

NUMERIAN THE INTELLECTUAL

A Dynastic Survivor in Fourth Century Gaul

Some years ago André Chastagnol drew attention to a rather charming portrait of the young Numerian (A. Aurelius Numerius Numerianus, Augustus 283–4), son of Carus (Augustus 282–3) and brother of Carinus (Augustus 283–4)¹). According to the *Historia Augusta* biographer of the family, the young Numerian was a sort of child prodigy, possessing remarkable rhetorical and poetic skills²). Such was his talent that he successfully challenged the best known poets of the day, including Nemesianus. Numerian was also awarded a statue at Rome not, as his biographer emphasises, on account of his imperial status, but in recognition of his rhetorical ability³). As Chastagnol correctly remarks, this description evokes previous portrayals in the *Historia Augusta*, modelled on Suetonius, of other emperors as intellectuals. It also recalls an incident which occurred a century later, when Ausonius, then tutor to Gratian at the imperial court, was invited to a battle of words by no less an opponent than the emperor Valentinian I⁴). The portrait of the cultured Numerian finds an even more resounding echo in another passage of Ausonius, the subject of this paper. This Ausonian reference also throws some light on a rather obscure chapter in the history of Gaul, namely the origin and development of late Roman Gallic aristocracy.

Among Ausonius' colleagues at the schools of Bordeaux around the middle of the fourth century was a scion of an erudite family which numbered one grammarian and three rhetors⁵). They originally came from Bayeux, where Phoebicus, the first recorded member of the family, served as a priest at the temple of Apollo⁶). The family also claimed Druidic descent, perhaps to cover humble

1) A. Chastagnol, Numérien l'intellectuel, BHAC 1977/8 (Bonn 1980), 65–71. PLRE I, 634.

2) Vita Cari 11.

3) Ibid.

4) Cento Nuptialis, Ausonius Paulo.

5) N. K. Chadwick, Life and Letters in Early Christian Gaul (London 1955) for some splendid pages on this family.

6) Ausonius, Prof. 4.7f. (Attius Patera), with the caveat: *si fama non fallit fidem* (vs. 8); Prof. 10.22f.

origins⁷). At some point Attius Patera, Phoebicus' son, emigrated to Bordeaux, where he obtained a chair of rhetoric. Patera had also taught at Rome where his fame was acknowledged by Jerome⁸).

His son, Attius Tiro Delphidius, was, like Numerian, a child prodigy who amazed his contemporaries with his poetic compositions⁹). Numerian had competed with Olympius Nemesianus; Delphidius sang the praises of the Olympian Zeus¹⁰). Delphidius further achieved renown as an orator, displaying his rhetorical skills in various law courts¹¹). Nor did he lack political ambition. This he attempted to further first under Julian, when the latter was Caesar in Gaul (356–60), and later under the eastern usurper Procopius in 365¹²). After the defeat of Procopius at the hands of Valens in 365, Delphidius was one of the Gauls who were sent home from Constantinople in the grim company of the usurper's severed head¹³).

Delphidius' most memorable court case is recorded by Ammianus. It occurred in 358/359, when Julian was residing in Gaul¹⁴). The case involved financial matters, probably relating to provincial taxation¹⁵). Julian's interest in such affairs was well-known, and if Delphidius wanted to attract the Caesar's attention he could have hardly chosen a more suitable case or defendant. The latter's name was Numerian (Numerius), and he had been a

7) A. D. Booth, Notes on Ausonius' Professores, Phoenix 32 (1978) 236.

8) Jerome, Ep. 120 praef.: *maiores tui, Patera atque Delphidius, quorum alter antequam ego nascerer rhetoricam Romae docuit* (c. 340).

9) Ausonius, Prof. 5.5f.: *tu paene ab ipsis orsus incunabulis / dei poeta nobilis*.

10) Hist. Aug. Vita Cari 11.2: *cum Olympio Nemesiano contendit*; Ausonius, Prof. 5.7f.: *sertum coronae praeferens Olympiae / puer celebrasti Iovem*. The Ausonian pun may have been intentional.

11) On his rhetorical ability, Jerome, Ep. 120 praef.: *omnes Gallias prosa versuque suo inlustravit ingenio*. Ammianus 18.1.4: *acerrimus orator*; Ausonius, Prof. 5.13–14: *celebrata varie cuius eloquentia / domi forisque claruit*. Sidonius Apollinaris, Ep. 5.10.3: *abundantia Delphidii*.

12) Ausonius, Prof. 5.21 f. for serving an unnamed tyrant. This anonymous ruler gave rise to many modern speculations ranging from Magnentius (Seeck, RE IV, 1901, 2503, s.v. Delphidius, followed by PLRE I, 246), through Magnus Maximus (Marx, RE II, 1896, 2573, s.v. Ausonius), to Procopius, already proposed by Evelyn White, Ausonius (Loeb) I, 107 note 2.

13) Amm. 26.10.6–8, where Delphidius is not named.

14) Amm. 18.1.4; Ausonius also refers, albeit obliquely, to the case, Prof. 5.21–2: *nec odia magnis concitata litibus / armaret ultor impetus*.

15) Amm. 18.1.4: *accusatum ut furem*... John of Antioch, fr. 178.3 (Müller, FGH 4.605). Note that Ammianus relates the story at the conclusion of a passage which discusses Julian's concern regarding the just distribution of tribute assessment and collection and the proper behaviour of provincial governors.

governor (*rector*) of Narbonensis. Both the governor's name and his province point to a connection with the third century imperial dynasty of Carus.

With the exception of the *Historia Augusta*, all the sources relating to the reigns of Carus, Carinus and Numerian give their provenance as Gallia Narbonensis, and quite possibly the city of Narbonne itself¹⁶). Sidonius Apollinaris refers to Narbonne as the "fruitful mother of Caesars" and the birthplace of Carus and his two sons¹⁷). There is hardly a doubt, then, that the family of Carus, Carinus and Numerian came from Narbonensis in Gaul. Moreover, the similarity between the *nomen* and the territorial affiliation of the two Numerians, the third century ruler and the fourth century governor, can hardly be a mere coincidence. There is no information concerning members of the family after the fall of the dynasty in 284, but the survival of close relatives, as well as the preservation of their Gallic patrimony, is feasible. Carinus is reputed to have married no less than nine times, although the name of only one wife was preserved along with a name of one son¹⁸). The existence of dynastic survivors need not surprise. Tetricus, another short-lived Gallic ruler of the third century, was spared by Aurelian after his defeat¹⁹). Not only did the vanquished usurper become a provincial governor in Italy, but his homonymous son became a member of the Roman senate²⁰). It is said that their house, situated in an elegant quarter at Rome, could still be seen at the end of the fourth century²¹). Be that as it may, the very survival

16) Aur. Vict. 39.12; Eutr. 9.12.1; Jerome, Chron.; Oros. 7.24.3; Chastagnol, *La patrie de Carus*, BHAC 1977/78 (Bonn 1980), 50–60.

17) Carmen 23.88f: *caesaribus ferax creandis* (translation by Anderson in the Loeb edition of Sidonius).

18) Hist. Aug. Vita Cari 16; Eunapius, fr. 4 (Müller). For the wife, Magnia Urbica, PIR (1983) V 2, p. 149, no. 99; for the son, Nigrianus, PIR V 3, p. 360, no. 98. He probably perished in 284.

19) Aur. Vict. Caes. 33.14; Eutr. 9.10; Hist. Aug. Tyr. Trig. 24.1, on noble origin; Aur. Vict. Caes. 35.3–4; Eutr. 9.13; Zos. 1.61.2; Hist. Aug. Aurel. 32.3, Tyr. Trig. 24.2, on Aurelian's victory.

20) Aur. Vict. Caes. 35.5; Epit. 35.7; Eutr. 9.13.2 (*corrector Lucaniae* in 273/5); Aur. Vict. Caes. 35.5 on adlection of Victorinus the son to the senate. Not less curious is the story of another third-century emperor, Probus, whose grandson was reputed to be none other than the bishop of Byzantium under Julian. A nice coincidence, if indeed Julian encountered all these dynastic survivors. On the linking between Probus and Metrophanes of Byzantium, Zonaras, 13.3.30–1, with M. DiMaio, *Smoke in the Wind: Zonaras' Use of Philostorgius*, Zosimus, John of Antioch, and John of Rhodes in his Narrative on the Neo-Flavian Emperors, Byzantion 58 (1988) 253–4.

21) Hist. Aug. Tyr. Trig. 25.4, if the information can be believed.

of the family through the clemency of the victorious emperor, and its subsequent enrollment in the senate provides a precedent for the case of Carus and Numerian.

The fourth century Numerian was governor of Narbonensis, where his family had probably been able to retain their property. Indeed, it is not unlikely that Numerian's local contacts and wealth carried some weight with regard to his appointment. Very little research has been done into low- and middle-level offices in the imperial hierarchy, such as that of provincial governorship²²). It would be interesting, for example, to trace the rationale behind such appointments. According to the *Notitia Dignitatum* (Occ. I 68–74. 106–117), provinces like Narbonensis and Aquitania had governors of non-senatorial rank (*praesides*). Numerian, however, would have been entitled to senatorial rank by virtue of his lineage. This fact alone should alert us concerning generalisations about the social origins of governors in late antiquity.

A rhetorical contest between a scion of a family that numbered the intellectual Numerian, and Delphidius, the fiercest orator of the day, was something of no small interest. With an audience that included Julian, himself no mean orator and a scion of another imperial dynasty, the affair was nothing short of sensational. The hearing was public and the specific charge against Numerian, so far as can be ascertained, seems to have involved tax abuse²³). In the event, Delphidius failed to produce evidence to convict Numerian. He expressed his frustration rather loudly to the Caesar saying: "What sort of justice is there if a man can be acquitted solely on the basis of his denial of the allegation?" And Julian promptly replied in kind: "What sort of justice indeed would there be if it were enough to find a man guilty solely on the basis of an accusation?"²⁴).

These words became a *cause célèbre*. They are reported by no less than three sources: Ammianus, a contemporary who knew Gaul at first hand, John of Antioch and Zonaras²⁵). After all, not

22) W. Kuhoff, Studien zur zivilen senatorischen Laufbahn im 4. J. n. Chr. (Frankfurt 1983) for preliminary observations. To date, most if not all the research on provincial governors has been prosopographical. There is need for an analysis of the office and its functions, particularly in the late Roman west.

23) P. de Jonge, Philological and Historical Commentary on Ammianus Marcellinus XVIII (Groningen 1980), 10, for embezzlement.

24) Amm. 18.1.4: *Ecquis, florentissime Caesar, nocens esse poterit usquam, si negare sufficiet? Ecquis innocens esse poterit, si accusasse sufficiet?*

25) John of Antioch, fr. 178.3; Zon. 13.12, the latter using the former. M. DiMaio, The Antiochene Connection: Zonaras, Ammianus Marcellinus, and John

every day can one report a court case in which two imperial descendants, one of a third century dynasty, the other of the ruling dynasty, as well as a scion of the most famous rhetorical family in Gaul, were involved. As it turned out, the descendant of the eloquent Caesar Numerianus did not fail to up-hold the family's reputation.

But the incident has further and more significant implications, far beyond its immediate dramatic elements. Owing to the paucity of literary and epigraphical sources for the late third and the early fourth century our knowledge of the process which gave birth to the apparently burgeoning Gallic aristocracy in the late fourth century is meagre²⁶). To date, not a single case of family continuity between the third and the fourth century has been established with any certainty. Two consuls of the *Imperium Gallicarum*, Sanctus and Censor (cos. 269 and 272/6 respectively), have been accredited with two Aquitanian descendants of the same name²⁷). The link is attractive but remains purely hypothetical.

In two other cases, two erudite members of the schools of Bordeaux in the fourth century, both colleagues of Delphidius, laid claim to pre-Constantinian lineage. Acilius Glabrio, a grammarian in Bordeaux, claimed no less a personage than Aeneas himself as an ancestor and, by implication, instituted his family as the Gallic branch of the famed aristocratic clan of the Acilii Glabrones²⁸). This connection is, to say the least, fanciful. Ausonius, the most famous product of the Gallic school system in the fourth century, repeatedly refers to his own noble ancestors. These, he asserts, had come from Lugdunensis to Aquitania in the third

of Antioch on the Reigns of the Emperors Constantius II and Julian, Byzantion 50 (1980) 158–60. But note the recent doubts cast on Ammianus' Antiochene background by G. Bowersock, Review of J. Matthews, *The Roman Empire of Ammianus*, JRS 80 (1990) 244–250.

26) The basic study is still, K. F. Stroheker, *Der senatorische Adel im spätantiken Gallien* (Tübingen 1948, rep. 1970). See now H. Sivan, *Ausonius of Bordeaux. Genesis of a Gallic Aristocracy* (London 1993).

27) For the consuls, Y. Burnand, *Senatores Romani ex provinciis Galliarum orti, Tituli 5* (Epigrafia e ordine senatorio 2, Rome 1982), 387 ff.; for the connection with two relatives of Ausonius in the fourth century, PLRE I, 810 (S 1), 196 (Censor). For list of Gallic Sancti (where, in fact, Germania Superior has the lead over Aquitania), H.-G. Pflaum, *Augustantius Alpinus Bellicius Sollers membres de la gens Cassia*, AEAq 39 (1966) 3–23 = *Scripta Varia* II, 373 f.

28) Prof. 24, esp. 4: *Dardana progenies*. This spurious claim has been taken at face value by all modern commentators, see H. Sivan, *A Late Gallic Branch of the Italian Acilii Glabrones? Mnemosyne* 44 (1991) 435–9.

quarter of the third century²⁹). Ausonius' claim to nobility has been suspected and described as a 'tale of lost fortunes' which could be neither refuted nor substantiated after the confusion caused by events in Gaul in the later part of the third century³⁰).

In fact, the confusion and the disruption which ensued during and after the *Imperium Galliarum* must have been so great that many then probably took the opportunity to come forward with claims to noble ancestry. An unnamed Aquitanian, for example, desiring to add the lustre of lineage to that of his costly silver, went so far as to adduce Mars, Romulus and Remus as his ancestors. This sort of claim to mythical forebears was not unknown among contemporary members of the Roman senatorial aristocracy. Within the context of the nascent aristocracy of the later empire it was clearly considered farfetched³¹).

Of course, one could follow Stroheker in assuming that the Gallic aristocracy of the late fourth century came into full bloom *ex nihilo*³²). A measure of continuity, however, must have existed³³). We cannot postulate that all estate owners in fourth century Gaul were *novi homines*, although at present the evidence does seem to point to a considerable measure of disruption. But the case of the two Numerians should be taken as a warning. Here, for the first time, it seems possible to trace a definite link between the senatorial aristocracy of the third century and at least one prominent member of the aristocracy of fourth century Gaul.

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29) Parentalia 4.2 f.; Prof. 16.6 f.; Ausonius lectori (praef. 1) 5 f.; Grat. actio 8: *familiam non paenitentiam*.

30) J. F. Drinkwater, *The Gallic Empire* (Stuttgart 1987), 80.

31) Ausonius, Epigr. 45, well worth translating in full: "Vain in his wealth and puffed up with haughtiness, this 'somebody' is noble in words only. Illustrious names of the present he holds in contempt; ancient pedigrees he covets. He names no less than Mars, Remus and the founder Romulus as his very own parents. Them he orders to be clothed with silken garments. Their images he engraves on his heavy silver and affixes to the threshold of his doors and to the ceilings in his rooms. I believe, however, that this 'somebody' did not even know his father and that his mother is really a prostitute".

32) Stroheker (s. note 26) 15 f.

33) For an attempt to trace continuity between pre-Roman and late Roman Gaul on the basis of patterns of land tenure, E. M. Wightman, *Peasants and Potentates*, *AJAH* 3 (1978) 97 f.