direct purpose of *Continuité*, Settipani has taken the opportunity to lay some interesting groundwork for further reconstruction. The important orientation to further efforts and forthcoming research is covered in the concluding section, “Beyond the Late Empire,” which surveys the current literature on various possible traceable descents from the senatorial aristocracy in Italy, Byzantium, and finally Gaul. For it is there—among the Gallo-Roman bishops of central and southern France, or among the courtier–bishops at the former imperial capital at Trier—that one sees characteristic Roman aristocratic names, and where Gallo-Roman writers speak with pride of senatorial ancestry. M. Settipani has promised to publish such Late Antique to Early Medieval links in a forthcoming work, but others will certainly contribute to the field based on the inspiring example of *Continuité*.¹⁹

I would like to acknowledge discussions and correspondence with Marshall K. Kirk and Don Charles Stone, and thank them both for sharing observations and research which have been digested and incorporated here.

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¹⁹ *Continuité*, 504 and n. 1, in which he promises a study of the “great Gallo-Roman families” in vol. 2 of *La préhistoire des Capétiens* (see above, n. 2).