Facing factoids

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I would like to open today's meeting with a few thoughts on what the PASE experience has taught us in the past three years. I will say something about early medieval (or more specifically Anglo-Saxon) prosopography, about the procedures we have adopted and the problems we have encountered in building an electronic database.

Prosopography is often considered a problematic field. You are probably all aware of the fact that it has often been said to be elitist and interested only in those who wielded political power. In many cases this is still true. However, the PASE project has tried to avoid that sort of approach by choosing from the very beginning to record all the people who appear in the sources for the study of Anglo-Saxon England, including even those whose names are not known. Our database is full of people who are called "Anonymous", which at a first glance might appear as the most popular name in Anglo-Saxon England. The PASE database will obviously contain much more information on the higher social classes, but this is solely a reflection of the sources we have used. Therefore, though the source material inevitably privileges élites, the project itself is not conceptually elitist.

A much more troublesome problem was choosing the categories on which our database should have been built. This was due to one main difficulty: how can one reduce history to a database? This might sound perhaps a little too crude, but at the end of the day that was (and still is) the main problem. How do you accommodate all the nuances and the vague descriptions that sources often provide? Furthermore, do you accept what sources say as a series of ascertainable and incontrovertible facts? We have tried to avoid doing that by using the term 'factoid' to define the entities (or categories) in which we structure prosopographical information. We decided to call such entities factoids because they are 'descriptions that a primary source *claims* applied to a person'.[1] We were very happy about this choice, but we soon discovered that finding a good term to describe these entities was not enough.

The next problem was again terminological, as we had to choose different labels to define the various factoids in which we wanted to record prosopographical information. Coming up with such terms as education, ethnicity, language competence, kinship was relatively straightforward, but when we had to start defining what being a *comes*, or a monk, or a *dux* in Anglo-Saxon England meant, we encountered more serious problems. Should we have called these "jobs"? Or "titles"? Or "offices"? We probably started by thinking that being a *comes* is (or was) different from being a monk. And up to that point everybody would have agreed. Then, we tried to start distinguishing between all sorts of various roles people could have had in Anglo-Saxon England. In part we inherited this way of thinking from the Prosopography of the Byzantine Empire (now called PBW), but we also tried to adapt

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[1] D. A. E. Pelteret, 'The challenges of constructing the Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England database', *Medieval Prosopography*, pp. 117-25, at p. 122.

it to the Anglo-Saxon society. And in the end we came up with three main factoids, in which we wanted to accommodate people's roles in Anglo-Saxon society. We called them Office, Occupation and Status. We also gave each of them a definition. We said that an office might have existed independently of the holder, it might have required appointment to the position, and it usually involved responsibility. An occupation, on the other hand, might have involved training, might have been a calling and could be a way of making a living. A status did not imply responsibilities; someone might have been born with it rather than acquiring it; it might have a legal definition and it might possibly have been an honorary title without responsibilities.

This seemed to be working all very well initially, but we were to encounter several difficulties later on when we had to decide whether, for instance, someone described as a *dux* in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* held the office or the status of a *dux*. Furthermore, all the monks mentioned in the seventh- and eighth-century hagiographic sources generated another problem since we felt that we had to distinguish between the condition of being just a monk and that of being in some sort of clerical orders. The choice of the term 'office' for bishops, priests and deacons was relatively unproblematic, but what should we have done with monks? The most logical solution, given the three definitions I mentioned earlier on, seemed to call this condition of being a monk an 'Occupation'. However, we cannot deny that when we showed our database at conferences, colloquia or seminars, people never failed to point out that this monk-as-an-occupation category looked a little awkward.

I could go on with several further examples showing how difficult it was and still is to choose and apply categories to a world which inevitably escapes our attempts of classification. It might be worth adding, however, that thanks to the flexibility with which our database has been constructed, we have recently started to think that it might be worth merging the three big factoids which have been called Office, Status and Occupation. Therefore, whenever a person is described as a *comes*, or a *dux*, or a reeve, or a monk or a priest or in any other way which could define a role within the Anglo-Saxon society, they will probably end up in a 'super-factoid'. This will still allow users to find all instances in which Anglo-Saxon people were described as holding any of the above mentioned conditions. Such a solution should save us from the problem of having to choose how to categorise strictly a given title or role, especially in those cases in which we find ourselves unable to decide whether someone was holding an office or a status.

Another problem which might be worth considering briefly in this respect is the one involving the choice between Modern English and the source original language to describe the roles that we have recorded as office/occupation/status. When entering such terms as 'priest', 'king', 'monk', 'abbot', 'dux', etc., we do not simply type these words in a free-text field, but we enter them through some pop-up boxes that we call Authority Lists. These lists consist of approved words or phrases, which ensure consistency and regularity throughout the data-entry process. However, the person entering the data is not limited to the terms in the authority list – if those on offer do not seem appropriate they can enter their own value. In other words, authority lists are fixed and flexible at the same time. They allow the PASE researchers to make consistent and controlled records, but they do not prevent the database from being as comprehensive as possible. This flexibility turned out to be particularly useful when we had to choose the language to use for the terms in the lists. We had to decide

whether it was prudent to follow scholarly accepted translations or whether it would be better to use the exact term in the source. For such things as king versus *rex*, abbot versus *abbas*, priest versus *presbyter* and so on, we felt safe in adopting Modern English translations. But the situation became much more complicated when we had to decide between, for instance, *dux* or 'ealdorman'. We encountered this problem especially while dealing with Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, for which we were using Colgrave and Mynors's edition and translation.[2] For instance, Colgrave and Mynors use 'ealdorman' to translate both *dux* and *praefectus*. 'Gesith' renders c*omes* and 'thegn' *minister*. Are these the terms we should also employ? Or is it safer at this stage to avoid providing a translation, keep the original text and maybe postpone decisions until all the material has been collected? Obviously we cannot solve all the problems which concern the study and the description of Anglo-Saxon society but we should at least be able to provide users with the tools which should make such investigations easier and quicker. Therefore, in those cases in which translations felt slightly insecure we decided to use the original terms, thus leaving room for possible new developments in the study of these secular offices. After all, this is all what our Prosopography project is about: we are trying to record and process information that scholars should find useful for their future research involving Anglo-Saxon people.

The problems I have described are some examples of the types of issues and decisions we have had to deal with in recent stages of our project. Several conceptual problems remain. There is always a danger in trying to categorise things and people - but historians do this in any case, even when they do not use electronic databases. Without being too philosophical, we could say that the study of history goes on because different generations of historians look at the same sources in new ways, often dictated by the types of contemporary issues they face. For this reason the new wave of prosopographical projects which have been springing up recently looks even more interesting. After all, in our post-modern age one would not expect all this interest in projects that often require such clear-cut decisions as the ones I mentioned earlier on. Perhaps one might find it strange that we are trying to pin down sources when recent critical debate has concentrated on the multiple meaning of texts and their relative autonomy from the intentions of the author. But electronic databases represent an aid that historians of the previous generations did not have. They are therefore too tempting a tool not to be used in prosopographical and other such studies. At the same time, while building them, historians must be aware of the dangers of certain positivist approaches. This has led us to call our entities 'factoids'; it has also led us to our decision to be source-driven, that is, to record solely what sources say as opposed to scholarly opinions on people or events. These will obviously find room in our comment fields, but they do not constitute the material on which the database is constructed.

To conclude, I would like to emphasise that the way in which the PASE project has developed in its recent stages has taught us an important lesson. It has reminded us of the risk of being trapped by one's own invention, no matter how clever or interesting it might look from a theoretical point of view. When building up an electronic database for historical research purposes, there is always a risk of becoming slaves of what should be the means to reach a goal rather than the goal itself. Therefore, one should always try and detach oneself from such tools in order to be able to evaluate

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[2] *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. by B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969).

the actual value of what has been achieved and the best way to do so is to ask for fellow historians' opinion. This is the main reason behind the organisation of an annual PASE colloquium.