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Social Mobility and the Renewal of the Senate in the Roman Empire

This paper aims at paying homage to Keith Hopkins (1934-2004) by reconsidering, from a sociological perspective, how various models of social mobility in the Roman imperial senate correlate with assumptions about continuity and change in the senate and the senatorial *ordo*.

The primarily demographical controversy between Hopkins and Alfoldy on the extent to which membership in the Roman Imperial senate was hereditary, was paralleled by their differing views on *ordo* identity, seen by them as weak and strong, respectively. The focus of this paper is not on their demographical claims, but on the assumption that there is a strong sociological correlation between social mobility and the identity of the imperial senate and its members. First, I consider three important elements: besides the role of the emperors, the cultural component of senatorial *ordo* identity (referred to as schema in recent sociological literature) on the one hand, and the resources and networks of the members on the other hand. In fact, independently from the deus-ex-machina role of emperors in shaping senatorial membership and certain cultural choices, social mobility can only be positively associated with the change of the schema of the senate if two other conditions that contribute to its reproduction are not met: social homogenization and dense social networks among senatorial families, whether old or new.

Two points will be discussed in detail:

1. There is plentiful evidence documenting processes of social homogenization: besides such well-known examples as Augustan marriage legislation, or the restrictions on participation in gladiatorial shows, recruitment patterns suggest that most future senators selected from among the lower strata displayed few traits starkly heterogeneous to those already characteristic of the *ordo*. While this project of homogenization was apparently shared by the emperor and senators, the issue of initiative and unique interests at stake will be further discussed.
2. Although studied only in terms of marriage patterns, there is reliable prosopographical evidence that shows willingness on the part of senatorial families to establish and maintain network relationships with new members entering the *ordo* as much as those new members may form part of regionally organized sub-networks. I consider just how much such willingness our sources attest, as well as some other possible networking opportunities, such as the lifetime appointments to religious offices and economic cooperation.

In conclusion, I contend that high social mobility in the Roman imperial senate may not directly correspond to the mutability of the senate as an institution, and the associated identity of its members. Other factors, such as social homogeneity and the availability of networks, can mitigate the effects of changing membership, and in fact may even serve the durability of the institution better than the retention of heterogeneous or isolated

members. Alterations in the renewal of the senate may need to be explained by more subtle factors affected by senators both old and new.