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DYNASTIC MARRIAGES IN THE ROMAN ARISTOCRACY

I

Alliances in the aristocracy of the Republic, that theme has engaged eager and assiduous study in the recent time. Not without the danger of exaggerations and schematism. In consequence, abundant controversy. Moreover, tedium ensues when the method is applied to periods devoid of testimony about persons who can be grasped as persons.

The large and intricate topic may be waived in this place. Instead, a negative and partial device offers. The argument from silence is to be deprecated, well and good. Nevertheless, when invoked with due safeguards, it yields clues. For adepts in detection the failure of dogs to respond by barking at vital moments has become a classic precedent.

It is worth the effort to look for families or groups that appear through the centuries to avoid mutual attachments contracted by matrimony or adoptions. For plain reasons of economy, the enquiry will concentrate on the most eminent houses in the primeval aristocracy. That is, the patricians, who held monopoly

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of office and power until plebeians won access to the consulate towards the middle of the Fourth Century.

And a further restriction. On a Roman estimate, five clans stood out, defined as the *gentes maiores*. Namely *Aemilii*, *Claudii*, *Cornelii*, *Fabii*, *Valerii*. From the outset those dynastic houses engross a large share in the annals of the Republic, and they lasted into the Empire.

II

First of all, to clear the approach and delimit the subject, observe one example of a notable affinity in the age of the great imperial wars. It concerns the Aemilii and the foremost branch of the Cornelii. The youthful Scipio who supplanted old Fabius in the contest with Hannibal had for wife an Aemilia, sister to Aemilius Paulus, the conqueror of Macedon. When the line of Scipio Africanus was lapsing, Paulus stepped in and supplied one of his sons for adoption. That is, Scipio Aemilianus, who destroyed Carthage.¹

The affinity recurs, albeit at a long interval. As a casual fact reveals, Aemilius Lepidus, the revolutionary consul of the year 78, gave a son in adoption to a Scipio. More significant his grandson Paulus Aemilius Lepidus, nephew to Lapidus the Triumvir and one of the earliest aristocrats accruing to the cause of Caesar's heir. About the time of the Battle of Actium, Paulus secured for bride a Cornelia of Scipionic ancestry: the lady who in the last poem of Propertius speaks from beyond the grave, consoling the bereaved husband and the two sons.

III

In sharp contrast stand the other three *gentes maiores*, viz. *Claudii*, *Fabii*, *Valerii*. No propinquity appears to be attested through long

¹ For family politics in that epoch see F. Münzer, *Römische Adelspolitik und Adelsfamilien*, 1920; H. H. Scullard, *Roman Politics 220-150 B.C.*, 1951, ed. 2. 1978; A.E. Astin, *Scipio Aemilianus*, 1967.

ages; and further, the Claudii seem to steer clear of Aemilii and Scipiones. The earliest link verifiable in the three houses belong to the reign of Caesar Augustus. Messalla Appianus, the consul of 12, is an Appius Claudius adopted by a Valerius Messalla.

On the lowest count, the phenomenon deserves emphasis—and it solicits an explanation, however hazardous and vulnerable. In enquiries of this sort, extreme caution is prescribed, the evidence being sporadic and defective. Especially for wives. During the last century of the Republic only two women of the Fabii are discoverable.²

The patriciate had gone into a decline, as consular lists document. For example, only two patricians in an interval of nine years (between 126 and 116). Families failed to maintain this rank, and some verged on extinction. Thus no Valerius Messalla consul for a whole century (from 161 to 61), no Fabius between 116 and 45.

At the same time however some *gentes* benefited from the emergence of collateral lines. Valerii Flacii came up for a short spell during the period when the Messallae were in eclipse; and after the decease of Scipio Aemilianus the Nasicae took over, descended from a cousin of the first Africanus. Yet the Nasicae subsisted on a narrow edge, with a consul dying in office (in 111), his son fading out after the praetorships.³

To the process a variety of causes contributed: political errors, infertility, paucity of children, pestilence, the insalubrity of the capital. None the less, despite intermittences in holding the fasces, families went on, not forfeiting social esteem—and some would rise again, notably the oldest and most illustrious.

IV

Under menace of extrusion, aristocracies might be expected to close their ranks and combine their resources. With the patriciate

² Namely a Vestal Virgin and the elderly bride annexed by a young fortune hunter (P. Cornelius Dolabella).

³ Next and the last in the line Metellus Scipio, the consul of 52—whose daughter Cornelia was the fifth wife of Pompeius.

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a contrary factor could not fail to operate. There was little help to be got from other families in a similar plight.⁴ They turned rather to potent or prolific houses in the plebeian nobility. Such were the Caecilii Metelli, on both counts: six consuls in the space of fifteen years (123-109).

Next, the cost of public life in the competition for rank and honour. To keep going or to repair ancestral fortunes a ready incentive awaited. Alliance was sought with friends and clients in the towns of Italy, the men of property who had drawn enrichment from the profits of empire.⁵

V

So far a general situation. For Claudii, Fabii, Valerii, recourse can be had to a specific explanation. All three were peculiar and distinctive. Some patricians like Aemilii and Julii asserted descent from kings or gods, from the nobility of Alba Longa, from Trajan families. Of Claudii and Valerii their legends showed them extraneous, from the Sabine country, the Claudii immigrants a few years after the founding of the Republic. For the origin of the Fabii adequate testimony is lacking.

Tradition and long emulation kept them apart, so it may be surmised. All three chose to abide in dynastic rivalry. Hence deliberate avoidances, which the historical record allows to be inferred, for all that it is so fragmentary.

The Claudii earned notoriety for ingrained and exorbitant pride. A hostile tradition alleged them oppressors of the Roman plebs. On the contrary, the Claudii were demagogue in the pursuit of power, using the plebs for *clientela*—and vexing rivals by their arrogance. And their ultimate origin was no demerit, at least in the opinion of the Emperor Claudius, the last of the line. That ruler, by the way, let fall an inconsiderate remark when he took for son a Domitius Ahenobarbus. Until now, he said, the Claudii had never resorted to an adoption.

⁴ Such as the patrician Manlii: no consul between 164 and 65.

⁵ On which theme, T. P. Wiseman, *New Men in the Roman Senate 139 B.C.-14 A.D.*, 1971.

VI

Patricians were requisite as substance and adornment of the Roman “*res publica*.” A statesman endowed with the authority and function of restoring the old order could not fail his duty. Sulla the Dictator conformed, a patrician himself. Youths whom he selected and favoured turned up in due course as consuls: in each year except three from 61 to 55, in all years from 54 to 49. Hence a splendid effulgence of high birth before the catastrophe when Pompeius Magnus and the Republic went down before the proconsul of Gaul.

In Caesar a predilection for patricians is no mystery. The heir to his name and power knew no limits or inhibitions when he established an aristocratic monarchy. An accident of demography contributed, and gaps caused by the civil wars. After a time, a new generation came up, declared by a run of young noblemen as consuls from 16 to 7. Of the patricians in that company, two belong to *gentes* which Caesar Augustus retrieved from long obscurity. He also augmented that order with families of the plebeian *nobilitas*.⁶

VII

The significance of marriage alliances under the Republic is confirmed by a cursory glance at the dynastic policy promoted from the outset, soon after the Battle of Actium, by a ruler who himself lacked ancestors, being the grandson of a municipal banker. He had no son, only a daughter, and a nephew: Claudius Marcellus, the son of his sister Octavia. Julia and Marcellus were promptly united, in 25. But Augustus was further equipped with four nieces issuing from the successive marriages of Octavia. In 28 he consigned the elder Marcella to Marcus Agrippa. The other three, closely coeval with Julia, became providentially nubile three or four years later. The younger Marcella was wife to Messalla Appianus, when he died in 12 (perhaps not her first husband). As for the two daughters of Marcus Antonius, the elder went to

⁶ Information on these topics (the author cannot dissemble) will be found in *The Augustan Aristocracy*, Oxford, 1986.

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Domitius Ahenobarbus, the younger to Drusus (the second stepson of the Princeps).

This is not the place to disengage the ramifications that ensued, or the vicissitudes of design and of chance. In the end the monarch, frustrated when two princes perished, the grandsons, was constrained to take in adoption the uncongenial stepson Tiberius Claudius Nero: a Claudian, but not from the superior line, the Appii Claudii.

For the succession to the supreme power, alternatives were not lacking in the nexus all along. For example Ahenobarbus the husband of Antonia, or Fabius Maximus, who married Marcia, a cousin of Caesar Augustus. Further the theme can revert for a moment to the Aemilii Lepidi, with visible advantage.

The illustrious Paulus has been mentioned, along with his wife Cornelia—who was in fact half-sister to Julia, the daughter of Augustus. He had two sons. The one, L. Paulus, married the second Julia, the granddaughter: both to be discarded and brought to ruin soon after the elevation of Tiberius Caesar. The other, Marcus Lepidus, is styled *capax imperii* in the notorious anecdote that reports estimates uttered by the moribund autocrat. To the son of Marcus, Caligula awarded the hand of his sister Drusilla, with promise of the succession.

VIII

Continuity between Republic and Principate was advertised by names and forms. As the historian Tacitus averred, *eadem rerum vocabula*. In truth, legalised autocracy based on powers delegated (and thereby surrendered) by *Senatus Populusque*.

Two different elements of continuity explain and supplement. First, the Princeps emerged as the last of the dynasts, in sequence to Pompeius, Caesar, Antonius. They are “monarchic faction-leaders,” so a Greek writer was to style them. From a violent redistribution of power and of property a new form of government arose—and no going back.⁷

⁷ Some modern scholars are impelled to deny the term “Revolution” to that phenomenon.

Second, Caesar Augustus perpetuated and enhanced practices always normal in the aristocracy; and he brought back for collusion the names of ancient and epic power, *magna nomina*, and even *ingentia nomina*.

In consequence, the dynasty proved lethal not only to rivals under suspicion (for the descendants of Sulla, Crassus and Pompeius regarded Julii and Claudii as usurpers) but to most members of the nexus itself. Yet propinquity to the Caesars was far from being the main cause that accelerated the exit of so many noble families.

Habits of luxury (rampant since the Battle of Actium in the verdict of Tacitus) and expenditure for display eroded their fortunes. The end of the Valerii exhibits a contrast. Valeria Messalina came to grief, consort of Claudius Caesar and at the same time daughter of a cousin who was the son of Messalla Appianus. But Messalla Corvinus, the signal pride of Augustan Rome, Republican, Antonian, Caesarian in his allegiances, had eschewed propinquity for sons or daughters. The last consul of his line took subsidy from Nero.⁸

IX

So far the aristocratic monarchy which ended with Nero, who was descended from Marcus Antonius and from Ahenobarbus, the stubborn enemy of both Pompeius and Caesar. Cornelius Tacitus, a Roman from the western provinces, elected for his *Annales* the theme of decline and fall. Parallel and blending with that of the dynasty, it embraced aristocratic *Libertas* and the ancient families.

The new managerial class soon took a hand, clients and agents of the Caesars. After three ephemeral pretenders, governors and armies produced Vespasian and the short-lived Flavian dynasty. Then, after a veiled *coup d'Etat* in the autumn of the year 97, followed Trajan, the first provincial emperor—and socially

⁸ For those attracted by negative phenomena, high aristocrats who kept clear of the dynasty are a useful subject of study.

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superior to Vespasian, being son of an eminent consul and one of the neo-patricians.

A new aristocracy thus reached its peak and prime with the third imperial dynasty, the "Antonine emperors." In its formation and components it declares an age-old theme recurring. That is, a nexus of families. The choice flower of southern Spain and southern France, combined their resources of wealth and energy. They were highly congenial although contrasted in one aspect, their ultimate extraction.⁹ The senators from Andalusia go back to the old Italian diaspora, to the soldiers and traders who stayed behind and duly developed a propertied class. Most of the Narbonensians, however, derive from native stock: their names attest citizenship conferred by proconsuls in the last epoch of the Republic. In fact, Nîmes and Vienne show precedence over Roman colonies such as Narbonne or Arles.

Taken at first sight, the four Antonine rulers (namely Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius) appear Spanish in preponderance. The *patria* of Trajan and of Hadrian (the son of a cousin) was Italica, an ancient settlement near Seville, that of the Annii (the paternal ascendance of Marcus) another town in the same province.

Advantageous marriages should not be overlooked. Trajan took to wife Pompeia Plotina from Nîmes. No issue, it is true, and none for his successor. But Antoninus Pius is a Nîmois, doubly so, from both grandfathers, viz. Aurelius Fulvus and Arrius Antoninus (each consul for the second time). Finally, for Marcus Aurelius, the maternal grandmother was Domitia Lucilla, a great heiress also from that Narbonensian city.

X

Emphasis has been put upon social continuity under a changed political system. Evoking the nobility of the Republic, a brief summary concentrated on a few baronial houses in the patriciate,

⁹ On which, cf. R. Syme, *Tacitus*, 1958, ch. XLIV, "The Antecedents of Emperors"; *Colonial Elites*, 1958, ch. I, "The Spanish Romans."

three of them, highly distinctive. Something ought to be said about features common to the whole governing class, whatever be their origins. Since the disquisition began by asserting value for negative phenomena, it will be suitable to call up for comparison aristocracies in European countries from the Fifteenth Century to the Eighteenth. They show resemblances one to the other, despite diversity in roles and comportment under monarchy. A brief definition could be given as follows.

At Rome a martial nation dispensed with the wearing of uniforms in the City: and a republic of citizens forbade duelling. Aggressive and sharp on the point of honour, members of the upper order had to fight out the feuds or quarrels with words and persuasion in courts of law and in the high assembly. Oratory became the requisite for success. Aspirants in the career of honours advanced through defined stages which weeded out the unfit; and those age regulations curbed youthful ambitions and enforced "oligarchic equality."

While pride in ancestry and status prevailed, there was no insistence on "purity of blood." An Aemilius lost nothing when he became through adoption a Cornelius or a Fabius. In the commerce of the sexes, aristocrats permitted or condoned much licence. The consequences were concealed. No subsequent marriage could secure legitimation, and the fruits of ancillary amours lapsed to where they belonged. Rome shows no trace of those bastards in high office, the generals and dukes or bishops and cardinals conspicuous in certain European societies.

Rome knew no kind of separate sacerdotal class. The priest was a magistrate. The government kept religion in its proper place using it to impress or intimidate the populace, as a foreign statesman like Polybius observed in due approbation.

The imperial people enjoyed pomp and ceremony, processions and funerals. No coats of arms, however, and no heraldry, apart from images and tables of ancestors. Finally, no primogeniture, no titles deriving from ownership of estates, from kinship or from a wife. Titles of that kind changed, varied, or piled up, whereas the Roman fashion of nomenclature was plain and constant. Seniority acquired in the service of the Republic declared the rank of a senator.

Such was the civic aristocracy which in the space of fifty-three

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years (the definition of Polybius) defeated Carthage, broke the kingdoms and achieved dominion over the world.

EPILOGUE

When comparative history is enlisted, it takes an effort to break free from its seductions. A gentle exit offers by way of a different society in the recent epoch. Namely the Bostonian aristocracy as it took shape in the course of the Nineteenth Century. Analysis affords entertainment as well as instruction.¹⁰ Among the “first families,” the often quoted quatrain assigns primacy to Cabots and Lowells:

And this is good old Boston
The home of the bean and the cod,
Where the Lowells talk to the Cabots,
And the Cabots talk only to God.

Both were of recent provenance when matched with the Winthrops and the Saltonstalls (the sole armigerous). Fortunes that originate in foreign commerce increased through industry as well as banking and were safeguarded by family trusts.

Furthermore, education bound those families together. They possessed, in the full sense of the term, a common university, exercising there a long predominance. Between 1659 and 1939, nine generations of Saltonstalls entered Harvard.

Intermarriage was frequent, and it followed repetitive patterns. Of seven Cabots, four went to Higginsons (the bankers of eminent repute); and in one Peabody family three out of six opted for Lawrences. Competition was eager and visible, but not often leading to such “avoidances” as marked (so it has been argued) certain dynastic houses at Rome. However no Saltonstall married a Lowell.

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¹⁰ Cleveland Amory, *The Proper Bostonians*, 1947 (Dutton Paperback, 1957).