

Prosopography:

An Approach to Studying Elites and Social Groups⁽¹⁾

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This study presents *prosopography*, or collective bibliography, as an auxiliary approach to historical study. Prosopography focuses on researching the common characteristics of historical actors belonging to a specific group, as well as studying their external characteristics, similar and different, and the trajectories of their lives, gathering data from phenomena touching any individual's life to common aspects of the lives of these individuals. Social historians have adopted prosopography, an approach once geared to the study of ancient history, to studying social groups in eras of medieval, modern, and contemporary history. This has resulted in the emergence of new findings that are distinct from those derived from other studies, especially when data are scarce and written sources are unavailable, or the archive is sparse or missing.

Prosopography

Collective Biography

History of Social Structures

Elite History

History of Social Groups

History of Political Groups

Prosopography is considered one of the least used methods used in writing political-social (and religious) history in the Arab world, as in Arab libraries it is rare to find studies devoted to specific social groups – whether elite or commoner – in any historical epoch, although this does not mean their complete absence from the realm of research.⁽³⁾

Prosopography combines the history of an individual with the history of structures, viewing the individual as an actor in history only as one of a group of other

actors. This study suggests that prosopography can set off new lines of research in biographical histories of individuals and groups, to derive new and possibly different conclusions from those we have grown accustomed to.

This paper offers a definition of prosopography, followed by an overview of its evolution and importance in the conduct of historical research and a perspective on how to work with its tools, and the difficulties that arise with it.

Prosopography, the Concept

Prosopography is a Greek compound of *prosopon* (person) and *gráphein* (description),⁽⁴⁾ hence “describing a person”. It is also defined as “description

of external features, the face and behaviour of human beings and animals”.⁽⁵⁾

1 This study was originally published in Issue 11 (January 2020) of *Ostour*, a biannual journal of historical studies. It was translated for publication in *Almuntaqa* by Michael Scott.

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3 A number of research papers have been published in Tunisia in recent years on Tunisian elites during the modern era, including: Salwa Huwaidi, *Aḥwān ad-Dawla fī'l-'Iyāla at-Tūnisīyya* (1735-1814), (Tunisia: Publications of the Laboratory of the History of the Mediterranean Economy and its Societies, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, 2014); al-Mahdi Jarād, *‘Ā'ilāt al-Makhzan bi'l-'Iyāla at-Tūnisīyya Khilāl al-‘Ahd al-Husayniyy 1705-1881* (Tunis: Publications of the Laboratory of History of the Mediterranean Economy and its Communities, College of Humanities and Social Sciences and the Tunisian National Archive, 2011); al-Mahdi Jarād, *Tujjār al-Bilāt bi-'Iyālāt Tūnis*, Tunis: Dār al-Ittihād, 2017). Among Moroccan publications we may mention here: Muhammad al-Mubakkir, *al-Masīhīyya wa'l-Tarawmun fi Shamāl Afriqīya al-Qadīm 284 AD -299 AD*, (Rabat: Dār Abi Raqrāq, 2004); Hamid al-Fatihi, *Dirāsa hawl al-Fuqahā' fī'l-Maghrib al-Marīniyy*, (Rabat: Time Publications, Sharafāt Series, 2018).

4 Caroline Sappia, “Introduction: La Prosopographie: Quelques clés sur une méthode,” *CLIO* (Revue de l'Association des historiens et du département d'histoire de l'UCL), no. 126 (janvier- juin 2007), pp. 8-9.

5 Charles Pietri, “Introduction,” *MEFRM*, vol. 100, no. 1 (1988), p. 7.

Dictionary definitions of the concept and the term's usage have changed throughout history. According to Verboven et al, in nineteenth-century dictionaries, definitions of prosopography intended the formal description of animals and individuals. By the second half of the same century, they came to signify listings of individuals and summary information about them.⁽⁶⁾ Researchers agree that conceptually, as a historical method, prosopography focuses on the similar and differing external characteristics of a group of individuals belonging to a specific group, as well as the course of their lives, by collecting data on phenomena going beyond individual lives, to the common features in each of their lives.

Thus, prosopography studies common features of a group of historical actors by studying their lives and their external and impersonal characteristics, as a collective. Consequently, prosopography also has been defined as “collective biographies that describe external characteristics of a group of individuals including some common denominator [...] and that describe the distinguishing material or physical characteristics of a more or less homogeneous group of individuals, by collecting as many of the material elements as possible that can enable us to describe the individual, spiritual elements that bring us from the person to the personality.”⁽⁷⁾

Prosopography and biography are similar, “but prosopography goes far beyond biography's accumulation of individual events to undertake research into the constants and variables of individual destinies and their relationship to other fates in the same milieu. Prosopography aims to focus on the retention of important points in an individual's linkages to society (the individual as such is not the focus), to gain knowledge of relationships of lineage, kinship, alliances, origins, or of the size of the individual's inherited and personal wealth, the nature of professional activities, practice of their

agency and authority and occupations in the army. For a general definition it can be said that prosopography is research into the “commonalities and differences presented by specific private biographies.”⁽⁸⁾ Where biography provides descriptive studies of individuals, prosopography incorporates these individual biographies with others with whom commonly shared characteristics can be demonstrated via quantitative and statistical studies, using a grid of questions or surveys. For the historian, it is a matter of “practicing the collective biography of a number of individuals, based on obvious shared outstanding features such as education and profession [...] whereas biography includes other elements such as psychology.”⁽⁹⁾ Prosopography focuses analysis on the individual but with reference the collective or social group to which they belong, and biographical data that can also serve to describe outward features of a specific group whose members share one or more such features according to their position (profession, social and/or geographic origins, and education) can be collected to highlight a specific group's common characteristics as actors at a specific stage, based on biographical data.⁽¹⁰⁾

Researchers disagree about whether Prosopography constitutes a historical research *methodology*, or merely “a research method, clearly less than a *methodology*, and less stringent than a *school*.”⁽¹¹⁾ There are those who define it as “a model inductive method,” departing from concrete data extracted from primary sources relating to individuals' behaviours and goals, to understand a general phenomenon.⁽¹²⁾

Most researchers agree to withhold description of prosopography as a methodology for various reasons, for “despite the extensive use of the term prosopographic methodology, prosopography is not a real methodology, because it does not present anything new in terms of research methods, data collection, investigation of sources, and review of findings. It is more precisely a specific means of

6 Koenraad Verboven, Myriam Carlier & Jan Dumolyn, “A Short Manual to the Art of Prosopography,” in: Keats-Rohan K. S. B. (ed.), *Prosopography Approaches and Applications* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2007), p. 41.

7 Ibid., p. 39.

8 Jean Maurin, “La Prosopographie Romaine: Pertes et profits,” *Annales, Economies, Société, Civilisations*, vol. 37, no. 5-6 (1982), p. 825.

9 Jean-Philippe Genet, “Introduction,” in: Françoise Autrand, *Prosopographie et genèse de l'État moderne*, no. 30 (Paris : Collection de l'École normale supérieure de jeunes filles, 1986), p. 9.

10 Sappia, p. 8.

11 Claire Lemerrier & Emmanuelle Picard, “Quelle approche prosopographique ?” *HAL*, 3/5/2011, pp. 1-2, accessed on 1/9/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2HDeRgy>

12 Verboven, Carlier & Dumolyn, p. 67.

study and a new approach to studying a specific era.”⁽¹³⁾ This approach is based on collecting data and biographical information for a group of individuals in a systematic and formal manner that allows organizing unusual or rarely considered information in a way that provides it with additional importance,

through revealing connections and patterns affecting historical processes.⁽¹⁴⁾

Overall, “it is necessary to distinguish between two primary uses of the word prosopography: in its narrow sense, as simply a listing of biographies; and in a broader sense which incorporates analytical work on the collected materials.”⁽¹⁵⁾

The Development of Prosopography

Prosopography emerged as an instrument in political history, aimed at gathering disparate and unusual data in ancient history and other scarcely documented eras (and specific periods) of non-existent archives or written sources – the importance of which becomes clear when a coherent narrative of the chain of events of the period is absent despite inscriptions being abundant.⁽¹⁶⁾ It has been used notably by social historians, given the urgent need for new methods of research into social history to explain transformations in specific societies during certain lengthy periods. From here it began to allow research into the nature of social groupings and their evolution and dynamism in the concerned society, and to illuminate possible new historical conclusions: “historians of ancient history in particular uphold the importance of the prosopographic approach to the subject of social history; they were the first to accurately perceive the value of the *prosopon* (πρόσωπον - face, persona) and look for ways to collect relevant documentation.”⁽¹⁷⁾

The emergence of the term prosopography dates to earlier periods, when it was used to refer to the lists of individuals belonging to a certain group or exercising specific functions. “It is not, therefore, a new thing at least in terms of the name, as since the sixteenth century the term appeared in titles Some published in Latin in Germanic countries, and later in French. However, the term preserved its original

meaning related to depicting ancient ancestors, so that prosopography concerned itself with the celebrations of famous men and genealogies of nobility, and is largely included in listings of works of ancient writers.”⁽¹⁸⁾ The emergence of the discipline is linked to intellectual, technological, and political developments in Europe during the Renaissance, since “For most social groups in most areas prosopography cannot usefully be employed before the explosion of record materials in the sixteenth century, caused by the invention of the printing press, the spread of literacy and the growth of the bureaucratic, record-keeping nation-state.”⁽¹⁹⁾

Prosopography in historical research began at the end of the nineteenth century as a result of developments during this century in historical science and research methods, and it commenced with the collection of biographies, initially simply a 'Who's Who' of individuals who mostly figured in the available resources as nobility.⁽²⁰⁾ During this period, historians attempted to find a new approach to the study of political and social history, given the scarcity of known sources (in particular for the history of the Roman Empire); prosopography was devised as a method used first by ancient (and subsequently modern) historians as a new approach to political history.⁽²¹⁾

13 Maurin, p. 824.

14 Verboven, Carlier & Dumolyn, p. 37.

15 Mohamed al-Mubakkir, “al-Burūsibūgharāfiyya fi-l-Dirasat al-Tarikhīyya,” *Majallat 'Amal: al-Tarīkh - al-Thaqāfa - al-Mujtama'*, Year Five, No. 15, 1998, p. 12.

16 Maurin, p. 826.

17 Michel Christol & Ségolène Demougin, “Le Choix d’une prosopographie provinciale: l’Exemple de la Narbonnaise,” *MEFRM*, vol. 100, no. 1 (1988), p. 11.

18 al-Mubakkir, pp 9-10.

19 Lawrence Stone, “Prosopography,” *Daedalus*, vol. 100, no. 1 (Winter 1971), p. 58.

20 Maurin, p. 824.

21 Verboven, Carlier & Dumolyn, pp. 41-42.

The first studies related to imperial and republican Roman history, with Theodor Mommsen figuring among the prominent pioneers of prosopography with his 1897-1898 study *Prosopographia Imperii Romani*. Then Matthias Gelzer affirmed the importance of the prosopography in studying the institutions of the Republic through an analytical study of the higher political positions that were monopolized by small and closed family groups.⁽²²⁾ Then, research efforts gradually began to start adopting prosopography to other historical eras and disciplines, for example, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, to the history of English political elites.⁽²³⁾

Interest in prosopography continued into the early twentieth century, as a group of historians shifted their focus from political history and theory to studying political actors, and before and after the First World War when some young historians, searching for new and more effective methods of understanding the work of political institutions, moved from the textual study of documents of political and constitutional theory or elucidations of bureaucratic apparatuses, to studying actual involved individuals and the experiences to which they have been exposed.⁽²⁴⁾ In this context, we can cite the book of the American historian Charles Beard (1874-1948) on the founding fathers of the American constitute, *The Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913), the work of English historian Lewis Namier (1888-1960) in his book on British parliamentarians, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, Macmillan and Company (1929), and German historian Gerd Tellenbach (1903-1999) in his book on the aristocracy of the German monarchies in the High Middle Ages during the Reich, *Königtum und Stamme in der Werdezeit des Deutschen Reiches* (1939).

With the second half of the twentieth century, Anglo-Saxon historians in Britain and the United States of America were particularly interested in analysing the behaviour of political ruling groups, thereby providing impetus for the expansion of prosopography. Thus,

“From the Second World War and for twenty years, prosopography was a specialty of British and transatlantic scholars.”⁽²⁵⁾ Later, European historians noted the importance prosopography was acquiring in historical studies, given the results shown by Anglo-Saxon research, which focused less on political choices, and more “on indicators of the development of a position and its specifications, its status at a given level, and its role in the social promotion of this or that family.”⁽²⁶⁾ Development of the field continued during the seventies, expanding “to include broader fields of time, spatial and objective, so that it has become a kind of an academic ‘fad’, “practiced by researchers in almost all historical disciplines.”⁽²⁷⁾ In this context, the Institute of Modern and Contemporary History, since its foundation in France in 1978, has chosen elite prosopography as one of the most prominent research domains in recent periods with studies of prominent social groups aimed at enriching biographical or statistical knowledge meant to present individual biographies within their family and social affiliations. These studies were all undertaken in a specific period or successive periods, aimed at rebuilding their life histories and respecting professional movement. The aim of this work was to create a working biographical dictionary as an instrument to test theories of the composition and renewal of political, economic, and cultural elites in France over time.⁽²⁸⁾

The development of prosopography differs with time and place, given the nature of historical research pursued in universities and political decisions of the concerned states. In the United States prosopography spread with the influence of sociology and political science, and with advances in the use of computers, while the British state supported prosopographic research projects where biographical data was collected and classified as studies, and not as statistics. French historians developed interest in prosopography somewhat later, through involvement in the large project of the Annales school using then modern computer technology, with the support of

22 Ibid.

23 Stone, p. 68.

24 Ibid., p. 52.

25 Maurin, p. 828.

26 Ibid.

27 al-Mubakkir, pp 7.

28 Denis Woronoff, “Les Principaux hommes d’affaires en France sous le second empire,” *MEFRM*, vol. 100, no. 1 (1988), p. 147.

the *École Pratique des Hautes Etudes* in Paris, established for decades as the centre of quantitative historical investigation in France.⁽²⁹⁾

On both sides of the Atlantic, methodological and technical factors contributed to the development of prosopography. In terms of methodology, prosopography allows a doctoral level research student to view a large number of sources and reflect on resolving the contradictions that might be encountered in these sources, allowing the arrangement of information in a systematic way to control the subject and size of the studied group. Technically, a computerized capacity to process data collected through prosopography contributed to the emergence of new historical questions.⁽³⁰⁾

Scholars affirm the existence of two “schools”: elite prosopography and prosopography of other social groups. The two schools differ in terms of subjects of study, hypotheses, methods and conclusions, but are united by mutual interest in *groups* rather than individuals or specific institutions.⁽³¹⁾

The *elitist* school surfaced in Germany and the United States, and developed further in England, which saw some of the best historical works, but these were surpassed in quantity and quality by American historians.⁽³²⁾ This school focused on studying the economic and political origins of elites, and their interests and relationships. These include a study by Christine Favre-Lejeune and Jean-François Solnon of the judiciary, and a study by Daniel Dessert and Françoise Bayard on finance experts.⁽³³⁾

The *mass* school (be it a group of federations, masses, alliances, or blocs), relied more on statistics, drawing inspiration from the social sciences. “This school has a sense that history is determined by the movements of popular opinion rather than by the decisions of so-called “great men,” or by elites, and they have been aware that human needs cannot usefully be defined exclusively in terms of power and wealth. They have necessarily been more concerned with social history than political history, and have therefore tried to ask a wider, if inevitably more superficial, set of questions than those usually posed by the members of the elitist school... and have tried to describe the past by the construction of Weberian ideal-types than by presenting a series of concrete examples.”⁽³⁴⁾ Italian historian Giovanni Levi used this approach to study the inhabitants of the village of Santana at the end of the seventeenth century.⁽³⁵⁾

Scholars have combined prosopography with other auxiliary disciplines to produce works of high-quality that make it possible to better understand a person's career and life path.⁽³⁶⁾ At the forefront of this biographical science researching the history of the private and minute particulars of lives of individuals is onomastics or onomatology for studying etymological history, and use of proper nouns and research in the meaning of the names and titles of individuals indicating profession, origins or social status; *genealogy* for the evolution of individuals' various social backgrounds; *sociography* to understand how individuals are distributed and their work in different social circle, all comparing different groups and uncovering possible relationships and overlaps between them.⁽³⁷⁾

Prosopography in Historical Research

The importance of the prosopography in historical research lies in providing scope for new *précises* or

nutshell summarizations different from those derived from other studies, as may be necessary especially

29 Stone, pp. 70-71.

30 Ibid., pp. 71-72.

31 Ibid., p. 48.

32 Ibid., p. 70.

33 Sébastien Didier, “La Prosopographie, une méthode historique multiscalaire entre individuel et collectif,” *Cahiers d'histoire*, vol. 35, no. 1 (2017), p. 70.

34 Stone, p. 48.

35 Didier, p. 71.

36 Verboven, Carlier & Dumolyn, p. 40.

37 Ibid., pp. 37-38.

when data is scarce, written sources are not available, and content of archives or ancient epochs is missing. Use of these approaches creates an ability to precisely analyse scattered archives, develop comparisons, and aggregate scattered elements to allow tracking the activities of the administrative, public, or private category under study, and its influence over the long term.⁽³⁸⁾ For medieval, modern, and even contemporary historical periods as well, prosopography is an appropriate method, facilitated by the availability of source material. Prosopography also facilitates “the construction of broad, rich and more ramified research material for testing anthropological hypotheses on family relationships and connections, or relating to family strategies of transferring property rights, particularly of families that are not royal (who are always better known), for whom the stakes are not one on the transfer of property but on political authority.”⁽³⁹⁾

To understand the above phenomena, prosopography (in one way or another) examines a large group of individuals based on one or more major criteria, and then analyses its characteristics.⁽⁴⁰⁾ It focuses on the motivations of individuals, and on the direct drivers of key life cycles (educational, professional, and social achievement). It excludes often structural non-individual and impersonal aspects.⁽⁴¹⁾ By doing this, “prosopography establishes horizontal or vertical sections within chronological sequences - in a medium determined by the job or the professional ranks of individuals who were caught in most cases at a certain stage of their career. Importantly, this becomes clearer when looking at these sections in the context of social and family relations and their temporal development: grandparents, grandchildren, fathers, and other relationships in comparison with the professional paths of other parties.”⁽⁴²⁾

Prosopography is concerned with studying the social individuals and their relationships, which represent the defining element of the group under study. Furthermore, relationships between members of an organization cannot be summed up with simple reference to the political function of their institution, but rather require the careful study of their social and regional origins, family and professional relations, and the cultural configurations that allow the discovery of the entirety of these relationships, from which the group's work can be explained in a logical manner.⁽⁴³⁾ Prosopography thus highlights the formal and informal relationships of the members of the studied group, which helps in understanding how and when these relationships came to be formed in a particular social milieu.

Prosopography provides material for the humanities in offering a basis that is sometimes essential for sociography by demonstrating the social dynamics of a particular society.⁽⁴⁴⁾ It is considered to be “ideally fitted to reveal the web of sociopsychological ties that bind a group.”⁽⁴⁵⁾ Hence its importance lies in its use as an instrument for the study of political and social groups in a given society. It helps with in-depth exploration of the discourse of political groups, analysis of the social and economic affiliations of its individual members, and presentation of the workings of the political structure and of the individuals forming its leadership.⁽⁴⁶⁾ Thus, prosopography allows for interpretation of political and institutional change through uncovering the underlying interests of the people under study, their motivations in work (legal and/or economic benefits, personal or family, alliance or customer relations).⁽⁴⁷⁾

To study social structures and movements, prosopography allows an analysis of changes that occurred in group and its changing status over time

38 Isabelle Parizet, “Méthodes de la Prosopographie de l'Époque contemporaine,” in *Livret- Annuaire 20, 2004-2005* (Paris: École pratique des hautes études: section des sciences historiques et philologiques, 2006), p. 313.

39 Mireille Corbier, “Pour une pluralité des approches prosopographiques,” *MEFRM*, vol. 100, no. 1 (1988), p. 195.

40 Verboven, Carlier & Dumolyn, p. 66.

41 Ibid., p. 67.

42 Corbier, p. 188.

43 Genet, p. 10.

44 Verboven, Carlier & Dumolyn, p. 60.

45 Stone, p. 66.

46 Ibid., p. 46.

47 Maurin, p. 827.

(through remaining always part of the elite), along with the titles and positions held by its members and their economic interests, by determining the degree of social mobility of the groups studied at certain stages by studying the family, social, and geographic origins, their professional-vocational situation and utilization of their political situation and professional status.⁽⁴⁸⁾ Thus, the prosopography interprets and accords meaning to political action and helps to explain ideological and cultural transformations to better recognize social truth and to precisely describe and analyse the structures of society and the degree and nature of the movements within it.⁽⁴⁹⁾

Additionally, prosopography clarifies the representational attributes of an individual and enables comparison of his own life with the typical life lived by the rest of the group to which he belongs. It clarifies the extent to which the course of this individual's life was either typical or exceptional while also examining the relationship of individuals with the world and the surroundings within and outside the family (job, marriage, kinship...), and the influence of laws, friends, work colleagues, and so forth.⁽⁵⁰⁾ Such factors help explain individual life experiences and what goes into stimulating and enabling their actions⁽⁵¹⁾ Finally, prosopography describes “the correlation of intellectual or religious movements with social, geographical, occupational, or other factors.”⁽⁵²⁾

Prosopography can be applied to almost all fields of historical research, including religious history, studying clergy listings, and political and institutional history, one of the first research fields of prosopography (with multiple studies as examples) devoted to the analysis of personal relationships and milieu and seeking a comprehensive view of the relevant behind-the-scenes individuals, networks, loyalty systems and protection mechanisms. Prosopography targets are often groups of diplomats, advisers, Parliament and government representatives,

or even municipal officials at the local level, to shed light on institutional workings by asking about the background of affiliated individuals.⁽⁵³⁾ But this implies that “the initial thinking about the nature of any institution must inform construction of the prosopographic approach itself.”⁽⁵⁴⁾ Prosopography is unique “as a means to bind together constitutional and institutional history on the one hand and personal biography on the other, which are the two oldest and best developed of the historian's crafts, but which have hitherto run along more or less parallel lines.”⁽⁵⁵⁾

In political history, prosopography enables study of the fluctuations of authorities in a given field, the role of the elite in the process, as well as the history of opposition and revolutions, with special attention focused upon leaders: their origins, upbringing and formation, social milieu and ideology. In administrative history, prosopography studies charts of the various members of administrative departments. As for social history and the history of mentalities, it takes up the relationships, bonds, and structures of a group whether elite or commoner: dependencies, patronages, social network structures, social identities, and social mobility. Private social groupings can also be studied, such as associations of professors and students, trade cooperatives and merchant guilds. Furthermore, prosopography is extremely well suited to studying philosophical and scientific ideas and ideologies and the emergence and accomplishment of most intellectual and cultural movements, such as humanism and the enlightenment. In economic and financial history, while there are few prosopographic studies in this field, a prominent exception is M. Boone's study of collectors of indirect tax in Ghent in the Middle Ages.⁽⁵⁶⁾ Such studies always aim to “illuminate the complexity of a particular milieu at a particular time, its origins and internal hierarchy, by means of a system of collective biographies, in order to better understand the macro-economic history of

48 Stone, p. 46.

49 Ibid., p. 47.

50 Verboven, Carlier & Dumolyn, p. 40.

51 Ibid., p. 41.

52 Stone, p. 47.

53 Verboven, Carlier & Dumolyn, pp. 48-49.

54 Jacques Verger, “Peut-on faire une prosopographie des professeurs des universités françaises à la fin du moyen âge?” *MEFRM*, vol. 100, no. 1 (1988), p. 62.

55 Stone, p. 73

56 Verboven, Carlier & Dumolyn, pp. 49-50.

production and exchange, and to try to align with the elites who were in effect the supreme state organs at that time.”⁽⁵⁷⁾ As with other fields, prosopography makes the “important contribution of allowing daily events and phenomena to be placed in a meaningful context and to distinguish what is isolated, what is exceptional and what is shared.”⁽⁵⁸⁾

For Stone, prosopography “could form the missing connection between political history and social history, which at present are all too often treated in largely watertight compartments, either in different monographs or in different chapters of a single volume. It could help reconcile history to sociology and psychology. And it could form one string among many to tie the exciting developments in intellectual and cultural history down to the social, economic, and political bedrock. Whether or not prosopography will seize all or any of these opportunities will depend on the expertise, sophistication, modesty, and common sense of the next generation of historians.”⁽⁵⁹⁾

Prosopography can be considered “a fruitful medium that gives insight into individuals’ life trajectories and interactions in all their complexities, and allows experimenting with hypotheses, and answering the questions ‘why’ and ‘how’ which we may pose regarding any given group, by commenting on its general tendencies, social standards, and the exceptional nature of some paths.”⁽⁶⁰⁾ Because of the multiplicity of historical domains that it takes up, prosopography “changes the nature of the questions asked and the value of the expected results as well.”⁽⁶¹⁾

Operating Method

Before beginning any research, one must pause to consider the subject of the research itself and hypotheses concerning it, as choice of methodology depends on these two points. On this basis, the choice

In addition, it combines multiple disciplines, in which history overlaps with other sciences, and the study of a group of individuals becomes part of a special context in which the traditional boundaries of various historical disciplines (history of law, history of institutions, church history, and economic history) disappear and evoke examples and expressions in other humanities and social sciences (sociology, anthropology, psychology, and political science).⁽⁶²⁾ Prosopography can also use other tools such as sociology and “combine the humane skill in historical reconstruction through meticulous concentration on the significant detail and the particular example, with the statistical and theoretical preoccupations of the social scientists.”⁽⁶³⁾

Notwithstanding the importance of prosopography in historical research, it may not be appropriate for all types of research and all research topics; its usefulness remains linked to the research aims and techniques. This is particularly the case if the available source material is insufficient or if the institutional, political, or economic framework is not understood, or the selected target group is too small or too large.⁽⁶⁴⁾ Hence, prosopography is best viewed as an auxiliary historical research technique that engages in systematic analysis of biographical data of a specific category of actors in history: the effectiveness of prosopography is related to the general objectives of the research and the roster of specific questions on the one hand, and the sources and literature available on the other hand.⁽⁶⁵⁾

of a prosopographic approach is linked to the nature of the social group studied, the problem it raises (its “problematic”), the hypotheses about it, the kinds of information and/or data that is sought, as well as the

57 Woronoff, p. 148.

58 Verboven, Carlier & Dumolyn, p. 41.

59 Stone, p. 73.

60 Lemerrier & Picard, p. 2.

61 Maurin, p. 831.

62 Verboven, Carlier & Dumolyn, p. 60.

63 Stone, p. 73.

64 Verboven, Carlier & Dumolyn, p. 69.

65 Ibid.

sources used to study it. The prosopographic method works best when applied to a specific, easily defined and small group within a limited time period (about a century), when the sources of information and data are rich, varied, broadly ranging, and complementing each other, and when the study is focused on a specific problematic."⁽⁶⁶⁾ Choice of subject, survey method and sampling must then adapt to the research problem at hand, more than to the available sources,⁽⁶⁷⁾ in addition to determining the points of comparison: descriptions and statistics are meaningless without our saying "this is a lot, or a few," and determining if it is "normal, or exceptional." Comparison and categorization of different individuals is the easiest method of undertaking descriptions and gathering statistics.⁽⁶⁸⁾ The general stages of prosopographic research are usefully summarized by Verboven, Carlier, and Dumolyn as follow:

- Determine the general research objective and formulate general working hypotheses
- Survey the source material and the general historical and theoretical literature
- Decide how you want to work (for example, whether or not to use a computer, and if so, what sort of software is appropriate to what you want to do; study a complete population, or work with a sample population only; use a qualitative or quantitative or mixed approach)

IF we choose prosopography as a research method, then the following steps apply:

- 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.
- Analyse the data from the database
- Synthesize the results; not just by separately analysing the answers in the questionnaire, but by combining and interpreting these data, analysing 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).⁽⁶⁹⁾

1- Defining the Group Studied

The researcher must first determine the group to be studied, its nature and the extent of its homogeneity, because the homogeneity of the studied group is certainly necessary because the goal in the end is to spotlight a functional model to define existing social behaviour, in one way or another, within specified limits. Mostly, if not in all cases, a harmonious representation cannot be established until after confronting the documentation and coming to command its content as much as possible, which would seem in a way to contradict this project.⁽⁷⁰⁾ Note that the "studied group" does not imply a social group in the sociological sense, but is rather a category created by the researcher for his or her own analysis, such as elites wielding power, marginalized people, immigrants, and others.

Three essential elements must be defined to precisely define the studied category: the characteristic (or characteristics) common to members of the category, the period, and the geographical domain.

The element of common characteristics is strictly required to determine target group members. If this common characteristic is not clearly identifiable from the sources, it becomes difficult to define the selection criterion and the category becomes too large, with the consequent difficulty in determining who does and who does not belong to it. Therefore,

66 Stone, p. 69.

67 Lemerrier & Picard, p. 19.

68 Ibid., p. 14.

69 Verboven, Carlier & Dumolyn, pp. 47-48.

70 François Gasnault, "Le Milieu universitaire à Bologne au XIX siècle: Les Aléas de l'Enquête documentaire prosopographique," *MEFRM*, vol. 100, no. 1 (1988), p. 159.

the researcher must define the category studied with precision and declare the common characteristics on the basis of which individuals have been included or excluded because each category or classification (whether thematic, geographic, or chronological) has implications for the data analysis.⁽⁷¹⁾ The simplest and most effective method is to define a property or a small group of properties that will constitute a criterion for inclusion or exclusion, and the domain of the main common features of all members of the category/classification.⁽⁷²⁾ The period considered must also be defined precisely to enable consideration of demographic and economic cycles. Some subjects require defining the geographic domain to identify origins, especially if the questions target the ancestors of the group under study.⁽⁷³⁾

It seems best to work on a limited group with constant and continuous components, and to multiply the comparators. Information is an important aid, as once information is gathered, individuals can be sorted by personal name, family name, profession, and origin, allowing for multiple comparisons.⁽⁷⁴⁾

2- Defining the Source Material

The source material used in the research must be determined *after* defining the group to be studied, for the researcher to fill the questions grid for the analysis and interpretation of the research results. These sources assist the researcher in completing the questionnaire and must be diversified to avoid false conclusions. Initially, before beginning the actual research, it is best to conduct a survey of relevant historical and theoretical sources and literature. The context of the research should be drawn using existing historical literature, and there should be adequate and accessible sources, enough to build a prospective database. It is preferable to use quantitative sources, supplemented with qualitative ones; all types of data sources to provide information on the studied

category, be it demographic, economic, financial, administrative, religious, legal and archival, or family.⁽⁷⁵⁾ Then, after identifying the sources, they are initially divided into sources *left by* the members of the group in question, if available, then into sources which provide information *about* the members of the group. After that, a special card can be filled out for each individual person with information expanding as the work progresses.⁽⁷⁶⁾ The source material used by prosopographers can be divided into three types: “bare lists of names of holders of certain offices or titles, or professional or educational qualifications; family genealogies; and full biographical dictionaries, which are usually built up in part from the first two categories and in part from an infinitely wider range of sources.”⁽⁷⁷⁾

To all these, sources of a different type can also be added such as tax records, public and private administrative records, and basic information about the family and relationships such as marriages.⁽⁷⁸⁾ Another type of document that can be used in prosopographic research is the type that can be collected from the work of demographers and social historians. These documents can create a data bank for prosopographers, and take on additional value in having been subjected to an initial preparation with statistical studies undertaken that can supply a general background necessary to understand the situations encountered by narrowly defined social groups such as those studied by the prosopographer.⁽⁷⁹⁾

The sources used in the research must be read critically, assessing the main sources from which the information was drawn about the members of the group under study, and then the context in which this information was gathered and recorded. Such critical reading also helps the analysis of diverse aspects within the studied group, and it should not be limited to one approach, or one type or another of documents. It must also be adapted to avoid simply

71 Verboven, Carlier & Dumolyn, pp. 51-53.

72 Lemercier & Picard, p. 20.

73 Verboven, Carlier & Dumolyn, p. 52.

74 Lucie Fossier, “L’Artisanat parisien à la fin du XIII siècle d’après les rôles de taille: Critique d’une source,” *MEFRM*, vol. 100, no. 1 (1988), pp. 130-131.

75 Verboven, Carlier & Dumolyn, pp. 53-54.

76 H el ene Millet, “Notice biographique et enqu ete prosopographique,” *MEFRM*, vol. 100, no. 1 (1988), p. 88.

77 Stone, p. 48.

78 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

79 Christiane Klapish-Zuber, “Histoire quantitative et prosopographie,” *MEFRM*, vol. 100, no. 1 (1988), p. 244.

undertaking a simple horizontal prosopography, but rather a vertical one – to better reflect social relations, and to rely as far as possible on documentation that is diversified in nature and in the types of processing that is required.⁽⁸⁰⁾

3- The Questionnaires

After determining and filtering the source material, a set of questions is developed by the researcher in accordance with the problems and hypotheses that the researcher selects to investigate. These “should include multiple-choice or open-ended questions linked to the purpose of the prosopography: Is the goal of these questions prosopographic research or simply the collection of data?”⁽⁸¹⁾

The question set depends on the information provided by the sources, which influence the nature of the questions asked by the researcher. Hence successive discussions are needed to pinpoint both what is needed to know in order to answer the research questions *and* what the available resources allow us knowledge of, in a reasonable, systematic way.⁽⁸²⁾ These questions give shape to the forms that must be filled in with the number of individuals according to their cards. It must be borne in mind that questions might be answered non-definitively from the sources.⁽⁸³⁾

The question set in prosopographic research differs from in sociology by virtue of the differences in the natures of the individuals being interviewed. Prosopography “interrogates the dead about the level of their studies, their professions, and their social origins. Indeed, in some cases, the written sources may be richer than such interrogation, through recalling a chronological depth that is free of the effects and defects of from memory.”⁽⁸⁴⁾

The questions that will be asked should be as well defined as possible, since they determine the size of the group, general specifications, internal

classifications, group accord and discord, the origins of individuals, relationships between members, the fate of the chosen career path of group members, and thought about formulation of questions in terms of internal and external comparisons of the group.⁽⁸⁵⁾

The following elements represent the basic components of a questionnaire, the answers to which relate to the quality of information provided in the sources: Private and family lives: names, surnames and basic dates in life: birth, death and marriage [...] Then, geographical givens: place of birth and residence [...] and close family: parents, brothers, sisters [...], extended family, origins, marriage, youth, training, religious affiliation, social milieu, and relationships. Then, career paths: specific preparation for professional life: education, school, university [...] Then, salary, and other forms of grants, awards, and gifts. Then, material and family status: immovable goods: homes, land [...] and movable goods: cash and balances [...] and capital machinery, raw materials [...] and profits or debts. Then, culture: religious and other institutions.⁽⁸⁶⁾ The researcher must know everything related to the civil status of the members of the group under study, their relatives and their relationships: “At this point we can hope to place the individual in his family network, and find the key elements in his rise and path. The process may be long, but it does not involve obstacles that cannot be overcome.”⁽⁸⁷⁾

The information provided in the other sources remains generally unconfirmed, and accordingly this must be reflected when developing the questions; space must be allocated in the databases for such differences.⁽⁸⁸⁾

4- Data Processing and Analysis

Based on the developed question set, the data processing role takes up establishing a database for each member of the group studied. Data processing can be undertaken either manually or by computer.

80 Christol & Demougin, p. 14.

81 Verboven, Carlier & Dumolyn, p. 55.

82 Lemerrier & Picard, p. 13.

83 Millet, p. 88.

84 Lemerrier & Picard, p. 12.

85 Ibid. p. 20.

86 Verboven, Carlier & Dumolyn, pp. 55- 56.

87 Woronoff, pp. 150-151.

88 Lemerrier & Picard, p. 14.

Using the available information is clearly necessary and requires the identification of a logical framework for jointly entering data.⁽⁸⁹⁾ At this stage, the researcher enters information collected about the members of the studied category in the database, distinguishing between qualitative and quantitative information; this may require separating them within the database, or else creation of two separate databases. The historian must link the search for biographical information to specific queries serving the purpose of comparison, rather than description.⁽⁹⁰⁾

The process of collecting information requires referencing approved and reliable sources, especially in the event of inconsistencies; distinctions must be made between information drawn from reliable, and less reliable, sources: what data derives from a primary source, and what from secondary literature? This enables any contradictory information to be checked and verified.⁽⁹¹⁾ A distinction should also be made between the information obtained through systematic interrogation of available sources, and that which may be incorporated on a case-by-case basis to enrich this or that biography.⁽⁹²⁾ The researcher should strive to obtain the greatest possible amount of information about the members of the study group with a concomitant investment of time and energy.⁽⁹³⁾

5- Processing the Results

After the researcher has access to the greatest possible amount of information about the members of the studied group, processing the results begins with analysis of the structures and sociological – intellectual composition of the group, identifying commonalities among its members and the extent of group homogeneity. If there is congruence between the elements of the studied group, analysis of one is enough to derive the features of all the others. If the studied group is homogeneous, analysing a small

sample is enough to determine the variant model, compared to the mean value. If the studied group is heterogeneous, it is necessary to analyse a very large sample to obtain an accuracy equivalent to that obtained in the first two cases. In all cases, the margin of error can be evaluated by calculating probabilities and expressed as a percentage.⁽⁹⁴⁾ Studying samples derives importance by enabling reduction of working time and different comparisons.⁽⁹⁵⁾

The process of analysing the results begins by converting data into tables and charts of statistics. Tables are used to determine the correlations between different factors, while statistics help to determine the characteristics of samples to understand differences within a studied category, and to “identify and understand exceptions as well, and in some way demonstrate the limits of what is possible and not possible within a particular group.”⁽⁹⁶⁾

Ultimately, the researcher chooses the method of data and results analysis that best enables answering the historical questions under investigation. It is critically important that the researcher pauses to reflect on the points of comparison, given their importance in the prosopographic process, whether comparing members of the group studied or different professional stages of the career of the individual her/himself, at or through the various social developments that s/he lived through⁽⁹⁷⁾; in this way personal information can be used to present clear case studies and make statistical comparisons, from which conclusions can be drawn.⁽⁹⁸⁾

6- Presenting the Results

The researcher can choose, during the process of presenting the results of his prosopographic research, between providing a synthesis of the interpretations that he came out with, or presenting the prosopographic database that he constructed,

89 Millet, p. 91.

90 Lemerrier & Picard, p. 3.

91 Verboven, Carlier & Dumolyn, p. 58.

92 Lemerrier & Picard, p. 22.

93 Millet, p. 91.

94 Maurin, p. 832.

95 Lemerrier & Picard, p. 14.

96 Ibid. p.15.

97 Lemerrier & Picard, p. 14.

98 Stone, p. 70.

along with his interpretations.⁽⁹⁹⁾ Then, during the data recording process, the researcher must devote his/her attention to what s/he will write,⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ reflecting a number of intellectual operations – definition, description, classification, and model-building – all linked to the history of the group studied and interpretation of the data obtained during the research process.

As for form, the researcher must choose between submitting the completed questionnaire with references/referrals or writing up traditional abstracts from the individual bio-cards.⁽¹⁰¹⁾ In the case of choosing the easiest first method, the researcher

will have to leave aside any unused information in the cards, but if he chooses the second method, s/he will be launching into work that will facilitate setting specific criteria and standards in a well-defined manner.⁽¹⁰²⁾ At the end of the day, “the study of social groups emerges as a data set with commentaries, but the historian must provide evidence to back up her/his assertions and must mention those sources. Contrary to the case of a sociologist, the historian need not keep the study’s informants hidden away in secret, since the study can be supplied with a biographical index.⁽¹⁰³⁾

Constraints, Challenges, and Problems

Prosopography, like other methods and approaches, can suffer at times from problems related to work methods, source materials, or to the group under study. With a cascading succession of studies and research projects, “Sufficient experience has now accumulated to make it possible to appreciate both the potentialities and the limitations of prosopographical studies. Some of the errors and deficiencies are inevitable consequences of pioneering in a new method and can be avoided in the future by learning from the mistakes of the past. Others, however, go deeper, and arise from some political and psychological presuppositions which are embedded in the foundations upon which prosopography rests.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾

At the forefront of the problems faced is the variation in the amount of information about the individuals that make up the group under study. Information can be abundant about some members of the group while rare or entirely absent about others, and some individuals can be absent from one team, and others from another. If the unknown information is incomplete and represents a large majority, then any

generalization based on statistical averages becomes shaky, if not impossible.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾

Additionally, we must also not forget the occasional overlap of this information and the changes that take place in it, over time and historical events. One of the problems that a researcher faces when collecting data on individuals of a particular group is the similarity of personal and sometimes family names in one and the same region and historical period, or in different areas and periods where people may be associated by either family affinity or similarity in the names. Name similarities constitute the big - sometimes insoluble - problem of interpreting names when collecting prosopographic data, which is how names are interpreted. Often only these names can help determine family relationships, but obviously in some cases two or more different people can have the same family name without necessarily being related to one another.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾

With regard to source material, “the foremost dangerous limitation lies in the distribution of our sources along two lines: first, randomly, then in a way that is inversely proportional to the actual numerical

99 Verboven, Carlier & Dumolyn, p. 59.

100 Lemerrier & Picard, pp. 22-23.

101 Millet, p. 88.

102 Ibid., p. 89.

103 Ibid., p. 88.

104 Stone, p. 57.

105 Ibid., p. 58.

106 Verboven, Carlier & Dumolyn, p. 68.

weight of the concerned social groups.”⁽¹⁰⁷⁾ The limitations of the source material may also relate to the nature of the group studied and its social affiliation: “lower one goes in the social system the poorer becomes the documentation. As a result, most studies that have already been made or are in progress today have been devoted to elites. The most popular subject for prosopography has been and still is political elites, but other groups which lend themselves most readily to such treatment are members of certain high status categories, such as civil servants, army officers, and upper clergy.”⁽¹⁰⁸⁾ 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 twentieth century. The poorest and most marginal groups in society are hardly ever well documented.⁽¹⁰⁹⁾

In addition, the nature of the available source material raises other problems such as an over-abundance of one type of source, and scarcity of another. Private correspondence is rarely included in historical documents because it is not preserved by (or obtained from) the family, in contrast to commercial and legal records and genealogies: If present, clarifying explanations are rarely given because individuals refrain from speaking of their personal convictions on paper, or even with friends.⁽¹¹⁰⁾ Then there is the problem of the topics dealt with in these documents, which may be richly informative about the material conditions and family and social relationships of individuals, while their spiritual and intellectual interests rarely emerge from viewing them.

Consequently, focusing on what is well documented and neglecting poorly documented aspects may have an adverse effect on prosopographic research. The issues of relative scarcity or abundance of sources

and access to them pose methodological problems for the historian in distinguishing what elements are special, ordinary or exemplary in a particular class, given scarcity. An abundance of sources, on the other hand, compels the researcher to choose among them judiciously and accurately, and to exercise caution when adopting a critical approach based on that choice. Access to sources depends to some extent on legal and administrative factors, such as the laws pertaining to privacy, working hours of archives, and document inventory as well as the researcher's personal qualifications, such as knowledge of languages.⁽¹¹¹⁾ This scarcity or abundance of resources relates as well to the periods that are studied. Contemporary and modern history, rich in source abundance, can be contrasted with the sources of ancient history, a period that is relatively miserly in terms of biographical sources.⁽¹¹²⁾

There is another problem related to the *classification* of the members of the group studied and the bases of this classification, because “meaningful classification is essential to the success of any study.”⁽¹¹³⁾ This problem makes classification of individuals' social, professional, political, material, and even cultural affiliations difficult, as classification can be based on wealth, profession, or political or religious affiliation.

There is also the problem of error in the interpretation of data, which requires extra attention not to reach wrong conclusions as a result of random samples, notwithstanding a sound classification; generalizing for all of the group studied on the basis of information from a known sample may distort the reality.⁽¹¹⁴⁾ Narrative explanations of prosopography become unclear, because they are not visible in charts.⁽¹¹⁵⁾ Good collection of biographical data from sources and references and its presentation in tables does not imply the ability to analyse and interpret it, because data analysis requires additional skills to

107 Maurin, p. 832.

108 Stone, pp. 58-59.

109 Verboven, Carlier & Dumolyn, p. 61.

110 Stone, p. 63.

111 Verboven, Carlier & Dumolyn, p. 53.

112 Lemerrier & Picard, p. 6.

113 Stone, p. 60.

114 Ibid., p. 61.

115 Verboven, Carlier & Dumolyn, p. 63.

those required in the information-gathering phase of the research.⁽¹¹⁶⁾ Added to this is the problem of neglecting the relationship between the part and the whole and assuming that a majority of the members of the group studied represents the group.⁽¹¹⁷⁾

The most recent problems arising in prosopographic work relate to the use of computer technologies

in storing information in the database, where the availability of computers has led some historians to focus excessively on issues that can be quantified. Still other researchers' ignorance of modern technologies can lead them to see it as an obstacle to research, and some of them "come to regard the computer as a threat to their intellectual predominance."⁽¹¹⁸⁾

Conclusion

Prosopography is especially important in the study of social groups, both elite and marginal, for whom there is a paucity of data available. For this reason, it takes on importance for the study of social groups in Arab, Islamic and African history that remain unknown to date for various reasons: jurists, scholars, *zawāyā* sheikhs, politicians, artisans, and army, party and union leaders as well. Researching the history of these groups can make it possible to shed new light on the political, social, and cultural history of the region, via a new approach that allows to construct a different picture of the historical progression.

116 Ibid., p. 65.

117 Stone, p. 62.

118 Ibid., p. 73.

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