GENEALOGICAL FLIGHTS OF FANCY. OLD ASSUMPTIONS, NEW SOURCES

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EDITORIAL NOTE

Morris Bierbrier was invited to address the Annual General Meeting of the FMG in June 2007, on a relevant topic of his own choosing. Morris is well known for his regular column "New Developments in Medieval Genealogy" in the *Genealogists' Magazine.* He has been highly supportive of the FMG since its inception, and is a member of our editorial advisory panel. In this transcript of his talk, he challenges medieval genealogists to adopt a highly critical stance in evaluating sources, and warns against some common pitfalls.

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I was rather taken aback when I was asked to address you today as my own genealogical research of late has been not in medieval genealogy but rather in more modern areas. During my career in genealogy, which has been at times both professional and scholarly although these are not mutually exclusive, I have ranged over all time periods and used a variety of sources and archives. Much to my surprise, I seem to have developed not into a genealogist or prosopographer but into a genealogical critic. The problem with being a critic is that one is often a voice in the wilderness. Mistakes are corrected, only to be repeated again and again. The internet has rather aggravated the situation. Never was a truism more valid than the aphorism "Garbage in, garbage out". As my audience well knows just because a supposed fact is repeated in a book or on the internet does not make it accurate without scholarly validation and even then it may be wrong as a new generation of scholars will sometimes gleefully point out.

The study of genealogy is as old as time and equally old is the process of genealogical fakery. Fraudulent pedigrees are composed for reasons of prestige, plain snobbery, and politics. Many of these fakes take on a life of their own. They are added to by later fakers and soon acquire a spurious authenticity and are cited back as undoubted evidence. Almost as bad are the inadvertent mistakes, made by scholarly and not so scholarly researchers, which become part of the record. As any reader of American genealogical publications will know, there are now many articles correcting mistakes in medieval and later genealogies made by 19th century writers.

The oldest adjusted pedigrees can be found in ancient Egypt. A long inscription from the Saite Period in the 7th or 6th century BC traces the owner's ancestry back 2000 years with a few gaps or dotted lines as we would now say. The problem is that one gap is about 1000 years. Most of the rest of the pedigree cannot be credited. Another inscription gives the owner's ancestry back 60 generations also with a few gaps. Here the pedigree can be cross-checked since the ancestors are high priests of Memphis known from other records. What the composer has done was to amalgamate a list of office-holders into one of ancestors. We are fortunate to know that many of these are in fact unrelated and have fathers different from their predecessors in office. This is an old trick which will be used again and again (Bierbrier, 2006). For political reasons the Egyptians were loath to admit that they had been conquered by foreigners so, after the conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great in 332 BC, the story was floated that the last native king of Egypt Nectanebo II, driven out by the Persians in 343 BC, had fled to Macedon where he had had an affair with the queen. The result was

Alexander who merely returned in triumph to his true homeland (Carney, 2006). No one has ever taken this fairy tale seriously especially as Alexander was born in 356 BC long before Nectanebo had fled south in the face of the Persians. However, this was not the first tale of its kind. Within 80 years of the conquest of Egypt by the Persian king Cambyses in 525 BC, Herodotus knew of two circulating stories concerning an alleged Egyptian princess Nitetis and the king. According to one, the Egyptian usurper King Amasis had given her, the daughter of his defeated rival Apries killed in 570 BC, to Cambyses as wife. She then urged him to conquer Egypt. Chronologically this makes no sense as she would be at least twenty years older than Cambyses and Amasis was no fool to give the Persians a legitimate excuse to invade. The other version has Nitetis as Cambyses' mother. Herodotus knew that this was false since the name of Cambyses' true mother was known - the Persian princess Cassandane. He dismisses both tales, as has done every specialist since (Sélincourt, 1972, pp.203-4). Unfortunately, this fake genealogy was revived in recent times by determined enthusiasts as a link to claim descent from the medieval to the ancient world and back through the Egyptian pharaohs. I shall not comment on the botched attempt to link various unrelated pharaonic dynasties. Since Cambyses could not be used as an ancestral link, Nitetis was now given as the mother of his sister-wife Atossa, later wife of Darius I and ancestress of the Persian kings.[1] In fact, no source gives the name of Atossa's mother, but Herodotus implies, by calling Cambyses her brother and not half-brother, that she was a child of Cassandane (Sélincourt, 1972, p.242). He had to be careful with his terminology since in Greek eyes marriage with a paternal half-sister was permissible but to a full sister would be considered incestuous, although not to the Persians. This maternity has been assumed by most later writers including the recent *Encyclopedia Iranica.*[2] In fact, Nitetis is pure invention and should be consigned to the realms of fiction.

Another lengthy fictional pedigree has recently become fashionable. Many descents are now claimed from the biblical King David when in fact none can be credited by a scholarly genealogist. This, of course, begs the question whether David himself existed. If there are descents, they cannot be proved beyond reasonable doubt. The last well-known historical descendant was Zerubbabel, Governor of Judaea under the Persians about 520 BC. A brief line of four generations is mentioned in *Chronicles* in the Bible[3], then silence. The next claim to appear was that of one Joshua ben Joseph otherwise later known as Jesus Christ although the claim was not apparently made by him. Two New Testament accounts trace a descent for him through Joseph and Zerubbabel. The accounts in Matthew and Luke are mutually contradictory[4] and the first generations after Zerubbabel are flatly contradicted by the more contemporary account in Chronicles. In fact, it is now recognized even by Church scholars that the nativity accounts have been manipulated to fit Jesus into the role of Messiah who must according to prophecy be of the line of David and born in Bethlehem. The pedigrees in the New Testament are therefore imaginary and invalid.

Apparently the next line of alleged descendants are the exilarchs of Babylon who appear from about 135 AD but information on whom is mainly preserved in the work *Seder Olam Zuta* probably of about the ninth century AD but possibly as early as the sixth or seventh century. No translation or scholarly edition has yet appeared. Although I have not read it in the Hebrew, it is clear that even this work probably

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1 See, for example, http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~jamesdow/s095/f944353.htm

2 *Encyclopedia Iranica* III, 13-14.

3 Holy Bible, *I Chronicles* 3: 17-24.

4 Holy Bible, *Matthew* ch.1; *Luke* ch.3.

does not give a full pedigree of names back to David since the exact genealogical descent of the exilarchs themselves is not wholly secure.[5] Apparently it gives 39 generations from the grandfather of Zerubbabel to about 520 AD which could be chronologically correct. However, about 1000 years of supposed oral testimony cannot be considered as evidence of any worth. Anyone involved in genealogy knows how garbled oral evidence can become in several generations let alone thousands. The late Professor Zuckerman caused considerable confusion, based on an erroneous identification, by positing that a descendant of the exilarchs founded a kingdom in southern France and his descendants merged into the local nobility (Zuckerman, 1972). This view has been rejected by all specialists in the area as utter nonsense (Grabois, 1973a,b) but is still spouted forth as proof in various genealogical speculations. Despite the disappearance of the exilarch line, certain families in the middle ages claimed Jewish Davidic descent and a full pedigree was produced by the Dayan family of Aleppo in the early 17th century and recently claimed as authentic (Dayan, 2004)[6]. Needless to say, there is no independent confirmation for most of the line which cobbles together the exilarchs' descent with large gaps of meaningless names before and after. Their exilarch line itself differs from the standard accepted line as seen in the *Encyclopedia Judaica.* Moreover, the line from David c.1000 BC to the publisher Moshe Dayan who died in 1668 AD is 73 generations or 1825 years at 25 years per generation which leaves about 700 missing years. From David to the alleged 45th generation the exilarch Bustanai who died in 670 leaves 400 years missing. Even counting some generations at 50 would not close the gap, while raising the general average would be unsustainable especially as the Jewish ethos was to marry young. This genealogy is chronologically worthless. Other claims are made that descendants of the exilarchs went to Spain and then into western Europe (Menton, 1996, 1999). Again the genealogies supplied rest on no firm evidence and leave uncertainties before and after Spain.

This leads to another unfortunate invented line of descent. According to legend, on the fall of the Sassanian empire to the Arabs in the seventh century, three daughters of the last ruler Yezdigerd III were presented to the Caliph Umar in Medina who insisted that they be sold as war booty and were eventually bought by the future Caliph Ali and handed out to his son Husayn and the sons of former Caliphs. All became the mothers of noted and saintly men, the most famous of which was Ali son of Husayn, a great-grandson of the Prophet and regarded by the Shiites as the 4th Imam (Slane, 1842). However, this legend does not first appear until the ninth century, three hundred years after the supposed event, and another account merely describes the mother as some one with a completely different origin, Sulafa from Sind and other sources as Ghazala. The ninth century writer Ibn Khallikan, who tells the story, remarks '*God knows which is right*'. As the scholar Sprengling (1939) remarked on the subject-'*Apparently the later the pedigree, the longer the genealogy*'. A truism which applies not only to Islamic genealogy. The Persian legend must have been a later invention to enhance the prestige on the Imamate line and attempt to dispel the slur that the fourth Imam was the son of a slave-at least she could be a royal slave. It may have been partly based on the fact that there is one probable genuine Sassanian descent. The Caliph Yazid II boasted that he was descended from them and his mother was undoubtedly a granddaughter of Yezdegird. The source for this is also ninth century. He left no traceable descendants. The legend was then seemingly picked up by the genealogists of the Jewish exilarchs who add that a fourth daughter

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[5] *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1971), Vol.6, 1023-8 (exilarchs); Vol.14, 1093 (Seder Olam Zuta); Vol.16, 1000-1 (Zerubbabel).

[6] See also http://www.malchut-israel.org/forum/Parchement's%20Translation.htm

was given either by the Caliph Umar or Ali to the exilarch.[7] Umar was never in Iraq at that time and would not have dispatched a captive princess back there when there were many takers in Medina. Moreover, he was not in the habit of giving away booty which could be sold for a profit especially to a non-Muslim. Nor can I see a local governor sending a choice captive to the exilarch off his own bat. The exilarch may have had a Persian wife but a princess is most unlikely and unprovable. Again the much later medieval source for the story cannot be credited. One might add that genealogical inventions were not uncommon in the Muslim world. Both the Fatimids probably and the Safavids certainly invented pedigrees giving a false descent from the Prophet (Schrier, 2006; Mazzaoui, 1972). The Fatimids' first version was so untenable that it was changed in a later version. They are not alone although you may be relieved to hear that there are some genuine descents of the Prophet as well.

Of course, faking a pedigree is not confined to the Muslim or Jewish world. It is a common practice of genealogists to please wealthy and influential clients from the Ancient World to the Modern. Sometimes it is part of the national or royal myth as the descent of the Anglo-Saxon kings from Woden or the blood relationships of the various unaffiliated Muslim or African tribes. It was often a feature of the medieval European nobility who favoured famous ancestors such as the Campbells of Scotland who give King Arthur as their ancestor. Often it is done for political purposes or religious purposes as I have already indicated. A very nice pedigree was produced for the Mongol warlord and commoner Timur the Lame (Tamerlane) which showed that he was a distant collateral relation of Genghis Khan (Thackston, 1989; Woods, 1990) It is not known if he took it too seriously. A descent from Genghis himself could not be concocted since everyone would know at once that it was a fraud. Later frauds include the well-known fake Armenian descent of the Byzantine Emperor Basil I and a host of descents from the Byzantine Palaeologan family through non-existent sons known to no contemporary sources.[8] Each new fraudster simply added his own fake descent to the already fraudulent pedigree. Later genealogists simply accepted many fake pedigrees at face value without rigorous scholarly critique.

In the modern period most of the problems stem from over eagerness rather than overt invention. As I remarked elsewhere, the Anglo-Saxon period in this country suffers from many faulty identifications based on tenuous evidence accepted as fact by over-enthusiastic researchers and then repeated again and again to become standard. One example is the fate of the mother of Egbert I of Wessex who is actually totally unknown and never mentioned in any source. Since Egbert's father was named as Eahlmund and there was a contemporary Eahlmund King of Kent, they were identified which may well be correct but then in a leap of speculation it was thought that Eahlmund of Wessex could only have been King of Kent through a marriage to a Kentish princess. Anglo-Saxon England did not work that way. One could become king of a country, without being related to the previous dynasty, by force of arms. It has also been suggested that Eahlmund may have been a genuine prince of Kent and that his Wessex pedigree is in fact the forgery. While not going that far, one can safely say that Egbert's mother remains unknown yet the Kentish connection is now reproduced without thought even given to her parentage. To link this imagination to the dynasty and back through them to Merovingian France is more wishful thinking.[9]

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7 *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol.6, 1028.

8 See the imaginary pedigrees in Mallat (1985) and my own comments (Bierbrier, 1980, 1988).

9 For a recent appearance of this non-existent lady see Mommaerts-Browne (2005, fig.2, p.409). ONDB **17**: 637 under Ecgberht rightly does not mention her, but raises the suggestion that Eahlmund himself was Kentish.

A more recent invention was the claim that Harold II was descended from Ethelred I in the male line.[10] In fact, his genealogy only goes back to his grandfather Wulfnoth and no further. Needless to say, apart from one historian and several wishful enthusiasts, this claim has been dismissed by all reputable scholars in the area. If Harold had this descent, he would have claimed it or even forged it, but it is never mentioned by any contemporary source even by his sister Edith and was only put forward in the twentieth century. This is not because William I censored it because the 11th century world did not have total thought control and there were plenty of enemies of William at home and abroad who would have used this information if it had existed. Sorry to say, Harold was a half-Danish usurper whose greed for the Crown precipitated the Norman Conquest. If Edgar the Atheling had been chosen king, perhaps such a drastic fate would have been avoided.

Earlier I mentioned the unreliability of oral evidence although sometimes, but not always, there is a kernel of truth which has been hopelessly garbled. I can confirm this by a few examples, taken from Byzantine genealogy. In 1558 Nicolo Zeno (born 1515), an Italian, published an account of his great-grandfather Caterino Zeno's travels to Persia in 1472, 86 years earlier, in which he claimed that that man's mother-in-law Valenza, wife of Nicolo Crispo, was the daughter of the Emperor John IV of Trebizond.[11] He did so in the context of the Italian meeting the Despina Theodora, wife of an important Khan, an undoubted daughter of John IV, who was stated to be a relation. Another version of this genealogy was published in 1559 by the editors of the writer G B Ramusio, who died in 1557, adding that Valenza's mother was Irene, daughter of the last Byzantine Emperor Constantine XI who was killed in 1453.[12] We know the last claim is false since Constantine had no issue and John IV was his contemporary. In 1873 Ramusio's and Zeno's accounts were translated into English, but the passage concerning Constantine XI was left out (Grey, 1873, pp.71-72). I wonder why. Yet genealogists from 19th century onwards have quietly accepted the other part of the equation and made Valenza, a non-Greek name, princess of Trebizond without checking the original which showed that the genealogy was worthless. Thirty years ago it was pointed out that this relationship was chronologically impossible as Valenza too must have been a contemporary of John IV (Kursankis, 1970). The evidence has long been available in Venetian reports, although overlooked, that Nicolo Crispo was already married in 1426 (Valentini, 1971) to a daughter of Jacopo Gattilusio, Lord of Lesbos and had been married to a Genoese, which the Gattilusios were, since 1418 (Thiriet, 1959). More recently, it has been discovered that Jacopo's mother was Valentina Doria, hence the name of her granddaughter Valenza (Ganchou, 2004). The only kernel of truth in the story of an imperial descent is that the Gattilusios were descended from the Emperor Andronicus III of Byzantium but had no direct blood connections to Trebizond. The Zenos thus had the wrong information 86 years after the event. However, it is possible to see why for there was an affinity as Despina Theodora's uncle Alexander of Trebizond had married a Gattilusio who was a cousin of Valenza. This connection was obviously later garbled into a blood relationship with a few extras thrown in.

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[10] This inventive pedigree was first devised by Anscombe (1913), followed by L Barlow (1957) and, more defensively, by F Barlow (2002). It was rightly dismissed by Mason (2004) and ignored in the discussion on Godwine's origins in ODNB **22**: 626.

[11] Zeno, N (1558), *De I Commentarii de I Viaggio in Persia idi M. Caterino Zeno*, 8, which was later printed in 1574 as part of G B Ramusio's work *Navigazioni e Viaggio*, (M Milanesi, editor, reprinted 1978, II, 220) and translated by Grey (1873, see pp.9-10).

[12] Ramusio, G B, *op. cit.*, II, 65.

Staying with Trebizond, another genealogical horror based on oral evidence has recently been uncovered. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Theodore Spandounes wrote a history of the Turks, first printed in 1519 but written by 1515, mentioning *en passant* that he was descended from the Byzantine George Kantakuzenos whose sisters, his great-great-aunts, were Irene, wife of the Despot of Serbia, and Helena, wife of David, last Emperor of Trebizond, executed by the Turks in 1463, thus about a mere 50 years earlier. He told a tragic tale about Helena burying the bodies before expiring (Nicol, 1997). The Byzantine historian Donald Nicol (1994) even included a brief biography of Helena in his book on Byzantine ladies, based wholly on Spandounes. The problem is that we have no other source to confirm her existence. Spandounes's mother's cousin Hugues Busac also wrote a treatise in which he referred to his great-aunt the Empress of Trebizond with no names (Laurent, 1952). Now we know that David had a wife named Maria of Gotthia and it was simply assumed that she died and was replaced by Helena. We also know that the father of George Kantakuzenos was Theodore and that David's mother was a certain Theodora Kantakuzene (Nicol, 1973). A bombshell has been quietly waiting in the Vatican library in the papers of a certain Angelo Massarelli (d.1566) which contain a detailed genealogy of the descendants of Theodore Kantakuzenos written about the same time as Spandounes or slightly later but undoubtedly based on much better information. The names which can be crosschecked are correct while there are many new names and relationships. The MS states quite clearly that George and Irene were Theodore's children and another daughter of Theodore was Theodora married to Alexios IV, Emperor of Trebizond, and that David was her son, who married only Maria of Gotthia (Ganchou, 2000). Basically Spandounes confused the Emperor of Trebizond whom his great-great-aunt married and invented the name of Helena. He seems to have been fond of the name Helena since he once calls his other great-great-aunt Irene of Serbia Helena as well. So much for his rather recent oral evidence. This is not confined to European sources. The modern pedigree of the descendants of Confucius states that one such married the daughter of the Emperor of China, Chien Lung, in 1772. As marriage relationships between Chinese and Manchus were forbidden, this was circumvented by having her adopted by the Grand Secretary Yu. Of course, contemporary reports and the imperial genealogy make it perfectly clear that the lady was in fact the actual daughter of Yu but why spoil a good story, and her imperial origin is confidently repeated on various websites on the internet as a solid fact (Lamberton, 2002).

Much of this imaginative genealogy can be countered by facts, and new facts surprisingly are still coming forth. In ancient history it is of course archaeology which continues to discover new inscriptions which add to and change our view of ancient genealogies. As the Egyptians were, with the exception of the later period, not excessively genealogically minded apart from the nuclear family, no great discoveries are anticipated but small details help to build up a bigger picture. A recent discovery of a broken stela in Israel proves that the royal family did indeed call itself the house of David although this does not prove whether the alleged ancestor David existed or not (Biran & Naveh, 1993, 1995). New Greek and Roman inscriptions also continue to add to our knowledge. The Romans were particularly keen on memorializing their relationships in stone. In the late 19th century an inscription from Asia disclosed that the Roman Governor of Asia, Sextus Appuleius, was the son of the Emperor Augustus's hitherto obscure half-sister Octavia and solved the mystery of a reference in the Roman historian Tacitus to Augustus's great-niece Appuleia Varilla. In recent times new inscriptions from Asia have confirmed the relationship and the parentage of the lady Appuleia Varilla. More importantly, the name of Sextus's wife is disclosed as Quinctilia obviously from the family of Quinctilius Varus and hence the lady's daughter's second name Varilla (Syme, 1986, pp.316-317 & Table III). A papyrus

has disclosed that a presumed brother of Quinctilia, Publius Quinctilius Varus, who later achieved fame (or perhaps shame) by being massacred in Germany, was married to a daughter of the great general Marcus Agrippa (Syme, 1986, p.313). Now a Roman edict confirms the names of the sons of the Roman senator Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso and adds a daughter Calpurnia to the list[13]. A new version of the consular list requires substantial changes to the pedigree of the aristocratic Cornelius Dolabella family although I do not necessarily agree with the published result (Tansey, 2000). And so hopefully it goes on.

When it comes to the medieval period which is the main interest of this organization, despite the work of historians and genealogists from the 17th century onwards, the complete archives of all countries have not been thoroughly examined. Many documents may still remain unread or even unknown. I have alluded to the Massarelli MS in the Vatican Library[14] and who knows what else may lurk there. A list of obituaries of the imperial Komnenos family of Byzantium has been recently discovered in Greece and published (Kouroupou & Vannier, 2005). Probably, important documentation may be found in archives which apparently have no connection with the source. The name and family of the first wife of the Emperor Isaac II Angelos of Byzantium has long remained a puzzle but their discovery is relevant as there are plenty of descendants from his daughter Empress Irene/Maria of Germany. Surprise, her family is included in a list of obituaries from Speyer Cathedral long-known but ignored (Hiestand, 1997). We now know her mother's first name but alas not her family as yet. Genoese archives, being examined by the Byzantinologist Thierry Ganchou, have yielded much valuable data on Byzantine families and also of Western families in the East in the later medieval period.[15] The Latins in the Levant were last examined in detail by Karl Hopf in the 19th century and are in need of serious revision as Ganchou shows. The Genoese archives also yield information on local citizens who are attested elsewhere in the medieval world (Balard, 2001). Continued research in the Vatican archives has proved useful in correcting the pedigrees of the Western nobility of the Kingdom of Jerusalem and Cyprus[16]. It is unlikely that they have been exhausted, let alone those of Venice. A new manuscript of a chronicle of the Cypriot monarchy with new genealogical facts and dates has recently turned up (Grivaud, 2001).

Then there is the internet. This new facility opens up further avenues of research and availability but with a price. What is authentic and what is fake? New scholarly databases not only help the researcher but also inspire the research. You only learn of mistakes when you are editing the material.

One new such tool is PASE, a database of Anglo-Saxon prosopography. It seems to avoid the pitfalls by listing each reference to the same individual (or so it thinks) separately rather than conflating them all, so any misidentifications can be spotted. It also seeks to avoid any speculation but sticks to the facts. No royal Harold for them. I wonder if the FMG should develop a star system for medieval genealogical sites. Off the internet, we have new prosopographies of the early Norman period by the team headed by Professor Keats-Rohan (1999; 2002). The computer age makes these

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13 Eck (1996) who oddly makes Calpurnia a granddaughter, corrected by Gordon et al. (1997).

14 For a transcription of the pedigree see the Kantakouzenos family on Charles Cawley's website *Medieval Lands* hosted by the FMG: http://fmg.ac/Projects/MedLands/BYZANTIUM%2012611453.htm

15 For example, Ganchou (1998) and his other articles cited above.

16 For example, Rudt de Collenberg, W H (1977-1980), *Epeteris tou Kentou Epistemonikon Ereunon* IX, 117-265; *Les Lusignans de Chypre*, X, 85-319.

productions possible and relatively easy. So ladies and gentlemen, the documents are out there still and it is up to you all to get cracking. Remember the genealogical critic will be waiting to examine your results.

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