

CHAPTER I

Introduction
The Senator

This study explores important polarities in senatorial promotion, using a new database of careers.¹ What difference did it make to be aristocratic? How much did earlier experience matter in high promotion? Was army command professionalised? Did the career system carry men upward on its own? Did it help to have served overseas? Did senators from the provinces gain social standing through greater activity?

Aristocratic potency for a senator mainly lay in three things: birth, office-holding and wealth. Descent from a senatorial family – preferably old, and best of all patrician – conferred enormous prestige.² But high office gave even greater standing, and the upper reaches of the Senate consisted of those who had reached the consulship or praetorship.³ However, senators also needed considerable wealth, because without it they could not maintain a grand enough lifestyle, and might even lose their rank.⁴ There were sometimes expulsions or resignations from the Senate.⁵ Thus, when Pliny wrote to the Emperor to seek senatorial rank for a friend, he emphasised that his original resources of 4 million sesterces had been considerably enhanced by inheritance.⁶ That was far above the nominal threshold of 1 or 1.2 million sesterces, but still below the amounts implied by the Emperors' grants to deserving senators. These suggest a figure of

¹ In the senatorial discussion, the main tool is statistical. The dominant patterns only emerge when careers are considered en bloc. Too little is known about most senators to support a biographical approach (Graham 1974), but some careers are discussed in Appendix 5.

² For inherited rank, see Alföldy 1975, with further debates in Hopkins-Burton 1983, chapter 3; Alföldy 1986: 136–61; Jacques 1987; and Hahn, Leunissen 1990. For patricians, see Pistor 1965 and Sections 2.3.1–2.3.8 (this volume).

³ See Chapter 2, Section 2.1. ⁴ For the financial demands of office, see Section 3.1.4.

⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 2.48; 12.52; Dio 57.10.3–4; 60.29.1; Suet. *Vesp.* 9; Aur. Victor, *Caes.* 9.9.; Pliny *Ep.* 4.11.1, 14.

⁶ *Ep.* 10.4; cf. Syme *RP* II: 480–2.

roughly 8 million sesterces.⁷ To be adequately provided for, the senator clearly needed much more than the basic amount.⁸

Partly because of the high wealth requirements, the need for new senators could not be entirely met from within the Senate. In practice some fortunes ran down over time, and individual families died out or could only be maintained by adoption, while others might not wish for generations of costly office-holding and social display.⁹ A single consulship was enough to make a family 'nobilis', and the point did not necessarily have to be proved again and again.¹⁰ And in the background were acute shortages in the aristocracy at the start of the Principate, amounting to demographic crisis.¹¹

Largely because of these problems, the Senate saw its recruitment progressively expanded by the Emperors to draw on local aristocracies all over Italy.¹² And in a crucial second phase, the Senate was increasingly supplemented from the aristocracies in the provinces.¹³ This no doubt welded the Empire more closely together. But it also represented a powerful net which trawled through concentrations of aristocratic wealth all over the Mediterranean in order to maintain the system as a whole (Chapter 6).¹⁴

Since the wealth of Roman society was primarily agrarian, the senator was bound to be a substantial landowner.¹⁵ Nevertheless, for much of the time he was confined to Rome and Latium by the obligations of his rank.¹⁶

⁷ Qualifying levels of 1 and 1.2 million sesterces are both reported under Augustus (Duncan-Jones 1982: 373 and Nicolet 1976). For Imperial grants worth about 8 million sesterces, Duncan-Jones 1982: 18 n. 7; for an outright grant of 10 million by Tiberius, *Tac. Ann.* 1.75.

⁸ That is also implied by Tacitus's anecdote in which the Hortensii are still reduced to shameful poverty after receiving 1.8 million sesterces from Tiberius (*Tac. Ann.* 2.37–8). But legislation which allowed a wealthy wife to make her husband's fortune up to the amount legally required suggests that the threshold level could still be important (*Dig.* 24.1.42, Gaius, Antoninus Pius).

⁹ Run-down fortunes, see n. 8; adopted heirs, Syme *RP* IV: 159–73; families dying out, Chapter 6, Section 6.1 and Chapter 2, n. 31 'honesta quies', Pliny *Ep.* 1.14.5; 'tranquillissimum otium' 7.25.2.

¹⁰ Cf. Alföldy 1975: 295; Section 2.1. ¹¹ Sections 6.1 and 9.3.

¹² Augustus himself was from Velitrae, related by marriage to the patrician Julii at Rome (Suet. *Aug.* 1).

¹³ Since provincial recruitment to the Senate was clearly part of a wider process, it is unrealistic to interpret the initiatives as spontaneous gestures of favour to the unprivileged, or as deliberate preference for provincials. See Chapter 6, n. 4.

¹⁴ Practically, no Mediterranean region was left untouched, even the Mauretania and Egypt, although the only senators from northern or frontier provinces were quite late. For regional origins, see *EOS* 1–2. The first senators from Egypt were enrolled under Caracalla (Dio 51.17.3).

¹⁵ Those with other sorts of wealth either bought land (Duncan-Jones 1982: 324), or could not aspire to the Senate, as with the friend whose money-making skills Seneca so much admired (*Ep. mor.* 101; Chapter 11, p. 119). In CE 33, when loans were temporarily outlawed, the resulting collapse showed that few of the wealthy had enough of their resources in cash, and when the ensuing panic made the land market freeze up as well, many were left high and dry (Duncan-Jones 1994: 23–5).

¹⁶ See Chapter 6, n. 14. Senators were technically domiciled in the city of Rome (Talbert 1984: 141).

His estates were typically distant, either elsewhere in Italy, or in provinces overseas. The provinces that could be visited without special permission were Sicily and later Narbonensis.¹⁷ But that still left most of the Empire effectively out of bounds. However, efforts to make candidates for office buy land in Italy showed that the Senate's centre of gravity was shifting, and they began quite early.¹⁸ The senatorial recess in September and October was convenient for retreats to pleasure spots such as Tibur or the coastal resorts in Campania. Ammianus's picture of a great household on the move, with the different grades of servant drawn up by rank and marching in line like an army battalion, may reflect the seasonal migration from Rome. The weavers are close to the master in his carriage; they are followed by the cooks, then by ordinary slaves and their friends, with eunuchs young and old bringing up the rear.¹⁹ But it is not clear whether senators went to distant estates during the recess. We know that Pliny, with strong roots in northern Italy and in Umbria, sometimes made personal visits there, but he may have been exceptionally mobile.²⁰ The post of curator rei publicae took some career senators to towns in Italy, mainly after Pliny's time.²¹

The social make-up of the Senate can be studied in detail, largely through the vigintivirate, the most junior post held by senators.²² The four colleges of vigintiviri incorporated a definite rank order, but patrician status outdid all college affiliation.²³ The gradations amounted to a seven-point hierarchy, with patricians at the top, followed in a clear sequence by plebeian members of the four colleges, then by non-vigintiviri and senators from the militiae.²⁴ The rankings provide an effective yardstick for assessing social standing. The final post in the career was equally

¹⁷ Talbert 1984: 140 n. 42.

¹⁸ Under Trajan, Pliny *Ep.* 6.19; HA *M.Ant.* 11.8. See also Andermahr 1998.

¹⁹ Ammianus 14.6.17; for eunuchs, see Section 13.8. The household of the city prefect Pedanius Secundus was said to number 400 members (*Tac.Ann.* 14.43). Pliny seems to have owned more than 500 slaves (Duncan-Jones 1982: 24).

²⁰ Cf. Duncan-Jones 1982: 20–3. Pliny sometimes liked to commute at the end of the day to a second home near Ostia, a journey of several hours (*Ep.* 9.40; 2.17). The re-letting of farms when the leases terminated was a special reason for a landlord to visit (*Ep.* 10.8.5), but one which would only occur every few years.

²¹ They were usually spared the postings in the deep south that went to lesser figures (Jacques 1984: 188).

²² Careers whose initial posts are missing cannot be studied in this way, and thus fall outside this survey (see Section 8.2.1).

²³ Patricians did not always belong to the highest vigintivir college, the monetales (see Section 2.3.2). The college hierarchy remained clear-cut nevertheless, and is spelt out in their access to the major priesthoods (Chapter 2, Table 2.3).

²⁴ See Chapter 2, Table 2.1 and Appendix 1.

important, and is likewise coded numerically.²⁵ It provides a simple tool for assessing individual performance. The two scoring systems thus reflect social standing and career outcome.

The source material comes from a database of over 550 senatorial careers of the Principate. It includes virtually all holders of the vigintivirate, together with a large proportion of the known careers without a vigintivirate.²⁶ All the careers are assigned to broad periods. More than half the evidence is evidently ‘Antonine’, with limited amounts in the first and third centuries.²⁷ Only one-third of the careers can be assigned to consular dates, but their chronology is very striking (Figure 7.1).

Senatorial office-holding changed little in its essentials over the three centuries from Augustus to Diocletian. Thus, a host of positions familiar very early on are combined in a career recorded in the 280s, at the very end of our period: triumvir capitalis, sevir, quaestor candidatus, praetor candidatus, legatus provinciae Africae, consul, curator alvei Tiberis, proconsul Africae, praefectus urbi and salius Palatinus.²⁸ Moreover, the few definite changes in the career system during the Principate came too late to figure significantly in the present material.²⁹ Although the sample comes from random survivals, representation of several core offices is relatively consistent.³⁰ This suggests a common survival factor, which makes it easier to extrapolate features of the senatorial career, as well as highlighting some anomalies in the surviving record.³¹

Access to senatorial office depended overwhelmingly on the Emperor. Seneca, in a satirical illustration of the man who can never be satisfied, makes the Emperor the source of preferment at every turn:

²⁵ See Appendix 1 and n.26.

²⁶ See Table 2.1. The total is 557 career senators (Appendix 7, omitting any cases where the earliest posts are missing, see n. 22). Thirty-six vigintiviri who have no further career are listed separately in Appendix 4, with a grand summary in Table A3. Steiner’s 1974 thesis was taken as a starting point for the vigintiviri, together with Hillebrand 2006 for first-century material, and Cascione 1999 for the tresviri capitales. The database utilises *PIR2* for senators known by family name, elsewhere *PIR1*, and biographical notices in *RE* and *Brills New Pauly*, together with the online Clauss-Slaby Datenbank, and surveys by Alföldy 1977, Birley 1981 and 2005, Christol 1986, Corbier 1974, Dabrowa 1998, Devijver 1989–92, Eck 1970, Groag 1939, Leunissen 1989, Pflaum *CP*, Rémy 1989, Rüpke 2005, Syme 1979–91, Thomasson 1996 and others. Names, offices, regional postings, patrician/plebeian rank, priesthoods, regional origin, period and consular date (if known) were all incorporated in a Systat database (Wilkinson 1988). Systat allows efficient tabulation and cross-tabulation of offices, together with graphic displays using Sygraph.

²⁷ See Chapter 7.

²⁸ From the career of L. Caesonius Ovinius Manlius Rufinianus Bassus recorded in CE 285 (no. 140 and Appendix 5, p. 167).

²⁹ See Section 7.3.

³⁰ Implying a survival-rate of about 8%, or 24 year-cohorts. See Chapter 8 and Table 8.1.

³¹ Extrapolation: see Appendix 3, ‘The duration of army posts’. For anomalies, see Chapter 8.

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He gave me the praetorship, yet I wanted the consulship. He made me consul, but not ordinarius. He made me ordinarius, yet withheld a priesthood. He placed me in his own priestly college, but why only in one? He promoted my entire career, but never increased my fortune. He bestowed a suitable amount of wealth, yet gave me nothing from his private treasury.³²

Pliny too describes high office as being bestowed by the Emperor. He also speaks of praetorships, priesthoods and consulships being conferred by mighty freedmen under Trajan's aberrant predecessors.³³

Seneca's words are symptomatic, and show the Emperor wielding absolute power over the upper reaches of the senatorial career. He was also responsible for naming *vigintiviri* and *quaestors*.³⁴ In posts below the consulship he evidently put forward certain men as his own *candidati*, whose election was thus assured.³⁵ But elections with an uncertain outcome show that the Emperor did not decide every name (see Section 3.1.1).

One of the most important issues in studying senatorial careers is whether advancement mainly depended on merit, or on birth and social connexions.³⁶ There has been some readiness to interpret Roman careers as though they belonged to a modern meritocracy, rather than an *ancien régime* system where nobility effortlessly rises to the top.³⁷ But the present analysis suggests that respect for aristocracy was often powerful and sometimes dominant.³⁸ Nevertheless, the Senate also included *strata* whose members were especially active.³⁹ And lack of aristocratic roots did not prevent provincials from contributing more than their share.⁴⁰

³² Seneca, *de ira* 3.31.2. Each of these imperial benefits lay within the bounds of possibility. Also *de ben.* 2.27.4.

³³ *Pan.* 88.1. For the Emperor's award of priesthoods, see previous note, and Dio 53.17.8. For consulships and praetorships awarded by Imperial slaves, see also Epictetus 4.1.148–50. Pliny elsewhere writes to Trajan requesting a praetorship for Accius Sura (*Ep.* 10.12).

³⁴ Mommsen *DP V*: 224. ³⁵ Talbert 1984: 342–3. See also Chapter 3, Section 3.1.2.

³⁶ Birley 1992.

³⁷ 'Of Louis XVI's 36 ministers, all except one were noble.' And there were 'five *ducs* and one prince among the 11 marshals of 1789'. (McManners 1967: 28–9.) In Parkinson's model of the 'British method (old pattern)', candidates are only appointed if they can show links with the higher aristocracy (Parkinson 1961: 22–3).

³⁸ Chapters 2 and 5. ³⁹ See Section 2.4. ⁴⁰ Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 2

Social Standing and Its Impact on Careers

2.1 Introduction

The most obvious divisions in senatorial society were not based on caste. Instead they reflected success in gaining magistracies, with consuls at the top, followed by praetors and the junior ranks.¹ The consulship was treated as conferring ‘nobilitas’, which extended to a man’s descendants.² But patrician status took privilege even further, as did the major priesthoods.

There were also important structural divisions, at the start of the senatorial career. These were incorporated in the initial post, the vigintivirate, held at about the age of twenty.³ The four parallel posts evidently mirrored the social spectrum within the aristocracy, and had noticeable effects on later success.⁴ First in the hierarchy were the three monetales (or ‘triumviri aere argento auro flando feriundo’). Below them were the ten iudices (or ‘decemviri stlitibus iudicandis’), followed by the four viocuri (or ‘quattuorviri viarum curandarum’) and the three capitales (‘triumviri

¹ Cicero specifies the first two groups: ‘illos ego praestantissimos viros lumina reipublicae vivere volebam, tot consulares, tot praetorios, tot honestissimos senatores’ (*Phil.* 2.37) (‘It was these most eminent men, the luminaries of the state, that I wished to preserve alive, so many consulars, so many ex-praetors, so many most honourable senators.’) Pliny’s Letters have 18 mentions of ‘consularis’ and 17 of ‘praetorius’. And when a praetor was accused of murdering his wife, Tiberius himself went to inspect the scene of the crime (*Tac. Ann.* 4.22).

² Chapter 1, n. 10. Pliny *Pan.* 70.2: ‘cur . . . deterior esset condicio eorum qui posteros habere nobiles mererentur quam eorum qui parentes habuissent’ seems to show that the Emperor could still create new ‘nobiles’ (‘why should the condition of those who deserve to have noble descendants be inferior to that of those whose parentage makes them noble?’). But the term is very rare, and it overlaps with the use of ‘nobilis’ in a more general sense. Cf. Hill 1969; Badel 2005: 65–9.

³ Recorded ages of vigintiviri are 18, 20, 20, 21 and 21 (*PIR* L 32, I 439, I 266 and S 140). Two men who died at 23 had also served as military tribune, typically a 2-year assignment (*PIR* V 297, *PIR* 2 S 700; for the duration of tribunates, see Appendix 3).

⁴ See Appendix 1.1, Tables 2.2 and 2.3 and text. There was no rigid rule, and members of the same family might belong to different vigintivir colleges. Domitius Lucanus was viocurus, but his younger brother Tullus was a iudex. Both were adlected as patricians by Vespasian (nos. 181, 182). Similarly, Minicius Natalis I was a viocurus, but his son was a monetalis (consuls in 106 and 139, nos. 253, 254). There was a visible progression in both cases.

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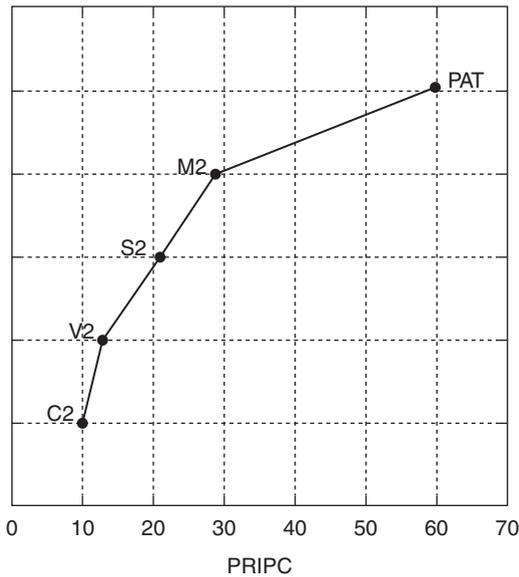


Figure 2.1 Access to major priesthoods: percentage who hold a major priesthood (for social categories, see Table 2.1)

capitales').⁵ To be a *monetalis* placed a man at the top of the tree as a *vigintivir*.

In view of the social distinctions seen in Figure 2.1, it is very unlikely that being allotted to a particular college was based on an assessment of career potential, although this has been suggested.⁶ Nevertheless, the *viocuri* stand out for their very active role (see Section 2.4), although this did not transform their social position, as seen in the priesthood hierarchy (Fig. 2.1).

The social standing of the different groups was largely reflected in their access to patrician rank (Table 2.2). Only the *monetales* have a majority of patricians, the other large patrician bloc being in the *iudices*. The figure for *capitales* is anomalous, but this group rose dramatically in status in the third century, and three of its four patricians belong to this period.⁷

⁵ The shorter forms are used here for convenience. For their contemporary use, see *ILS* 1175; 1185 (*triumvir monetalis*); *CIL* VI 41234; *AE* 1964, 178 (*viocurus*). For *viocuri* named as such, see also Christol 1986: 317.

⁶ Birley 1988: 80–1 in an otherwise important and seminal article (cf. also Alföldy 1975: 291–2). For scepticism, see Campbell 1975: 18 and Dobson 1993a: 192.

⁷ See nos. 140, 352 and 367. Chapter 7, p. 78. See also Appendix 1, p. 154. Plebeian *capitales* are well below other *vigintiviri* in their percentage of consulships (see Table 2.3).

*Social Standing and Its Impact on Careers*Table 2.1 *Totals by social group*

	Total	Percent
1. All patricians (PAT)	81	15
2. Plebeian monetales (M2)	31	6
3. Plebeian iudices (S2)	174	31
4. Plebeian viocuri (V2)	70	13
5. Plebeian capitales (C2)	39	7
6. Plebeian non-vigintiviri (NOV)	134	24
7. Senators from the militiae (MIL)	28	5
TOTAL	557	

Table 2.2 *The distribution of patricians*

	Patricians	Percent
Monetales	48/79	61
Iudices	18/192	9
Viocuri	2/72	3
Capitales	4/43	9
Non-vigintiviri	9/143	6
Militiae	0/28	0

Patrician rank over-rode every other attribute, and placed the holder on a higher social level, as emerges from office-holding patterns studied in Section 2.2. And the numerous career senators with no vigintivirate formed a further social group. These in turn were separate from the few promoted from the equestrian militiae.⁸ Thus the status hierarchy contained seven categories (Table 2.1).

⁸ For the non-vigintiviri (abbreviated here as 'NOV'), see Appendix 2. For senators and the militiae, see also Section 10.1.2. Senators began to be deflected from the militiae very early (see Dio 52.25.6), and from admittedly small samples, their numbers appear stable at 5% over the three periods (see Table 7.3). For first century praetors with this background, see nos. 517, 582, 599, 605, 312 (also consul). In Epictetus's imaginary example (4.1.33–40), the manumitted slave dissatisfied with merely being free obtains the gold rings of the eques, serves the three militiae and then enters the Senate. For transitions from slavery to the senate, see Section 14.3.1.

2.2 Priesthoods, Consulships and Career Scores

The major priesthoods and the consulship also provide important indexes of social standing (Table 2.3). The priesthoods show a continuous descending hierarchy in the first five categories, with patricians far above the rest, holding more than twice as many priesthoods as anyone else. They also far outstrip other groups in the consulship. The priesthood quotients for the first five groups are continuously graded (Fig. 2.1). Although less steep, the sequence is the same in terms of career scores and consulships, except that men in the fourth category, the *viocuri*, are higher than expected. Their career score ranks second, and their consulship figure is third in the first five places (see Table 2.3).

The non-*vigintiviri* and the *militiae* men fall outside the orthodox career structure.⁹ Perhaps surprisingly, they are second only to the patricians in their career scores. Both also hold consulships in quite large numbers, falling behind when it comes to priesthoods.

The close relationship between access to priesthoods and social standing extended even further, with the importance of the individual priesthood reflected in the average social score.¹⁰ The priesthoods were, in order of precedence, *pontifex*, *augur*, *quindecimvir sacris faciundis* and *septemvir*

Table 2.3 *Priesthoods, consulships and career scores*

GROUP	Consuls	Percent	Major priesthoods	Percent	Career score (av.)
1. Patricians (PAT)	59/81	73	49	60	9.2
2. Plebeian <i>monetales</i> (M2)	15/31	48	9	29	7.5
3. Plebeian <i>iudices</i> (S2)	66/174	38	36	21	7.1
4. Plebeian <i>viocuri</i> (V2)	31/70	44	9	13	7.7
5. Plebeian <i>capitales</i> (C2)	12/39	31	4	10	6.6
6. Plebeian non- <i>vigintiviri</i> (NOV)	52/134	39	16	12	7.8
7. <i>Militiae</i> (MIL)	13/28	46	3	11	8.4

⁹ Table 2.2 lines 6–7.

¹⁰ For social scoring, see Appendix 1, Table A1. The coding is as follows: patricians 7; plebeian *monetales* (M2) 6; plebeian *iudices* (S2) 5; plebeian *viocuri* (V2) 4; plebeian *capitales* (C2) 3; plebeian non-*vigintiviri* (NOV) 2; *militiae* (MIL) 1. The last two categories lie outside the conventional groupings, and are given lower social scores.

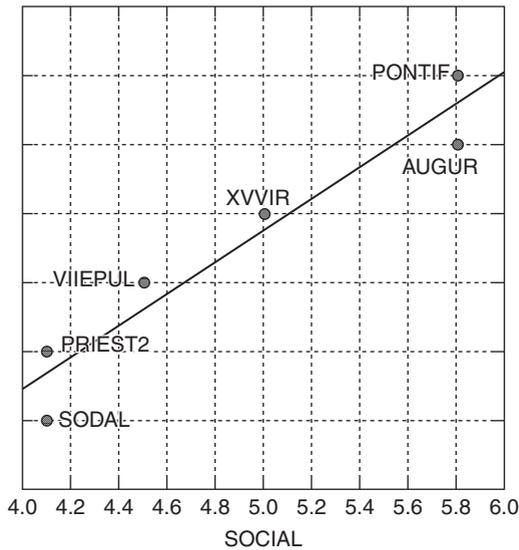


Figure 2.2 Priesthood and average social score
 (for social scores see Appendix 1; 'Priest2' comprises fetal, curio, Arval, lupercus and sodalis Titius)

epulonium, followed by sodales of the Imperial cult and secondary priest-hoods such as fetales.¹¹ For the results, see Fig. 2.2.¹²

2.3 The Patricians

As the pre-eminent social group, the patricians require separate treatment. Not all belonged to the same vigintivir college (see Section 2.3.2).¹³ But college affiliations mattered less at this level (Table 2.2, with 2.5).¹⁴

¹¹ *Tac. Ann.* 3.64. The Emperors belonged ex-officio to all four major priestly colleges, shown in order of precedence in Julio-Claudian inscriptions (*ILS* 107, 160, 222(4)). Dio refers to them as 'the four priesthoods' (53.1.5 and 58.12.5). Fetials, Arvals, curiones, luperci and sodales Titii are classified here as 'secondary priesthoods'. See also Appendix 6.

¹² There was some overlap, because it was possible to hold a mixture of priesthoods, even combining them with being sodalis in some cases. The figures shown include all major priests, together with the non-overlapping secondary priests and sodales.

¹³ Pistor 1965; Barbieri 1952: 479–93; Jacques 1986: 121–5 and 660–1.

¹⁴ It has been suggested that 'there were almost no practical differences between (patricians and plebeians) by the imperial period, but for reasons of religion and tradition emperors did seek to maintain and exalt a tiny group of patricians' (Talbert 1984: 526). But this is not borne out by the evidence, which shows distinct patrician career patterns. Fifteen percent of the career sample is patrician. Emperors drawn from the Senate were often patricians (Galba, Otho, Nerva, Trajan). See