THE CAESONII IN THE THIRD CENTURY A.D.: THE IMPACT OF CRISES ON SENATORIAL STATUS AND POWER

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Introduction

It is undeniable that the third century was a period full of critical situations. From the death of Commodus in 192 until the radical reforms of Diocletian beyond 284 A.D., the Roman Empire had to cope with civil wars, military rebellions and mutiny, pestilence and a growing number of barbarian invasions at the frontiers. Especially in the period 249–284, Roman emperors had to concentrate on warfare more than ever before, in more parts of the Empire, and with growing intensity. By spending much time in border regions and other war-zones, they built up personal networks that were different from those of earlier emperors. They encountered more military men and imperial staff acting in the provinces and fewer high status senators and knights. In this way, these upstart military and technocratic men obtained access to crucial assignments and functions created to solve crises in important areas and had the chance to reach an extremely powerful position within the Empire.

However, even within this period of change, continuity did not vanish completely. As this article will show, there were several elite Roman families which were able to maintain or even develop their position within the chaos and transformations of the third century. The Caesonii will be used as an example to illustrate the position of such a central elite family throughout the third century. To this end, the careers of several generations of this family will be discussed in detail first. Next, the role of the Caesonii and other central elite families in the administration of the third century will be dealt with. This will lead

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* This paper stems from a poster presented at the 7th workshop of the international network 'Impact of Empire', 20–24 June 2006 in Nijmegen. It serves as an illustrative example of a wider topic, i.e. administration, appointment policies and social hierarchies in the Roman Empire, A.D. 193–284, which I will treat in my PhD study. An earlier draft of this paper was read by Luuk de Blois, Daniëlle Slootjes and Heather van Tress, who all have made valuable suggestions, and to whom I express my thanks.

to some remarks concerning imperial appointment policy towards the traditional senatorial elite in the third century and the impact of crises on their status and power.

The Caesonii – the course of the third century reflected in three careers

The careers of three generations of the family of the Caesonii coincide with Roman imperial history stretching from the reign of Marcus Aurelius to the reign of Diocletian.¹ Gaius Caesonius Macer Rufinianus, born around 155/160 A.D., was the first member of this family who reached a consulship.² It is generally assumed that he had Italic roots.³ Beside the fact that his father was also called Gaius, nothing is known about his ancestors. Dietz claimed that this Caesonius must have been a *homo novus* based on the fact that he started his career as a *triumvir capitalis*. However, Eck rightly argues that this argument cannot be considered decisive.⁴ Caesonius Macer Rufinianus married Manilia Lucilla and it has been suggested that she was the sister or daughter of (Tiberius) Manilius Fuscus, *consul suffectus* 196/197, *consul II ordinarius* 225.⁵ Caesonius' career can be deduced from an inscription on an epitaph set up by his son. This inscription found near Tibur mentions his entire career in inversed order.⁶

¹ According to *DNP*, Bd. 2 (1997), 929, Caesonius was a Roman family name, documented from the first century B.C.

² *PIR*² C 210. On this man and his career see also: W. Eck, *Die Statthalter der germanischen Provinzen vom 1.-3. Jahrhundert* (Köln 1985), 76–77; M. Christol, *Essai sur l'évolution des carrières sénatoriales dans la 2e moitié du IIIe s. ap. J.-C.* (Paris 1986), 160–162; P.M.M. Leunissen, *Konsuln und Konsulare in der Zeit von Commodus bis Severus Alexander (180–235 n. Chr.)* (Amsterdam 1989), 388; B.E. Thomasson, *Fasti Africani: senatorische und ritterlichen Amtsträger in den römischen Provinzen Nordafrikas von Augustus bis Diokletian* (Stockholm 1996), 86–87 no. 118; C. Badel and A. Béranger, *L'empire romain au III^e siècle après J.-C.* (Paris 1998), 139–141.

³ Eck and Leunissen suggest that he is from Regio I, possibly from Antium. See Eck 1985, op. cit. (n. 2), 76; Leunissen 1989, op. cit. (n. 2), 357.

⁴ K. Dietz, *Senatus contra Principem. Untersuchungen zur senatorischen Opposition gegen Kaiser Maximinus Thrax* (München 1980), 104 f.; Eck 1985, op. cit. (n. 2.), 76.

⁵ L. Caesonius Lucillus Macer Rufinianus, the son of Caesonius and Manilia Lucilla, was one of the *Fratres Arvales*, which was a heritable priestly office. That is why Settipani suggests that Lucilla might have been connected to Ti. Manilius Fuscus (*PIR*² M 137), who was *Frater Arvalis* in 190. C. Settipani, *Continuité gentile et continuité familiale dans les familles sénatoriales romaines à l'époque impériale: mythe et réalité* (Oxford 2000), 349, note 4.

⁶ *CIL* 14.3900 = *ILS* 1182 = *Inscr. It.* IV 1, 102 (Latium, Tibur). For an overview of his career and the careers of the other Caesonii, see the Appendix.

The start of his senatorial career was not exceptional. Being one of the *vigintiviri*, he fulfilled a police-function in Rome as *triumvir capitalis*. This appointment cannot be dated exactly, but was probably at the end of the reign of Marcus Aurelius, just before taking his position as military *tribunus*, one of the commanders of *legio I Adiutrix*. For this position he left Italy to go to Brigetio in Pannonia Superior, probably during Marcus' second expedition in Germania.⁷ He was about twenty years old at that time. It was in the period in which he held this function that his unit was granted military honours (*dona militaria*) by the emperor, which is proudly mentioned in the inscription as well. The next step in his *cursus honorum* was a position as *quaestor* in Narbonensis after which he returned to Rome to become *tribunus plebis*, probably already during the reign of Commodus. Around 185, he was sent to Hispania Baetica as *legatus* to assist the governor and about two years later he became *praetor* and entered the next stage of his career.

Before reaching the consulship, his praetorian career included six or seven positions and can, therefore, be considered rather long. He assisted the governor of Asia as *legatus* and subsequently fulfilled the first of several positions as Italic *curator* in his career. As *curator rei publicae* he probably executed a financial task in Asculum (Picenum), followed by another military function as *legatus* of *legio VII Claudia* at Viminacium in Moesia Superior. Next, he became *proconsul* of Achaia. Governing Greece was reserved for junior praetorian senators. After his proconsulship he returned to Italy to become *curator rei publicae* of Tarracina, a city in Latium, at the end of the reign of Commodus or not long after this emperor's death in 192.⁸ He went to Spain for his next position as *legatus Augusti pro praetore*, governing Lusitania. It is not certain whether he was already appointed when Septimius Severus was proclaimed emperor, or whether the new emperor appointed him there, but he probably retained his position until his function as *consul suffectus* in circa 197/198, when he was about forty years old. The consulship might have been a reward for taking part in putting down the rebellion of Lucius Novius Rufus, governor of Hispania Citerior and

⁷ G. Alföldy, *Fasti Hispanienses. Senatorische Reichsbeamte und Offiziere in den Spanischen Provinzen des römischen Reiches von Augustus bis Diokletian* (Wiesbaden 1969), 146–147; R. Syme, *Emperors and Biography* (Oxford 1971), 159. Pflaum suggested that this office was fulfilled in 173; H.-G. Pflaum, *Les fastes de la province de Narbonnaise* (Paris 1978), 84–85.

⁸ Leunissen 1989, op. cit. (n. 2), 388, suggests circa 193. For a date at the end of the reign of Commodus, see W. Eck, *L'Italia nell'impero Romano. Stato e amministrazione in epoca imperiale* (Bari 1999), 236.

supporter of Clodius Albinus, one of the rivals of Septimius Severus.⁹ This certainly would explain the further course of his career.

Just before, or not long after, his consulship, he was appointed to his third position as Italic *curator rei publicae*, this time in Teanum, a city in the northern part of Campania.¹⁰ Around 198 he became responsible for the banks and channels of the Tiber as *curator alvei Tiberis*, a position which both his son as his grandson would also occupy in the future. After this, probably around 200, he was appointed to his first consular governorship in Germania Superior. For his next post of *curator aquarum et Miniciae* he returned to Italy. Presumably he fulfilled this position somewhere between 203 and 213, but the exact date and duration are unclear.¹¹ Caesonius' next position crowned his career: he was appointed *proconsul* to govern the economically important province of Africa. He may have fulfilled this position under Caracalla in 213/214 or 214/215, but a date under Elagabal or Severus Alexander has also been suggested.¹² Caesonius Macer Rufinianus' task as *curator rei publicae* of Lavinium or Lanuvium, both of which are in Latium, brought him back to Italy once more. He fulfilled it twice, at the end of the reign of Caracalla, according to Eck.¹³ He was also *sodalis Augustalis*, but it is impossible to determine the exact position of this priestly office within his career.

His career ended in a remarkable way: Caesonius Macer Rufinianus was *comes* of emperor Severus Alexander, most probably during the latter's Persian campaign of 231–233 A.D. It seems unthinkable that the senator, who must have been over 70 years old during the Persian

⁹ Alföldy 1969, op. cit. (n. 7), 146; Christol 1986, op. cit. (n. 2), 161; Leunissen 1989, op. cit. (n. 2), 155 and 289.

¹⁰ Christol 1986, op. cit. (n. 2), 161 agrees with *PIR*² C 210 that this position must have been fulfilled before the consulship and that the post of *curator alvei Tiberis* must have been Caesonius' first consular task. Leunissen 1989, op. cit. (n. 2), 388, suggests that the curatorship of Teanum was his first consular position.

¹¹ Christol 1986, op. cit. (n. 2), 161, note 9, follows Pflaum 1989, op. cit. (n. 7), 85, who suggests 204 or not much later. Here Pflaum rectifies the date of about 220, previously suggested by him. See H.-G. Pflaum, 'Du nouveau sur les Agri Decumates à la lumière d'un fragment de Capoue', *Bonner Jahrbücher*, 163 (1963), 234–237.

¹² Thomasson 1996, op. cit. (n. 2), pp. 86–87, suggests a date under Elagabal or Severus Alexander and that, in this case, his son might have served as his father's *legatus* in Africa. He claims that there is not much space for a proconsulship during the reign of Caracalla. Christol 1986, op. cit. (n. 2) 162, and Leunissen 1989, op. cit. (n. 2), 388, suggest a date between 212/213 and 215.

¹³ Eck 1985, op. cit. (n. 2), 76, accepts Lavinium; Eck 1999, op. cit. (n. 8), 234, says Lanuvium.

expedition of this emperor, was actually taken along on this perilous and exhausting Eastern campaign. Suggestions that the title *comes* had developed into a title to indicate that someone was connected to the court, like *amicus*, might therefore very well be true.¹⁴

The son of Caesonius Macer Rufinianus and his wife Manilia Lucilla was named Lucius Caesonius Lucillus Macer Rufinianus and was probably born around 195.¹⁵ His career is known to us mainly from an inscription on a statue base also found near Tibur.¹⁶

He started his career as one of the *vigintiviri* with a judicial position as *decemvir stlitibus iudicandis* sometime at the beginning of the reign of Caracalla. At that time, or not long afterwards, the family was accepted into the patriciate (*electus in familiam patriciam*). This can be noticed in the career of Caesonius Lucillus Macer Rufinianus: he was appointed *quaestor* as imperial *candidatus* at the end of Caracalla's reign and became *praetor candidatus* after that, without intervening positions, which was typical for a patrician career. His appointment as *praetor* was probably after the death of Caracalla, during the reign of Elagabal, around 220/222.¹⁷

Like his father, Caesonius Lucillus Macer Rufinianus also served in several positions as *curator*, two of which followed immediately after his praetorship. First, he became *curator rei publicae* of Suessa, a city in Campania. For the second curatorship both Tusculum in Latium as well as Puteoli in Campania near Naples are suggested.¹⁸ Either way, both positions were fulfilled in Italic cities. A post as *legatus* and at the same time deputy of the *proconsul* brought him to Africa, where he would return later in his career, and consecutively led to his suffect consulship. These positions can be dated around 225/230, during the

¹⁴ Pflaum 1978, op. cit. (n. 7), 85–86; see also Thomasson 1996, op. cit. (n. 2), 87.

¹⁵ Christol 1986, op. cit. (n. 2), 162, note 15.

¹⁶ *CIL* 14.3902 = *ILS* 1186 = *Inscr. It.* IV I, 104 (Latium et Campania, Tibur). See also: *CIL* 6.2104b; *CIL* 6.37165; *AE* 1915, no. 102 = *CIL* 6.39443. For this Caesonius, see *PIR*² C 209 and Dietz 1980, op. cit. (n. 4), no. 17, 103 ff.; Christol 1986, op. cit. (n. 2), 158–172; Leunissen 1989, op. cit. (n. 2), 377; Thomasson 1996, op. cit. (n. 2), no. 122, 90; M. Peachin, *Iudex vice Caesaris. Deputy Emperors and the Administration of Justice during the Principate* (Stuttgart 1996), 112–114.

¹⁷ Peachin 1996, op. cit. (n. 16), 113, dates the first steps of his career somewhat earlier. He assumes that this Caesonius was *quaestor* in circa 212 and *praetor* in circa 217. In that case, both positions would have been carried out during the reign of Caracalla.

¹⁸ About the problem, see *PIR*² C 209 and also Thomasson 1996, op. cit. (n. 2), 90.

reign of Severus Alexander, at about the same time that Caesonius' father was *comes* of this emperor.

Shortly after his consulship, the function of *curator alvei Tiberis et cloacarum urbis* became his first consular task. His next job as *curator aquarum et Miniciae*, the position which his father had also fulfilled, can be dated during the last years of Severus Alexander's reign, between 230 and 235. In the year 238 he was chosen as one of the *vigintiviri ex senatus consulto rei publicae curandae*, who, by senatorial decree, were to set the empire free from the among senators very unpopular emperor Maximinus Thrax. His membership of this group shows that he was a highly respected member of the senate. Eventually, the group of twenty succeeded. All the known members of the *vigintiviri* of 238 had successful careers. Caesonius Lucillus Macer Rufinianus was awarded with a *proconsulship* of Africa and returned to this province with which he was already familiar. It must have been about ten to fifteen years after his position as *legatus* and *vice proconsulis*, probably not before 240/241, since it is attested that he took part in meetings of the *fratres Arvales* in 239 and even in January 240.¹⁹ Both the *Historia Augusta* and Zosimus mention the usurpation of a Sabinianus who was acclaimed emperor in Carthage in 240 and was struck down at the end of the year by the governor of Mauretania Caesariensis.²⁰ Caesonius might have been sent there to restore order in the province, which would mean that emperor Gordianus III put great trust in this man. However, this is merely an assumption.

That Caesonius concluded his career with a position as *praefectus urbi* and a judicial task as deputy of the emperor himself (*electus ad cognoscendas vice Caesaris cognitiones*), also implies that he enjoyed imperial trust. Unfortunately, these last two positions cannot be dated more precisely than with a *terminus ante quem* of 254. So, although it is likely that they were also fulfilled during the reign of Gordianus III, as *PIR* suggests, they could also have been carried out under Philippus Arabs, Decius, Trebonianus Gallus, Aemilius Aemilianus or even Valerianus. It is also unclear whether the two positions were carried out simultaneously or subsequently.²¹ A second consulship might have been expected, but

¹⁹ *CIL* 6.37165; Thomasson 1996, op. cit. (n. 2), 90, note 137.

²⁰ *Scriptores Historiae Augustae, Vita Gordiani* 23, 4; Zosimus 1.17.1.

²¹ Peachin 1996, op. cit. (n. 16), 114, deals with the problem of dating these positions. He locates Caesonius as *vice Caesaris* in Rome between 242 and 244, when Gordianus III was conducting his *expedition Orientalis*, and thinks this position was prior to the

Caesonius may have died before he could have been appointed. At any rate, Caesonius Lucillus Macer Rufinianus proved to be one of the more important senators during the first half of the third century, considered loyal by several emperors.

The next generation of the Caesonii was represented by Lucius Caesonius Ovinus Manlius Rufinianus Bassus.²² He was the son of the above-mentioned Caesonius and a woman who probably descended from the *gens Ovinia*, which was important in the third century as well.²³ His career can be deduced from an honorary inscription from Aversa.²⁴

He must have been born during the reign of Severus Alexander, between 225 and 230, and served in his first position about 240/245 under Gordianus III or Philippus Arabs. Just like his grandfather he started his career as *triumvir capitalis*. Next, he became *sevir turmae deducendae (equitum Romanorum)*, one of six men responsible for organising the annual games, which brought along a great financial responsibility. As a patrician, the next steps in his career were *quaestor candidatus* and *praetor candidatus*.

His praetorian career was short. Two functions as *curator rei publicae* led him directly to the consulship. His first curatorship was carried out in Beneventum in the southern part of Italy and the second one in Lavinium in Latium led him to a city where his grandfather may also

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prefecture of the city. He suggests that Caesonius laid down his position as judge when Philip returned to Rome and that he was then named *praefectus urbi*, circa 246. However, he admits that the epigraphic evidence supplies no precision in this regard.

²² *PIR*² C 212; *PIR*² O 186; *PLRE* I, 1971, s.v. Bassus 18. See also Christol 1986, op. cit. (n. 2), 158–176; Thomasson 1996, op. cit. (n. 2), no. 130, 93–94.

²³ According to Settiani 2000, op. cit. (n. 5), 351, this Caesonius was married to an (Ovinia), who was probably the sister of (L. Ovinus) Pacatianus, who was married with Cornelia Optata A[quila?] Flavia..., the sister of Cn. Cornelius Paternus, *consul ordinarius* 233. He suggests that L. Ovinus Rusticus Cornelianus, *consul suffectus* in the middle of the third century, and Ovinus Pacatianus, *praefectus urbi* 276, might have been their children, and that an Ovinus Iulius Aquilus (?) Nonius Paternus, *consul ordinarius* 267?, *consul II ordinarius* 279, *praefectus urbi* 281, might have been their grandson. However, he admits that there are too many uncertainties about the Ovinii to determine a *stemma*.

²⁴ *AE* 1964, no. 223 (Aversa, Campania). He is also known from three other inscriptions (*CIL* 10.1687 = *ILS* 1206; *AE* 1945, no. 21; *AE* 1968, no. 109), which add little to our knowledge of his career. According to Christol 1986, op. cit. (n. 2), 167–176, they refer to the homonymic son of the *consul suffectus* ca 260. This theory, however, was not adopted by many scholars. See Leunissen 1989, op. cit. (n. 2), 202, note 318, and Thomasson 1996, op. cit. (n. 2), 93, note 137. Even if Christol's assumption would be correct, this would only point at another successful generation of the Caesonii within the third century, and would support my argument.

have served as curator. He fulfilled his consulship around 260, probably as *consul suffectus*.²⁵ At that point his career had survived the many changes of imperial power during the 250's.

His consular career started with the position of *curator alvei Tiberis et cloacarum sacrae urbis*, also fulfilled by both his father and grandfather. He held several positions in Africa, a province he may have known from accompanying his father during his proconsulship. However, this might have interfered with the start of his own *cursus honorum*. This Caesonius was *legatus* of Carthage, *curator* of the *colonia Carthaginiensium* and finally *proconsul Africae* for three years in a row. The three African positions are mentioned in succession on his career inscription, but it is doubtful whether they were actually fulfilled consecutively. It has been suggested by both Eck and Christol that the positions of *legatus* and *curator* belonged to the praetorian part of his career.²⁶ The functions might have been clustered in the inscription because they were all fulfilled in the same area. The proconsulship of Africa, which can be dated around 275 under Aurelianus and/or Tacitus, did not mean the end of this man's career. On the contrary, the emperor Probus chose him to chair the *iudicium magnum*, probably a court of appeal at Rome. After this, he carried out some other judicial functions under Probus. He was appointed judge (*iudex*) as deputy of the emperor himself (*vice Caesaris*) in cases between the imperial treasury (*fiscus*), and private individuals and cases between private persons themselves.²⁷ At first, he fulfilled this position in Rome, probably between 276 and 281, and later, presumably during the last years of the reign of Probus (281/282), also in Africa. The title *comes Augustorum duorum* was probably bestowed upon him between 283 and 285, when Carus and Carinus or Carinus and Numerianus were joint emperors.

Two more positions are mentioned in the inscriptions: a second consulship and a position as prefect of the city of Rome. The consulship can be dated around 284 and was presumably a suffect one, which was quite unique. After 104 A.D., all the *consules iterum* had been *ordinarii*.²⁸ However, most of the positions of *consules ordinarii* in the years 283 to

²⁵ It has been suggested that he was identical with the Bassus, who was *consul ordinarius* in 259. See Christol 1989, op. cit. (n. 2), 100–101.

²⁶ Eck, *RE Suppl.* 14 (1974), 82; Christol 1986, op. cit. (n. 2), 163–164.

²⁷ It is unclear whether this position was first exercised *inter fiscum et privatos* and later only (*item*) *inter privatos*, or whether the categories did not change. See Christol 1986, op. cit. (n. 2), 166.

²⁸ See Eck 1974, op. cit. (n. 26), 82.

285 were fulfilled by the emperors themselves, so there was hardly any space for non-imperial *consules ordinarii* in those years, which might explain this uncommon situation. The consulship might have coincided with the position of *praefectus urbi*. It is striking that this Caesonius is not mentioned in the list of city prefects of the Chronographer of 354. Usually, this is explained by suggesting that Caesonius was not *praefectus* of Rome at the first of January, but was appointed in the middle of a year to replace someone else.²⁹ The exact year in which he performed this function is uncertain, but it was probably around 285, during or just before the start of the reign of Diocletian. According to the inscription, Caesonius was also *salius Palatinus*, *pontifex maior* and *pontifex dei Solis*. Only the last priestly office can be dated, although not precisely, since this office only came into use under Aurelianus in 274.

Inscription AE 1968, 109 mentions one other function: *pr[...]/ones tracto Piceno*. Unfortunately, this function cannot be determined with certainty. Suggested solutions are *praefectus adversus latrines* (against brigands), *praefectus annonae* (responsible for the corn crop) and *praefectus ad tirones* (to select recruits).³⁰ Beside the fact that the function cannot be determined, it is also problematic that the position within the career cannot be established, since in this inscription the functions seem not to be in chronological sequence.

A Caesonius Bassus was *consul ordinarius* in 317. He was probably the son or rather the grandson of Caesonius Ovinus Manlius Rufinianus Bassus and was the last consul of the Caesonii who is known to us.³¹

The Caesonii and other central elite families in the third century

Within about a century the Caesonii seemed to have developed from a rather ordinary senatorial, perhaps originally even equestrian, family into a patrician clan whose members had flourishing careers under many emperors of the third century. The family does not seem to have suffered from the numerous changes of imperial power which appeared especially from 238 A.D. onward. Quite the contrary. The

²⁹ See under *PIR*² O 186.

³⁰ See Eck 1974, op. cit. (n. 26), 83. Eck prefers Barbieri's suggested solution of *pr[ae]fectus ad tir/ones*.

³¹ *PLRE* I, Bassus 12.

most impressive appointments within the careers of the Caesonii can be dated after that critical year.

Many similarities can be found in the careers of the three Caesonii. Caesonius Lucillus Macer Rufinianus and his son fulfilled both their quaestorship and their praetorship as *candidati* of the emperor. This demonstrates imperial favour as well as their patrician status. Typical of a patrician career is also the relatively low number of offices between the praetorship and the consulship within their careers.

The number of positions, mainly curatorships, in which the Caesonii served in Italy is considerable. The position of *curator aquarum*, the prefecture of Rome, and possibly also the curatorship of Lavinium, were fulfilled by two of them. The post of *curator alvei Tiberis* even appears in all of their careers.

Besides Italy, Africa was a region in which all of them were active. All three of them reached the high post of *proconsul* of Africa. In this way the emperors took a certain risk by enabling the family to build up a social network in Africa. The risk of usurpation grew when a family had connections in a certain area and could lead to situations comparable to the seizure of power by the Gordiani in the years 238 to 244. Apparently, the advantage of the fact that they knew the province was considered more important than taking precautionary measures against usurpation.

In any case, the confidence put in the Caesonii was not misplaced: none of the members of this family abused their power. On the other hand, after 238, military commanders, not senators, appeared to be the greatest threat to the imperial throne. Military experience, military power and social networks among military officers were matters that made a difference from 240 onward. Those were exactly the qualities that the Caesonii largely lacked. The positions they fulfilled mainly offered them experience in the financial and legal sphere, hardly any knowledge of the military, and most of them involved more honour than actual power.

Two events were decisive for the position of the Caesonii in the period between the reign of Marcus Aurelius and the reign of Diocletian. First, the fact that Caesonius Macer Rufinianus chose to support Septimius Severus in his battle against Clodius Albinus, and second, the fact that Caesonius Lucillus Macer Rufinianus became one of the *vigintiviri* in 238. The first decision brought the family consular and patrician status and put them on the map as an important senatorial family. The second matter enabled them to maintain their position in

a chaotic period and to rise to the highest possible positions within a senatorial career and some intriguing special tasks in direct service to the emperors. During the remainder of this period of about a hundred years, the Caesonii seem to have kept a low profile, being loyal to most emperors, but never so bound to one emperor in particular that his death would cause danger to them. In this way, they were able to survive the chaos and transformations of the third century crises.

To what extent is the case of the Caesonii applicable to the situation of other central elite families in the third century? Unfortunately, the family of the Caesonii is the only family of which the careers of several generations in a row have come down to us. However, enough is known about some other families and the careers of some members of these families to compare their situation with that of the Caesonii.

Some of these families can be traced back to the time of the Republic, like the Acilii Glabrones et Aviolae and the Valerii Messalae. Others seem to have obtained consular status during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, for example the Brutii, the Vettii and even the Claudii Pompeiani, descendants of Tiberius Claudius Pompeianus, important general and son-in-law of Marcus Aurelius. A third group arose during the reign of Septimius Severus. Some examples are the Virii and the Marii, who were descendants of men who supported Septimius Severus during the civil wars, just like Caesonius Macer Rufinianus.

Uniting families through nuptial bonds, as happened between the Caesonii and the Ovinii, was a rather common way for these families to maintain or expand their position. That this could have far-reaching results is demonstrated by the example of the Hedii Lolliani and the Egnatii. The sister of the Hedii Lolliani, who where *consules ordinarii* in 209 and 211, got married to one of the Egnatii, Egnatius Victor, *consul suffectus* before 207.³² Their daughter, (Egnatia) Mariniana got married to the future emperor Publius Licinius Valerianus, and gave birth to the future emperor Publius Licinius Egnatius Gallienus.

A considerably number of these central elite families seems to have originated from Italic areas.³³ Some of them had patrician status and

³² Q. (Hedius) Lollianus Plautius Avitus was *consul ordinarius* in 209 and (Hedius) Terentius Gentianus in 211.

³³ This goes for example with certainty for the Acilii, the Brutii (Volcei, Luciana), the Numii, the Ragonii (Opitergium, Venetia et Histria) and probably also for the Egnatii (Etruscan origine), the Hedii Lolliani (Liguria), the Valerii Messallae and the Virii (northern Italy).

if so, a position as *quaestor* and/or *praetor candidatus* often shows up in careers of members of this family.³⁴ A large number of Italic curatorships also appears within the careers of members of these families.³⁵

Many of these central elite family members appear on the list of *praefecti urbi*: L. Marius Maximus Perpetuus Aurelianus (218–219); L. Egnatius Victor Lollianus (in 254, under his brother-in-law Valerianus); Valerius Maximus (probably in 255); L. Virius Orfitus (273–274) and Vir(i)us Lupus (278–280). The post of *proconsul Africae* or *Asiae* was also often given to members of these families. Marius Maximus Perpetuus Aurelianus served as *proconsul Africae* and *Asiae* during the reign of Caracalla.³⁶ Q. (Hedius) Lollianus Plautius Avitus was *proconsul Asiae* about 224. L. Egnatius Victor Lollianus even held the position of *proconsul Asiae* for three succeeding years in the period 242–247. He might have been sent there by Gordianus III in connection with the campaign against the Persians and was probably allowed to keep this position under Philippus Arabs. Apparently, he made the right decision by immediately supporting Philippus as the new emperor who, in return, did not replace him.³⁷ Finally, several judicial positions, sometimes as deputy of the emperor, were carried out by members of these elite families. For example Q. (Hedius) Lollianus Plautius Avitus who was *iuridicus* in Spain, in Asturia and Callaecia, during the reign of Septimius Severus, and Vir(i)us Lupus who was appointed *iudex sacrarum cognitionum vice Caesaris* in Egypt (or Asia) and the East by emperor Aurelianus or Probus.

³⁴ C. Vettius Gratus Sabinianus, for example, was *praetor candidatus*, and L. Marius Perpetuus was *quaestor candidatus*. C. Vettius Gratus Atticus Sabinianus was both *quaestor* as well as *praetor candidatus*, just like Q. (Hedius) Lollianus Plautius Avitus.

³⁵ Some examples: both C. Vettius Gratus Sabinianus and his presumed brother C. Vettius Gratus Atticus Sabinianus served as *curator Flaminiae et alimentorum*. L. Valerius Claud(ius) Acilius Priscil(l)ianus [Maximus], also one of the members of the *vigintiviri* in 238, served as *curator alvei Tiberis* and *curator Laurentium Lavinatium* between his ordinary consulship in 233 and his position as *praefectus urbi* in 255. The position of *curator Laurentium Lavinatium* was also fulfilled by Vir(i)us Lupus, descendant of one of the important generals of Septimius Severus. L. Marius Perpetuus, brother of Marius Maximus, another general of Septimius Severus, was *curator rei publicae Alviensium* and *Tusculanorum*.

³⁶ He served as *proconsul Asiae* for two years in a row which was highly unusual. It was also highly unusual that he was both *proconsul Africae* as well as *Asiae*. See Leunissen 1989, op. cit. (n. 2), 185; 217 and 224–225.

³⁷ Leunissen 1989, op. cit. (n. 2), 185.

The impact of crises on senatorial status and power

The crises of the third century caused changes in many fields, including the administration of the empire. Critical situations like barbarian invasions and usurpation called for many *ad hoc* appointments to enable men to solve specific crises. These men were often recruited from the military commanders and imperial staff acting in the provinces. They stayed in close vicinity to the emperors who were forced to spend most of their time in war-zones.

On the other hand, parts of the Empire that were not heavily struck by long-term problems, such as repeated invasions and enduring warfare, and had a traditionally high status within the Empire, for example the provinces of Africa and Asia, were continuously entrusted to loyal status set senators, who were also appointed to functions in Rome and Italy. Such senators were as always very well qualified to govern these parts of the Empire and were acceptable to local elites in those relatively rich, developed areas. In this way, the emperors gave senators the honours due to them without giving them too much actual military power. In earlier periods of the Principate, emperors had acted likewise towards the patrician nucleus of the senatorial order. Both parties, the emperors as well as the members of elite senatorial families, seemed to agree with this policy. The latter maintained their social status without taking too much risk, and the emperors were probably glad that certain mechanisms of the old system did not call for change but continued to function as they had done before. Keeping the senatorial families satisfied in this way would also add a lot to the legitimization of their position among the senators. However, the gradual disappearance of the coincidence of high social status and the ability to exercise power in the Roman Empire in the third century is undeniable.

Rome, September 2006

Appendix – The Careers of the Caesonii

<i>Name</i>	C. Caesonius Macer Rufinianus	L. Caesonius Lucillus Macer Rufinianus	L. Caesonius Ovinus Manlius Rufinianus Bassus
<i>Career until position as praetor</i>	?? – triumvir capitalis ?178/180 (or 173?) – tribunus militum leg I Adiutricis ?? – quaestor provinciae Narbonensis ?? – tribunus plebis ca 185 – legatus proconsulis Baeticae ca 187 – praetor	?? – decemvir stlitibus iudicandis ca 215/217 (or ca 212?) – quaestor candidatus ca 220/222 (or ca 217?) – praetor candidatus	After 235? (240/245?) – triumvir capitalis After 235? (240/245?) – sevir turmae deducendae ?? – quaestor candidatus ?? – praetor candidatus
<i>Career until position as consul</i>	?? – legatus proconsulis Asiae ?? – curator r p Asculanorum ca 187/190 – legatus Aug legionis VII Claudiaie ca 192 – proconsul Achaiae ca 193 curator r p Tarracinensium ?194–?197 – legatus Aug pr pr Lusitaniae ca 197/198 – consul suffectus ----- ca 197 – curator r p Teanensium	?? – curator r p Suessanorum ?? – curator r p Tuscolanorum / Puteolanorum ?225/230 – legatus Africae eodem tempore vice proconsulis ?225/230 – consul suffectus	Before 260 – curator r p Beneventanorum ca 260 – consul suffectus
<i>Consular career</i>	?198–200 – curator alvei Tiberis ?200–?203 – legatus Aug pr pr Germaniae sup ?203/213 – curator aquarum et Miniciae ?213/215 (or 218/222?) – proconsul Africae ?? – curator r p Lanivinatorum/ Lavininorum II ?222–235 (231–233?) – comes Aug	?225/230 – curator alvei Tiberis et cloacarum urbis ?230/235 – curator aquarum et Miniciae 238 – XXvir ex s c r p curandae Not before 240/241 – proconsul Africae 241/254 (242–244?) – electus ad cognoscendas vice Caesaris cognitiones 241/254 (246?) – praefectus urbi	?? – curator alvei Tiberis et cloacarum sacrae urbis ?? – legatus proconsulis Africae dioeceseos Carthaginiensis (praetorian?) ?? – curator coloniae Carthaginensium (praetorian?) ca 275? – proconsul Africae tertium ca 276/282 – electus a divo Probo ad praesidendum iudicium magnum ca 276/281 – iudex sacrarum cognitionum vice Caesaris sine appellatione cognoscens inter fiscum et privates item inter privates Roma ca 281/282 – iudex et in provincial Africa Spring/summer 283?–285 – comes Augg Fall 284 – consul II suffectus 285 – praefectus urbi
<i>Priestly offices</i>	?? – sodalis Aug	239/240 – frater Arv	?? – salius Palatinus After 274 – pontifex dei Solis ?? – pontifex maior