

CHAPTER I

Introduction *The Senator*

This study explores important polarities in senatorial promotion, using a new database of careers.¹ What difference did it make to be aristocratic? How much did earlier experience matter in high promotion? Was army command professionalised? Did the career system carry men upward on its own? Did it help to have served overseas? Did senators from the provinces gain social standing through greater activity?

Aristocratic potency for a senator mainly lay in three things: birth, office-holding and wealth. Descent from a senatorial family – preferably old, and best of all patrician – conferred enormous prestige.² But high office gave even greater standing, and the upper reaches of the Senate consisted of those who had reached the consulship or praetorship.³ However, senators also needed considerable wealth, because without it they could not maintain a grand enough lifestyle, and might even lose their rank.⁴ There were sometimes expulsions or resignations from the Senate.⁵ Thus, when Pliny wrote to the Emperor to seek senatorial rank for a friend, he emphasised that his original resources of 4 million sesterces had been considerably enhanced by inheritance.⁶ That was far above the nominal threshold of 1 or 1.2 million sesterces, but still below the amounts implied by the Emperors' grants to deserving senators. These suggest a figure of

¹ In the senatorial discussion, the main tool is statistical. The dominant patterns only emerge when careers are considered en bloc. Too little is known about most senators to support a biographical approach (Graham 1974), but some careers are discussed in Appendix 5.

² For inherited rank, see Alföldy 1975, with further debates in Hopkins-Burton 1983, chapter 3; Alföldy 1986: 136–61; Jacques 1987; and Hahn, Leunissen 1990. For patricians, see Pistor 1965 and Sections 2.3.1–2.3.8 (this volume).

³ See Chapter 2, Section 2.1. ⁴ For the financial demands of office, see Section 3.1.4.

⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 2.48; 12.52; Dio 57.10.3–4; 60.29.1; Suet. *Vesp.* 9; Aur. Victor, *Caes.* 9.9.; Pliny *Ep.* 4.11.1, 14.

⁶ *Ep.* 10.4; cf. Syme *RP* II: 480–2.

roughly 8 million sesterces.⁷ To be adequately provided for, the senator clearly needed much more than the basic amount.⁸

Partly because of the high wealth requirements, the need for new senators could not be entirely met from within the Senate. In practice some fortunes ran down over time, and individual families died out or could only be maintained by adoption, while others might not wish for generations of costly office-holding and social display.⁹ A single consulship was enough to make a family 'nobilis', and the point did not necessarily have to be proved again and again.¹⁰ And in the background were acute shortages in the aristocracy at the start of the Principate, amounting to demographic crisis.¹¹

Largely because of these problems, the Senate saw its recruitment progressively expanded by the Emperors to draw on local aristocracies all over Italy.¹² And in a crucial second phase, the Senate was increasingly supplemented from the aristocracies in the provinces.¹³ This no doubt welded the Empire more closely together. But it also represented a powerful net which trawled through concentrations of aristocratic wealth all over the Mediterranean in order to maintain the system as a whole (Chapter 6).¹⁴

Since the wealth of Roman society was primarily agrarian, the senator was bound to be a substantial landowner.¹⁵ Nevertheless, for much of the time he was confined to Rome and Latium by the obligations of his rank.¹⁶

⁷ Qualifying levels of 1 and 1.2 million sesterces are both reported under Augustus (Duncan-Jones 1982: 373 and Nicolet 1976). For Imperial grants worth about 8 million sesterces, Duncan-Jones 1982: 18 n. 7; for an outright grant of 10 million by Tiberius, *Tac. Ann.* 1.75.

⁸ That is also implied by Tacitus's anecdote in which the Hortensii are still reduced to shameful poverty after receiving 1.8 million sesterces from Tiberius (*Tac. Ann.* 2.37–8). But legislation which allowed a wealthy wife to make her husband's fortune up to the amount legally required suggests that the threshold level could still be important (*Dig.* 24.1.42, Gaius, Antoninus Pius).

⁹ Run-down fortunes, see n. 8; adopted heirs, Syme *RP* IV: 159–73; families dying out, Chapter 6, Section 6.1 and Chapter 2, n. 31 'honestae quies', Pliny *Ep.* 1.14.5; 'tranquillissimum otium' 7.25.2.

¹⁰ Cf. Alföldy 1975: 295; Section 2.1. ¹¹ Sections 6.1 and 9.3.

¹² Augustus himself was from Velitrae, related by marriage to the patrician Julii at Rome (Suet. *Aug.* 1).

¹³ Since provincial recruitment to the Senate was clearly part of a wider process, it is unrealistic to interpret the initiatives as spontaneous gestures of favour to the unprivileged, or as deliberate preference for provincials. See Chapter 6, n. 4.

¹⁴ Practically, no Mediterranean region was left untouched, even the Mauretaniae and Egypt, although the only senators from northern or frontier provinces were quite late. For regional origins, see *EOS* 1–2. The first senators from Egypt were enrolled under Caracalla (Dio 51.17.3).

¹⁵ Those with other sorts of wealth either bought land (Duncan-Jones 1982: 324), or could not aspire to the Senate, as with the friend whose money-making skills Seneca so much admired (*Ep. mor.* 101; Chapter 11, p. 119). In CE 33, when loans were temporarily outlawed, the resulting collapse showed that few of the wealthy had enough of their resources in cash, and when the ensuing panic made the land market freeze up as well, many were left high and dry (Duncan-Jones 1994: 23–5).

¹⁶ See Chapter 6, n. 14. Senators were technically domiciled in the city of Rome (Talbert 1984: 141).

His estates were typically distant, either elsewhere in Italy, or in provinces overseas. The provinces that could be visited without special permission were Sicily and later Narbonensis.¹⁷ But that still left most of the Empire effectively out of bounds. However, efforts to make candidates for office buy land in Italy showed that the Senate's centre of gravity was shifting, and they began quite early.¹⁸ The senatorial recess in September and October was convenient for retreats to pleasure spots such as Tibur or the coastal resorts in Campania. Ammianus's picture of a great household on the move, with the different grades of servant drawn up by rank and marching in line like an army battalion, may reflect the seasonal migration from Rome. The weavers are close to the master in his carriage; they are followed by the cooks, then by ordinary slaves and their friends, with eunuchs young and old bringing up the rear.¹⁹ But it is not clear whether senators went to distant estates during the recess. We know that Pliny, with strong roots in northern Italy and in Umbria, sometimes made personal visits there, but he may have been exceptionally mobile.²⁰ The post of *curator rei publicae* took some career senators to towns in Italy, mainly after Pliny's time.²¹

The social make-up of the Senate can be studied in detail, largely through the *vigintivirate*, the most junior post held by senators.²² The four colleges of *vigintiviri* incorporated a definite rank order, but patrician status outdid all college affiliation.²³ The gradations amounted to a seven-point hierarchy, with patricians at the top, followed in a clear sequence by plebeian members of the four colleges, then by non-*vigintiviri* and senators from the *militiae*.²⁴ The rankings provide an effective yardstick for assessing social standing. The final post in the career was equally

¹⁷ Talbert 1984: 140 n. 42.

¹⁸ Under Trajan, Pliny *Ep.* 6.19; HA *M.Ant.* 11.8. See also Andermahr 1998.

¹⁹ Ammianus 14.6.17; for eunuchs, see Section 13.8. The household of the city prefect Pedanius Secundus was said to number 400 members (*Tac.Ann.* 14.43). Pliny seems to have owned more than 500 slaves (Duncan-Jones 1982: 24).

²⁰ Cf. Duncan-Jones 1982: 20–3. Pliny sometimes liked to commute at the end of the day to a second home near Ostia, a journey of several hours (*Ep.* 9.40; 2.17). The re-letting of farms when the leases terminated was a special reason for a landlord to visit (*Ep.* 10.8.5), but one which would only occur every few years.

²¹ They were usually spared the postings in the deep south that went to lesser figures (Jacques 1984: 188).

²² Careers whose initial posts are missing cannot be studied in this way, and thus fall outside this survey (see Section 8.2.1).

²³ Patricians did not always belong to the highest *vigintivir* college, the *monetales* (see Section 2.3.2). The college hierarchy remained clear-cut nevertheless, and is spelt out in their access to the major priesthoods (Chapter 2, Table 2.3).

²⁴ See Chapter 2, Table 2.1 and Appendix 1.

important, and is likewise coded numerically.²⁵ It provides a simple tool for assessing individual performance. The two scoring systems thus reflect social standing and career outcome.

The source material comes from a database of over 550 senatorial careers of the Principate. It includes virtually all holders of the *vigintivirate*, together with a large proportion of the known careers without a *vigintivirate*.²⁶ All the careers are assigned to broad periods. More than half the evidence is evidently 'Antonine', with limited amounts in the first and third centuries.²⁷ Only one-third of the careers can be assigned to consular dates, but their chronology is very striking (Figure 7.1).

Senatorial office-holding changed little in its essentials over the three centuries from Augustus to Diocletian. Thus, a host of positions familiar very early on are combined in a career recorded in the 280s, at the very end of our period: *triumvir capitalis*, *sevir*, *quaestor candidatus*, *praetor candidatus*, *legatus provinciae Africae*, *consul*, *curator alvei Tiberis*, *proconsul Africae*, *praefectus urbi* and *salius Palatinus*.²⁸ Moreover, the few definite changes in the career system during the Principate came too late to figure significantly in the present material.²⁹ Although the sample comes from random survivals, representation of several core offices is relatively consistent.³⁰ This suggests a common survival factor, which makes it easier to extrapolate features of the senatorial career, as well as highlighting some anomalies in the surviving record.³¹

Access to senatorial office depended overwhelmingly on the Emperor. Seneca, in a satirical illustration of the man who can never be satisfied, makes the Emperor the source of preferment at every turn:

²⁵ See Appendix 1 and n.26.

²⁶ See Table 2.1. The total is 557 career senators (Appendix 7, omitting any cases where the earliest posts are missing, see n. 22). Thirty-six *vigintiviri* who have no further career are listed separately in Appendix 4, with a grand summary in Table A3. Steiner's 1974 thesis was taken as a starting point for the *vigintiviri*, together with Hillebrand 2006 for first-century material, and Cascione 1999 for the *tresviri capitales*. The database utilises *PIR2* for senators known by family name, elsewhere *PIR1*, and biographical notices in *RE* and *Brills New Pauly*, together with the online Clauss-Slaby Datenbank, and surveys by Alföldy 1977, Birley 1981 and 2005, Christol 1986, Corbier 1974, Dabrowa 1998, Devijver 1989–92, Eck 1970, Groag 1939, Leunissen 1989, Pflaum *CP*, Rémy 1989, Rüpke 2005, Syme 1979–91, Thomasson 1996 and others. Names, offices, regional postings, patrician/plebeian rank, priesthoods, regional origin, period and consular date (if known) were all incorporated in a Systat database (Wilkinson 1988). Systat allows efficient tabulation and cross-tabulation of offices, together with graphic displays using Sygraph.

²⁷ See Chapter 7.

²⁸ From the career of L. Caesonius Ovinius Manlius Rufinianus Bassus recorded in CE 285 (no. 140 and Appendix 5, p. 167).

²⁹ See Section 7.3.

³⁰ Implying a survival-rate of about 8%, or 24 year-cohorts. See Chapter 8 and Table 8.1.

³¹ Extrapolation: see Appendix 3, 'The duration of army posts'. For anomalies, see Chapter 8.

He gave me the praetorship, yet I wanted the consulship. He made me consul, but not ordinarius. He made me ordinarius, yet withheld a priesthood. He placed me in his own priestly college, but why only in one? He promoted my entire career, but never increased my fortune. He bestowed a suitable amount of wealth, yet gave me nothing from his private treasury.³²

Pliny too describes high office as being bestowed by the Emperor. He also speaks of praetorships, priesthoods and consulships being conferred by mighty freedmen under Trajan's aberrant predecessors.³³

Seneca's words are symptomatic, and show the Emperor wielding absolute power over the upper reaches of the senatorial career. He was also responsible for naming *vigintiviri* and quaestors.³⁴ In posts below the consulship he evidently put forward certain men as his own *candidati*, whose election was thus assured.³⁵ But elections with an uncertain outcome show that the Emperor did not decide every name (see Section 3.1.1).

One of the most important issues in studying senatorial careers is whether advancement mainly depended on merit, or on birth and social connexions.³⁶ There has been some readiness to interpret Roman careers as though they belonged to a modern meritocracy, rather than an ancien régime system where nobility effortlessly rises to the top.³⁷ But the present analysis suggests that respect for aristocracy was often powerful and sometimes dominant.³⁸ Nevertheless, the Senate also included *strata* whose members were especially active.³⁹ And lack of aristocratic roots did not prevent provincials from contributing more than their share.⁴⁰

³² Seneca, *de ira* 3.31.2. Each of these imperial benefits lay within the bounds of possibility. Also *de ben.* 2.27.4.

³³ *Pan.* 88.1. For the Emperor's award of priesthoods, see previous note, and Dio 53.17.8. For consulships and praetorships awarded by Imperial slaves, see also Epictetus 4.1.148–50. Pliny elsewhere writes to Trajan requesting a praetorship for Accius Sura (*Ep.* 10.12).

³⁴ Mommsen *DP* V: 224. ³⁵ Talbert 1984: 342–3. See also Chapter 3, Section 3.1.2.

³⁶ Birley 1992.

³⁷ 'Of Louis XVI's 36 ministers, all except one were noble.' And there were 'five *ducs* and one prince among the 11 marshals of 1789'. (McManners 1967: 28–9.) In Parkinson's model of the 'British method (old pattern)', candidates are only appointed if they can show links with the higher aristocracy (Parkinson 1961: 22–3).

³⁸ Chapters 2 and 5. ³⁹ See Section 2.4. ⁴⁰ Chapter 6.