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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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 Rufinus, 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 Rufinus 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.


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.


⁵ L. Caesonius Lucullus 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 (PIR² M 137), who was Frater Arvalis in 190. C. Settipani, Continuité gentilice 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.