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INTRODUCTION

Royal Families

Monarchies are now rare in the world, numbering around twenty in a system of almost two hundred independent states, but for hundreds of years monarchy was the way that politics worked in most countries. And monarchy meant power was in the hands of a family – a dynasty – and hence politics was family politics. It was not elections or referenda that shaped political life, but the births, marriages and deaths of the ruling family. This added further unpredictability to the unpredictable business of ruling. Even in modern Western democracies there have been political dynasties producing recurrent presidents, such as George Bush (1989–93) and George W. Bush (2001–9) in the USA, although this is rare. And the crucial thing about these democracies is that while George W. Bush could legitimately inherit personal property from his father, he could not inherit office. It was this separation of property, which could legitimately be distributed on family lines, from office, which could not, that marked the definitive step away from dynastic politics.

In this earlier, dynastic, world where office, including the highest, was family property, biology was a bigger determinant of political life than it is today. Biology does not determine all of human life but it determines a lot of it. Humans are born weaker and need more nurture than other mammals. They become sexually fertile in their teens. The number of children that a woman can bear is limited, the number that a man can father less so, although paternity is notoriously more difficult to establish than maternity. Old age advances on all humans, sometimes bringing with it a weakening of physical and mental powers. In the Middle Ages the absence of contraception meant that fertile women might have

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numerous children, and poor sanitary conditions and rudimentary health care meant that many of them died before their first birthday. Average life span was low by modern Western standards. Even those who made it to the age of twenty were unlikely to live far beyond fifty. All these things shaped life for everyone, but their impact at the top of society, among the rulers, could have major political consequences. Sometimes those consequences were disastrous.

The main features of the life cycle of an individual can be sketched out easily: birth, childhood, relationships with parents and, probably, siblings, sexual maturity, sexual activity (usually), sexual partner or partners, the birth of children, relationships with children, aging, death. But, of course, this cycle takes place in a world where everyone else is also going through his or her own life cycle, and at a different pace and with innumerable variations. One can make generalizations about certain overall constraints to the human pattern, but that pattern is only truly discoverable in reality as a multitude of individual themes. The best model when analysing dynastic history may well not be the theorems of social science but a piece of baroque counterpoint.

In addition to these biological determinants, family life in the Middle Ages was shaped by assumptions about proper social roles. Medieval Europe was a patriarchal society, ruled, for the most part, by kings, who wished to hand on power after their deaths to their sons. This patriarchal concept of rulership is doubtless linked to the fact that kings were expected to be war-leaders. And the business of war was ‘man’s business’. An account of the upbringing of Godfrey de Bouillon, a hero of the First Crusade, puts it very succinctly: ‘for training in war, there is his father; for the veneration of God, there is his mother!’[1] When recruitment was taking place for the Third Crusade in the late 1180s, men who failed to answer the call to arms were sent wool and distaffs – a parallel to the white feathers of the First World War handed by women to men who had not enlisted but one with a specifically sexual meaning: if you aren’t going off to war, you might as well be a woman![2] A French scholar of the later Middle Ages, explaining the purpose of the exclusion of women from succession to the throne of France, put it simply: ‘to the end that the commonwealth might be better and more powerfully defended by men than by women’.[3] Conversely, the long-lived fascination with stories of

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Amazons, always located in distant lands or distant times or both, must indicate that imagining a society of female warriors was an enthralling violation of ordinary norms and assumptions.

The power-structures of medieval Europe, however, were not shaped by Amazons but by the urge towards male-line succession. Even in the case of monarchies that were in theory elective, fathers were usually expected to be succeeded by sons. Some dynasties were extremely successful in achieving this. The Capetians, who became kings of France in 987, managed to pass the throne from father to son until 1316, an amazing 329 years later. Even when this direct transmission from father to son was interrupted, the French Crown nevertheless continued to pass exclusively through male lines of the dynasty, down to the deposition of the last king of France in 1848. If other kingdoms attained nothing like this kind of continuity, it was still customarily the goal to secure male-line descent. The Plantagenet kings of England could not match the Capetians in terms of father–son succession, but still managed to keep the throne in the hands of the male line for 331 years, from 1154 to 1485. Likewise, the Arpad kings of Hungary, however often they were at each other's throats, passed their title in the male line for 255 years, from 1046 to 1301. All the kings of Aragon from 1162 to 1410, a period of 248 years, were related in the male line.

So, as measured either by father–son transmission or by the looser yardstick of transmission in the male line, there were dynasties that endured for centuries. But not all medieval ruling families attained such dynastic continuity. A striking example is provided by Byzantium, especially in the long period before the fall of Constantinople to the Fourth Crusade in 1204. There are some complex decisions to make when counting Byzantine emperors and their succession, since co-emperorship was common, but a credible approximation is that, of about sixty-five imperial successions between 476, the date of the abdication of the last western Roman emperor, and 1204, only eighteen or so were simple father–son transfers of power, that is, not much more than one in four. All the others involved transmission by marriage, collateral inheritance or, very frequently, usurpation.[4] Only two dynasties in the whole history of Byzantium in this period, the Heraclians and Macedonians, produced emperors in five successive generations. In this

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respect succession in the Byzantine empire resembled that in the state from which it had grown, the Roman empire, which also had very few long-term dynasties. Foreigners noticed this distinctive pattern. ‘Why’, asked an envoy from the Khazars of the Asiatic steppes, ‘do you follow the evil custom of replacing one emperor with another of different lineage?’[5] The eleventh-century Armenian writer, Aristakès of Lastivert, also recognized this trait, contrasting Byzantine practice with that of other peoples, among whom the ruler’s son succeeds him. Patrilineal succession is like iron, he says, the Byzantine custom of intrusion by outsiders is like mere brick.[6]

At the other end of Europe, it is also evident that in the Celtic and early Scandinavian worlds the nature of a ruling dynasty was different from that of, say, the Capetians or Plantagenets. Irish royal succession is a subject which non-specialists approach at their peril, but it may be possible for an outsider to sketch the general outline.[7] It seems that in Ireland, as in Wales and in early Scandinavia, it was assumed that the new king would be an adult male, that hereditary right would be only one of the grounds he would put forward to justify his claim to succeed, and that this hereditary right could look different from the hereditary rights asserted by royal claimants in other parts of western Europe. In particular, there was a much larger pool of candidates for kingship, because of concubinage or frequent divorce and remarriage, the recognition of the long-term rights of collateral branches of the dynasty, and hence a smaller role for primogeniture.

The distinctive features of the family structures of the ruling classes of Ireland, Wales and early Scandinavia were noted, usually disapprovingly, by their neighbours. Adam of Bremen, a German observer of things Scandinavian, remarked that when King Canute died in 1035, he left three sons, two of whom ‘were born of a concubine, and who, as is the custom among barbarians, shared an equal part of the inheritance as Canute’s children’.[8] He also described the polygamy practised by the Swedish chieftains: ‘in coupling with women they know no measure; each has two or three or more at the same time, according to his means; rich men and rulers have them without number; the sons born from such unions are deemed legitimate’.[9] Anglo-Norman and English ecclesiastics of the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries reiterated complaints

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about Irish and Welsh practices: incest, that is, cousin marriage; the dissolubility of marriages; the equal standing of legitimate and illegitimate children.[10] It is clear that if one combines recurrent divorce and remarriage, or the public recognition of women other than the wife, with acceptance of the rights of the children of several, or even all, sexual partners, the chances of a ruler leaving sons will be greater than in a system of indissoluble monogamy and rights only for the legitimate, which was the rule, at least in principle, in many other parts of Christendom. This is why Irish royal dynasties did not face the issues of female succession or succession by minors, since there would always be adult male claimants when a king died.

If we turn to look at the workings of the dynastic system prevalent in most parts of Europe, we find its underlying and basic principle expressed very cogently in the following statement by Margaret of Burgundy, the sister of Edward IV and Richard III of England, writing in 1495: ‘In this kingdom, as is well known, a king is constituted not by the wishes of the people or by election or by the right of war but by the propagation of blood.’[11] ‘Propagation of blood’ means sex and childbirth, and hence the human life cycle. One could begin one’s analysis at any phase of that cycle, but the search for a bride is a reasonable starting point.