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). According to the Historia Augusta biographer of the family, the young Numerian was a sort of child prodigy, possessing remarkable rhetorical and poetic skills. 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 ability. 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 I. 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 rhetors. They originally came from Bayeux, where Phoebicus, the first recorded member of the family, served as a priest at the temple of Apollo. The family also claimed Druidic descent, perhaps to cover humble

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.
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 Jerome.

His son, Attius Tiro Delphidius, was, like Numerian, a child prodigy who amazed his contemporaries with his poetic compositions. Numerian had competed with Olympius Nemesianus; Delphidius sang the praises of the Olympian Zeus. Delphidius further achieved renown as an orator, displaying his rhetorical skills in various law courts. 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 365. 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 head.

Delphidius’ most memorable court case is recorded by Ammianus. It occurred in 358/359, when Julian was residing in Gaul. The case involved financial matters, probably relating to provincial taxation. 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

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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 nascerrer 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 corona praeferen Olympiae / puer celebrasti Iovem. The Ausonian pun may have been intentional.
11) On his rhetorical ability, Jerome, Ep. 120 praef.: omnes Gallias proa 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. 5.21f. for serving an unnamed tyrant. This anonymous ruler gave rise to many modern speculations ranging from Magnentius (Sceek, 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 itself. Sidonius Apollinaris refers to Narbonne as the "fruitful mother of Caesars" and the birthplace of Carus and his two sons. 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 son.

The existence of dynastic survivors need not surprise. Tetricus, another short-lived Gallic ruler of the third century, was spared by Aurelian after his defeat. Not only did the vanquished usurper become a provincial governor in Italy, but his homonymous son became a member of the Roman senate. It is said that their house, situated in an elegant quarter at Rome, could still be seen at the end of the fourth century.

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20) Aur. Vict. Caes. 35.5; Epit. 35.7; Eutr. 9.13.2 (*corrector Lucaniae* in 273/5); Aur. Vict. Caes. 35.5 on adlectio 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 governorship.22)
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 Aquitanica 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 num-
bered 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 sensa-
tional. The hearing was public and the specific charge against
Numerian, so far as can be ascertained, seems to have involved tax
abuse.23) 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 Zonaras.25) 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 de­
cendants, 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 elo­
quent Caesar Numerianus did not fail to up-hold the family's
reputation.

But the incident has further and more significant implica­
tions, 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 Gal­
liarum, 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 gram­
marian in Bordeaux, claimed no less a personage than Aeneas him­
self as an ancestor and, by implication, instituted his family as the
Gallic branch of the famed aristocratic clan of the Acilii Glabri­
ones28). 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

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26) The basic study is still, K. F. Stroheker, Der senatorische Adel im spätan­

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 (Cen­
sor). 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

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
quarter of the third century\textsuperscript{29}). 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 century\textsuperscript{30}).

In fact, the confusion and the disruption which ensued during and after the \emph{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 farfetched\textsuperscript{31}).

Of course, one could follow Stroheker in assuming that the Gallic aristocracy of the late fourth century came into full bloom \textit{ex nihilo}\textsuperscript{32}). A measure of continuity, however, must have existed\textsuperscript{33}). We cannot postulate that all estate owners in fourth century Gaul were \textit{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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\textsuperscript{29} Parentalia 4.2 f.; Prof. 16.6 f.; Ausonius lectori (praef. 1) 5 f.; Grat. actio 8: \textit{familiam non paenitendam}.

\textsuperscript{30} J. F. Drinkwater, The Gallic Empire (Stuttgart 1987), 80.

\textsuperscript{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”.

\textsuperscript{32} Stroheker (s. note 26) 15 f.

\textsuperscript{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.