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Problems and Possibilities of Namelessness in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages

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Problems and Possibilities of Namelessness in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages

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Social Bonds, Kinship and Networks

Volume 40
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Edited by
Charlotte Cartwright, Jamie Wood,
and Erin Jordan

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Problems and Possibilities of Namelessness in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages

Jamie Wood, Hope Williard, Máirín MacCarron,
Julia Hillner, and James R. Burns

Introduction

NAMES MATTER. Readers of this article may well be familiar with the object commonly known as the "Tassilo Chalice," an eighth-century silver and gold-gilded bronze vessel of insular design now held at Kremsmünster Abbey in Austria.[1] While it is traditionally associated with Duke Tassilo III of Bavaria (r. 748–788), this name leaves half its story untold. In fact, the prominent inscription around its foot reads: *Tassilo dux fortis + Liutpirc virga regalis* (Tassilo, strong duke, and Liutpirc, royal scion).

* All authors contributed equally. They are listed in reverse alphabetical order. Research was supported by the projects "Connecting Late Antiquities" AH/X002381/1; DFG-Nr. 508354349 (PIs Richard Flower, Julia Hillner), which also provided funding for open access publication of this article; "Domestic Slavery and Sexual Exploitation in the Households of Europe, North Africa, and the Near East, from Constantine to c. AD 900 / AH 287," European Research Council grant agreement no. 101001429 (of James R. Burns; PI Erin Thomas Dailey); "Lettercraft and Epistolary Performance in the Merovingian Kingdoms, 476–751," NOW (Dutch Research Council) project VI.Vidi.211.045 (of Hope Williard, PI Robert Flierman); "The Unnamed: Slavery and the Making of the Church in Late Antique Iberia," Leverhulme Trust International Fellowship IF-2024-022 (PI Jamie Wood); "Time for Women? Gender, Chronology and Historiography before AD 900," Research Ireland Consolidator Laureate, IRCLA/2022/2234 (PI Máirín MacCarron). We would like to thank Graham Barrett, James Harland, Simon Loseby, Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, and Pia Wiegmink for sharing insights and references that informed various parts of this article, and Ed Roberts for chairing the roundtable at Leeds IMC 2025 where we tested out and exchanged our individual perspectives on namelessness. The comments of the two anonymous reviewers were also extremely valuable in developing our analysis and argument.

[1] For example, in 2014, at an exhibition in Aachen to mark the 1200th anniversary of Charlemagne's death, the chalice was exhibited as "Tassilokelch": *Karl der Große – Charlemagne. Katalog der Sonderausstellung Karls Kunst vom 20. Juni bis 21. September 2014 im Centre Charlemagne, Aachen*, ed. Peter van den Brink and Sarvenaz Ayooghi (Dresden: Sandstein, 2014), 196–97. More recently, see: Carl I. Hammer, "Liutpiriga, Ducissa: The Eighth-Century Tassilo Chalice and Liutpirc's Bavarian Reign Reconsidered," *Reti Medievali Rivista* 26, no. 1 (2025): 9–27.

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Liutpirc was Tassilo's wife and the object's co-donor. The correct attribution should therefore be the "Tassilo and Liutpirc chalice." The fact that this is usually not the chalice's modern name reveals two examples of how and why namelessness occurs. First, the chalice shows us that names can go missing even when they are in plain sight. Second, it demonstrates that the choice to overlook or omit a name is conditioned by cultural habits, in this case the practice of affording women lower social prestige than men.

The present article shows that the loss of names is an age-old problem and explores its effects on how we study Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. Naming has long been a staple of research on late antique and early medieval social, religious, and political history, in prosopographical, onomastic, and place-name studies. Naming in late antique sources is often correlated with higher social standing, focusing scholarly attention on elites. As with the "Tassilo chalice," those who were named were more likely to have been of higher status and those who were not were more likely to have occupied subordinate and marginal positions in society, due to gender, ethnicity, status, or a combination thereof.[2] Essentially, a name makes an entity more "study-able" for historians. The scholarly predilection for names is such that late antique and early medieval historians have on occasion created names for the subjects we study, either because it makes them more manageable or because it is meant to make them more "human."[3] Naming as an analytical tool has additional

[2] See Julia Hillner, Máirín MacCarron, and Ulriika Vihervalli, "The Politics of Female Namelessness between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 15 (2022): 367–401.

[3] A famous case of a made-up name is that of Augustine of Hippo's concubine, often called "Una," based on him calling her "una" ("the only one," for him), which was first coined by Gary Wills, *Saint Augustine: A Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999). Wills is followed in this, for example, by Kate Cooper, *Queens of a Fallen World: The Lost Women of Augustine's Confessions* (London: Basic Books, 2023): 81–98. Another example is the sister of the above-mentioned Liutpirc who is incorrectly called "Desiderata" on the basis of a one-time misreading of "desiderata filia" in Paschasius Radbertus, *Vita Sancti Adalhardi* 7, Patrologia Latina 120, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1852), col. 1511 ("cum idem imperator Carolus desideratam Desiderii regis Italorum filiam repudiaret"), as identified by Janet Nelson, "Making a Difference in Eighth-Century Politics: The Daughters of Desiderius," in *After Rome's Fall: Narrators and Sources of Early Medieval History*, ed. Alexander Callander Murray (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 171–90, at 179 n. 39, 183 (Nelson suggested plausibly that her name was Gerperga, but she is unnamed in the source). See also the continued use by some historians of the name "Fredegar" for the unknown author of a Merovingian seventh-century chronicle, even though it has long been



Figure 1. The Tassilo and Liutpirc chalice. © Stift Kremsmünster. Photo: Reinhold Weissenbrunner.

limits: witness the difficulties historians of late antiquity have in deciding whether two historical personages who shared the same name were in fact the same person, or if an anonymous figure was a real person or invented to suit an author's literary aims.[4] Inventing names, or relying on histori-

understood that this name is a sixteenth-century anachronism: Andreas Fischer, "Rewriting History: Fredegar's Perspectives on the Mediterranean," in *Western Perspectives on the Mediterranean: Cultural Transfer in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, 400–800 AD*, ed. Andreas Fischer and Ian Wood (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 55–76, at 55–56.

[4] John R. Martindale, "Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire: Addenda et Corrigenda to Volume I," *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 29.4 (1980): 474–97; see also the bibliography assembled in Ralph W. Mathisen, "Fifteen Years of P.L.R.E.: Com-

cally dubious ones, has been deemed necessary because it allows us to cope with the nature of our surviving evidence: many, indeed most, individuals in late antique sources are not named.

This article considers some of the methodological, theoretical, and empirical implications of namelessness for scholars of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages and proposes new perspectives on the question. We consider the lack of a name—or names—for individuals or groups not as a "paralyzing lack"[5] but an opportunity to reappraise how we approach and interpret our sources and how we think about the world of late antiquity more generally. Despite the quantitative predominance of the nameless in our late antique and early medieval sources, they have received only minimal attention in scholarship, a lacuna which we suggest has had a distorting effect on our understanding of late antique society on a systemic level. Some recent studies have begun to redress this imbalance, revealing that there was a whole range of reasons—ranging from accidental to deliberate—why individuals were left nameless, but that they all reflect the social and political priorities of authors, at the same time as carrying—and reproducing—broader cultural values.[6]

Our paper starts by acknowledging the prior historiography of namelessness, noting that the extensive empirical, methodological, and ethical reflections on the phenomenon by historians of early modern and modern times have not fed through into studies of the late ancient and early medieval worlds in a meaningful way. We then move on to two case studies of the early medieval West that examine the process that led to the un-naming of enslaved people and letter carriers, with a particular focus on sources from Merovingian Francia. We underline the active authorial choices—and underpinning social values—that rendered certain individ-

pliments, Complaints, and Caveats," *Medieval Prosopography* 7 (1986): 1–37. Thomas Pratsch, "Exploring the Jungle: Hagiographical Literature between Fact and Fiction" in *Fifty Years of Prosopography: The Later Roman Empire, Byzantium and Beyond*, ed. Averil Cameron (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 58–72.

[5] Tom Geue, *Author Unknown: The Power of Anonymity in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 5: "I want to escape the loops [of attributing texts to named authors] by treating anonymity not as a paralyzing lack but as a constitutive effect of the text, an enabling force fundamental to the way it works."

[6] Hillner, MacCarron, and Vihervalli, "The Politics of Female Namelessness"; David Pelteret, "Should One Include Unnamed Persons in a Prosopographical Study?," in *Prosopography Approaches and Applications: A Handbook*, ed. K. S. B. Keats-Rohan (Oxford: University of Oxford Linacre College Unit for Prosopographical Research, 2007), 183–96.

uals anonymous. The final two sections discuss the methodological and interpretive challenges of attempting to quantify the nameless and the implications of namelessness for prosopographical research, especially in the age of Digital Humanities.

Historiographical Frameworks

The study of nameless people in the fields of ancient and medieval history is still in its infancy. There has been a small increase in scholarship since the 1970s, doubtlessly inspired by the growing influence of social history. This scattering of studies, which was driven by Classicists, mainly focused on women, advanced some precious statistics, and generally came to a consensus conclusion around social etiquettes of naming and un-naming in the Greco-Roman world.[7] In many ancient sources (letters, court speeches, comedies, even histories), respectable women went unnamed in order to protect their or their families' honor. However, interest in counting nameless people dwindled again from the early 2000s, concomitant, perhaps, with the rise of doubts about empirical research among Humanities scholars following the "linguistic turn."[8] Outside the fields of classics and ancient history, attention has been on the role of nameless people in storytelling and the narrative functions they perform, including in an inspiring study by Adele Reinarz on the Old Testament, as well as in scholarship on later medieval Romance.[9] For late antiquity and the early

[7] David Schaps, "The Woman Least Mentioned: Etiquette and Women's Names," *Classical Quarterly* 27 (1977): 323–30; Alan Sommerstein, "The Naming of Women in Greek and Roman Comedy," *Quaderni di Storia* 6.11 (1980): 393–418; Jan Bremmer, "Plutarch and the Naming of Greek Women," *American Journal of Philology* 102 (1981): 425–26; Frederick Jones, "Naming in Pliny's Letters," *Symbolae Osloenses* 66 (1991): 147–70; S. Douglas Olson, "Names and Naming in Aristophanic Comedy," *Classical Quarterly* 42 (1992): 304–19.

[8] Among the few studies are Abdool-Hack Mamoojee, "Naming Relatives and Intimates in Cicero's Correspondence," *Cahiers des Études Anciennes* 38 (2001): 5–15; Stephanie Larson, "Kandaules' Wife, Masistes' Wife: Herodotus' Narrative Strategy in Suppressing Names of Women," *Classical Journal* 101 (2006): 225–44; Javier Uría, "Personal Names and Invective in Cicero," in *What's in a Name? The Significance of Proper Names in Classical Latin Literature*, ed. Joan Booth and Robert Maltby (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2006), 13–31.

[9] Adele Reinhartz, *"Why Ask My Name?" Anonymity and Identity in Biblical Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Jane Bliss, *Naming and Namelessness in Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2008).

Middle Ages, however, there is a dearth of scholarship.[10] This may be due to onomastic research dominating the study of individuals, families, and ethnic groups in this period, and the opportunities that studies of names and naming patterns offer for establishing genealogies and understanding multi-generational social networks and changing ethnic identities in an age of transformation.[11] Consequently, some prosopographies do not include anonymous individuals at all, while most others set a threshold for incorporation and publication that relies on subjective judgements by editors, such as the "importance" of individuals or the level or kind of attestation in the sources.[12] Other scholars have collected anonymous individuals—and even groups—but never published them.[13]

The lack of focus on nameless individuals is unfortunate since, as mentioned above, most individuals in ancient and medieval sources are not named. In a broader scholarly context, the lack of focus on namelessness is surprising given the vibrancy of reflections on the subject in other historical fields. When we turn to transatlantic slavery and studies of the early modern and modern colonial worlds, we are confronted with a plethora of debates about absences, silences, fragments, gaps, and unequal

[10] Although, see Pelteret, "Should One Include Unnamed Persons in a Prosopographical Study?"; the use of the question in the title is revealing, even when the answer is positive.

[11] The bibliography is too extensive to be cited here. Symptomatically, the foremost prosopographical database of the early Middle Ages, *Nomen et Gens*, http://nppm.ub.uni-tuebingen.de, has been designed to support onomastic research: *Nomen et gens. Zur historischen Aussagekraft frühmittelalterlicher Personennamen*, ed. Dieter Geuenich, Wolfgang Haubrichs, and Jörg Jarnut, Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde 16 (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 1997).

[12] For further discussion of these problems see n. 22 and Julia Hillner and Máirín MacCarron, "Social Network Analysis," in *Brill's Companion to Roman Prosopography*, ed. Marietta Horster, Richard Flower, Ralph Mathisen, and Frédéric Hurlet (Leiden: Brill 2026), 151–81, esp. 153–61

[13] E.g., the Prosopographia regnorum orbis latini, now held at the German Historical Institute in Paris; see Karl Ferdinand Werner, "Problematik und erste Ergebnisse des Forschungsvorhabens 'PROL' (Prosopographia Regnorum Orbis Latini) zur Geschichte der west- und mitteleuropäischen Oberschichten bis zum 12. Jahrhundert," *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken* 57 (1977): 69–87. For more on these issues, see Victoria Leonard, "Dividing the Later Roman Empire: Methodologies, Problems and Effects," in *Brill's Companion to Roman Prosopography*, ed. Horster, Flower, Mathisen, and Hurlet, 443–59; Hillner and MacCarron, "Social Network Analysis."

power reproduced by the sources—or "the archive," to use a current term.[14] In these debates, namelessness features prominently, for in the process of violent subjugation of people during colonization through enslavement or other forms of dispossession, many of their names were either lost or supplanted by new names imposed by masters or colonizers as expressions of domination.[15]

Ethical considerations also feature prominently in debates about the imposition or lack of names in early modern and modern colonial contexts.[16] The focus in these debates is often not on namelessness itself, but rather on the processes by which minoritized individuals can be given back their "humanity."[17] There is a particular tension in such debates between attempts to make past injustices and inequalities visible—based on the argument that naming writes people into history and namelessness erases—and the problem that recoverable names were often part of colonial projects and not individuals' "real" names.

It is very clear that early modern and modern historians are so alert to these tensions because they work in an environment where the past is nearer, and therefore questions around legacies, commemoration, and reparation loom large. In these contexts, the study of nameless people often responds to public demands, including by descendant communities, to know the identities of "unnamed" individuals. At the same time, con-

[14] E.g., Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12 (2008): 1–14; Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Mònica Ginés-Blasi, *Intentional Invisibilization in Modern Asian History: Concealing and Self-Concealed Agents* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2025).

[15] Sarah Abel, George F. Tyson, and Gisli Palsoon, "From Enslavement to Emancipation: Naming Practices in the Danish West Indies," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 61 (2019): 332–65; Susan Benson, "Injurious Names: Naming, Disavowal, and Recuperation in Contexts of Slavery and Emancipation," in *The Anthropology of Names and Naming*, ed. Gabriele vom Bruck and Barbara Bodenhorn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 178–99.

[16] For the following and a good overview over such debates see: Walter Hawthorne, Richard Roberts, Fatoumata Seck, and Rebecca Wall, "Introduction: The Politics and Ethics of Naming the Names of Enslaved People in Digital Humanities Projects," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 19 (2025), https://dhq-static.digitalhumanities.org/pdf/000781.pdf.

[17] Minoritization here refers to the sidelining of people who are not necessarily a minority numerically but who could represent the majority of a given population (literally making them into a social minority). See Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein, *Data Feminism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023), 26.

siderations of privacy, confidentiality, and consent are more paramount, because "not all descent communities welcome the telling of histories that link them to slavery." They may consider historians' efforts to make their pasts searchable and legible through finding and publishing names intrusive and another form of epistemic violence.[18] In this context, the invention of names or the use of pseudonyms—as has been embraced by some scholars in our field to combat namelessness—is not unproblematic.[19]

For the ancient, late antique and medieval worlds these questions might seem incongruous—irrelevant even—for lines of descent between late antique or early medieval and modern individuals are obscure and carry less, if any, emotional weight. Furthermore, it is often, although not always, impossible to recover individuals' names, even when we want to.[20] There are entire fields within premodern studies, such as prehistoric archaeology, that operate without ever being able to name individuals within the populations they study. Nonetheless, we should ask ourselves whether ancient and medieval historians have an equal or even greater responsibility to the nameless subjects we study, many of whom were minoritized and dispossessed (women, children, the dependent, the enslaved). Recent strides in DNA research have shown that we may be more connected, through many nameless generations, to the "distant" past than we have hitherto appreciated.[21] But even in the absence of clear descendants, historians are the only advocates for ancient and medieval people, a fact which should invite ethical and epistemological reflection. To begin with, we should question our tendency—especially in prosopo-

[18] Hawthorne, Roberts, Seck, and Wall, "Introduction," section 12. On issues of privacy and consent see also Elaine Farrell and Lenne McCormick, "Naming and Shaming? Telling Bad Bridget® Stories," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 2 (2024): 413–32. See also Julia Laite, "The Emmet's Inch: Small History in a Digital Age," *Journal of Social History* 53 (2020): 963–89.

[19] Niamh Moore, "The Politics and Ethics of Naming: Questioning Anonymisation in (Archival) Research," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 15 (2012): 331–40.

[20] On the impossibilities of recovering names lost in the deep past compared to the recent past, see Julia Hillner, "The Art of Naming Women," *Writing Helena* (blog), January 8, 2019, https://writinghelena.wordpress.com/2019/01/08/the-art-of-naming-women/. See also the cases of Liutpirc and Gerperga, cited above for successful early medieval examples.

[21] Sarah Abel and Catherine J. Frieman, "On Gene-ealogy: Identity, Descent and Affiliation in the Era of DNA Home-Testing," *Anthropological Science* 131.1 (2023): 15–25, who rightly warn about the dangers of abusing such research for ethnoracial politics.

graphies and other standard reference tools in our field—to simply list the nameless, often lumping them together under the label "Anonymi."[22] Such an approach might allow us to quantify unnamed individuals and aggregate them for the purpose of statistical analysis, a subject to which we return below, but—as pointed out by scholars of modernity—such reduction to numbers might result in the creation of artificially faceless crowds and therefore a secondary erasure of individuality.[23] In a second step, we should explore our sources to uncover the conventions that rendered individuals nameless and to understand the reasons why authors may have chosen to leave individuals nameless, as the next two case studies demonstrate.

Namelessness, Social Marginalization, and Domestic Slavery

Looking at domestic slaves and servants in late antique sources allows us to interrogate the relationship between namelessness and social marginalization. Unlike a peasant or servile tenant farming a distant field, household dependents were in close, regular contact with the elite, including the authors of our primary sources. Sidonius Apollinaris must have known the name of his *puer familiaris* who updated him on the delivery of certain letters.[24] Gregory the Great probably knew, or could at least have found out, the name of the *puerulus* who somebody had bequeathed to him,

[22] On *Anonymi* in prosopographical compendia see Peter Schreiner, "Prosopographie und Gesellschaft. Zum Abschluss dreier prosopographischer Lexika und dem Stand der prosopographischen Forschung in der Byzantinistik," *Historische Zeitschrift* 300 (2015), 103–20, at 114. Some resources do not even include anonymous people, for example, the *Prosopographia Imperii Romani*, *Prosopographisches Lexikon der Paläologenzeit, 1261–1453*, and the early volumes of the *Prosopographie Chrétienne du Bas-Empire*. On this issue see Pelteret, "Should One Include Unnamed Persons in a Prosopographical Study?," and Dion Smythe, "A Whiter Shade of Pale': Issues and Possibilities in Prosopography," in *Prosopography*, ed. Keats-Rohan, 129.

[23] Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021). On the analysis of "emic" crowds in our sources see further below.

[24] Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epistularum libri IX,* 4.12, Monumenta Germaniae Historica [hereafter, MGH], Auctores antiquissimi, 8, ed. Christian Lütjohann (Berlin: Weidmann, 1887), 1–172 at 64.

whom he subsequently gifted to a certain Narses.[25] Gregory of Tours must have known the name of the *puer* whom he sent to receive visitors one day.[26] But they did not tell us their names. Only rarely, with a couple of exceptions, did our authors name slaves who did not subsequently acquire free status.[27] This creates problems. It can leave us wondering if the single *servus*/*a*, *famulus*/*a*, *puer* or *puella* that accompanied a saint into the wilderness actually existed, or if they were merely a literary trope to signify the asceticism of their purported master.[28] Faced with anonymous groups of servile dependents, where we cannot know if each separate mention of a slave or servant should be counted as a different individual, it also becomes near-impossible to work out the size of early medieval households and the overall numbers of slaves they included. The social history of the transition from the Roman to early medieval world is impoverished as a result.

Admittedly, most people—free or unfree—in our major narrative sources, including in the writings of Gregory of Tours, are unnamed. The "Gendered Networks in Early Medieval Narratives" project has clarified the exact scale and direction of namelessness in Gregory's *Ten Books of Histories*: fifty-three percent of all people mentioned within it are name-

[25] Gregory the Great, *Registrum epistularum,* 7.27, MGH, Epistolae, 2, ed. Paul Ewald and Ludo M. Hartmann (Berlin: Apud Weidmannos, 1893), 474. Gregory does, however, name slaves in other letters, including 3.18, 3.39, 9.99, 9.201. On Gregory's exploitation of slaves and familiarity with them, see Lisa Kaaren Bailey, "Servants of God? *Servi* in the letters of Gregory the Great," *Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association*, 17 (2021): 25–41.

[26] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, 5.18, MGH, Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum [hereafter, SRM], 1.1, ed. Bruno Krusch and Wilhelm (Hanover: Hahn, 1937–1951), 1–537 at 220 [hereafter, Gregory of Tours, *DLH*]. The status of *pueri* in Gregory's works is a matter of controversy. It is possible that this *puer* was a cleric. But for the likelihood that at least some of Gregory's *pueri* were slaves, see James R. Burns, "*Puer, id est servus*: The Conflation of Slaves and Children in Late Antique Latin," in *Children at Work in the Late Ancient World: New Perspectives and Comparative Research,* ed. Christian Laes (Berlin: De Gruyter, forthcoming 2026).

[27] The exceptions to this trend in the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours include: Leucadius, at Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 5.48, 257, and possibly the *puer* Gailen, at 5.14, 207, if one is willing to interpret him as a slave.

[28] Cyprianus, Firminus, and Viventius, *Vita Caesarii Arelatensis* 1.5, MGH, SRM, 3, ed. Bruno Krusch (Hanover: Hahn, 1896), 457–83 at 466; Gregory of Tours, *Liber de passione et virtutibus sancti Iuliani martyris,* 23 in *Libri octo Miraculorum*, MGH, SRM, 1.2, ed. Bruno Krusch (Hanover: Hahn, 1969) [hereafter, *LM*], 112–33 at 124; Gregory of Tours, *Liber vitae patrum* [hereafter, *VP*] 19.1, in *LM*, 211–293 at 286.

less, with women far more likely to be anonymous than men.[29] Yet Gregory appreciated that names added credibility to hagiography and wrote that he tried to learn the names of miracle-beneficiaries from shrine custodians.[30] In this context, it is revealing that Gregory of Tours often names not the slave or servant who was helped by a saint, but their lord or master.[31] This includes cases involving his own *pueri* as well as in a case where he was presented with a healed *puer*/*famulus* by his master.[32] We could take this as emblematic of how the identity of the unfree was mediated through their owners, revealing the double-standards that underpinned much of the late antique social order. Nonetheless, the relationship between namelessness and social class was neither neat nor consistent. Occasionally, Gregory did give the name of both master and slave in his miracle stories.[33] Moreover, in two of Gregory's accounts where runaway domestic slaves feature prominently, he gave their names but left their masters as unnamed *barbari*: here, namelessness serves to marginalize the slaveholders.[34] These instances partly reflect the social mobility—both upwards and downwards—of late antique society. In one of these examples, the slave, Portianus, would go on to become an abbot and then a saint. In the other example, one of the slaves, Attalus, was related to Gregory, while the other slave, Leo the cook, earned fame and freedom through rescuing Attalus from his enslavement. Interestingly, when a seventh-century chronicler abbreviated Gregory's narrative, he referred to Leo the cook by name but left Attalus, the blood-relative of the episcopal and senatorial family, unnamed.[35]

[29] Hillner, MacCarron, and Vihervalli, "The Politics of Female Namelessness," 397. For the underlying data see the project "Women, Conflict and Peace: Gendered Networks in Early Medieval Narratives," hereafter referred to as "Gendered Networks" (Leverhulme Trust RPG 2018–014) and https://sites.google.com/sheffield.ac.uk/genderednetworks/data/merovingian-gaul.

[30] Gregory of Tours, *Libri I–IV. de virtutibus sancti Martini episcopi* [hereafter, *VM*] 3.45, in *LM*, 134–210, at 193.

[31] For example, Gregory of Tours: *Liber in Gloria martyrum* 76, in *LM*, 34–111, at 89; *VM* 3.53, 195; *VM* 4.5, 200.

[32] Gregory of Tours: *VM*, 3.60, 197; *VM* 3.12, 185; *Liber in gloria confessorum* 65, in *LM*, 284–370, at 336; *VP* 8.8, in *LM*, 211–283, at 249.

[33] For example, Gregory of Tours: *VM* 2.4, 160–1; *VM* 4.20, 204; *VM* 4.27, 206; *VM* 4.41, 210.

[34] Gregory of Tours, *VP* 5.1, 227–228; Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 3.15, 112–6.

[35] *Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii scholastici libri IV cum continuationibus* 3.37, MGH, SRM, 2, ed. Bruno Krusch (Hanover: Hahn, 1888), 1–193 at 105.

This might seem surprising if one was to assume an intrinsic connection between namelessness and social status, but then Leo had a far more active role in Gregory's original narrative: he plotted their escape from their master. He was the more exciting character for Gregory's early medieval audience. It is all the more regrettable, then, that the original *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* includes an entry for Attalus but not Leo.[36]

So, although slaves were generally left anonymous in our late antique sources, in individual cases factors such as familial, political, or religious identity could outweigh social class in determining whether they were named or not. Moreover, the decision about who to name or leave unnamed was peculiar to each author: it shows us what excited them, what bored them, and where they felt they had to exercise caution. It might also indicate what they expected would interest their audience, what their audience would accept and what they may have needed to explain away. All of this can tell us a great deal about elite social values and literary practices. It is less clear what it can tell us about the nameless themselves.

Yet we should at least keep in mind the possibility that a slave's named/unnamed status in a source might reflect their own actions, and not just the biases of our high-status authors. The attempts of Portianus to run away, resisting his owner's mastery, eventually culminated in freedom and brought him into contact with social elites who were prepared to venerate his memory. Leo the cook, according to Gregory, volunteered to rescue Attalus. It was through these slaves' own assertive actions that they acquired profiles conducive to being named by Gregory. Indeed, although there are notable exceptions to this trend, disruptive *servi* are far more likely to be named in Gregory's *Histories* than the legions of seemingly obedient, ambiguous *pueri*.[37] Conversely, anonymity might reflect the strategies of slaves too. The anthropologist James C. Scott wrote:

> For many forms of peasant resistance, we have every reason to expect that actors will remain mute about their intentions. Their safety may depend on silence and anonymity; the kind of resistance itself may depend for its effectiveness on the appearance of conformity;

[36] J. R. Martindale, *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire, Volume 2: A.D. 527–641* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 149, 767–71.

[37] Around five percent of *pueri*/*puellae* are named compared to just under around half of the *servi*. Hillner, MacCarron, and Vihervalli, "The Politics of Female Namelessness," 387–88, identified a similar trend with women, who are more likely to be named by Gregory when they were active participants in events.

> their intentions may be so embedded in the peasant subculture and in the routine, taken-for-granted struggle to provide for the subsistence and survival of the household as to remain inarticulate.[38]

These insights have obvious relevance for household slaves. Avoiding unwanted, violent attention may have given some unfree people a very good reason to try to remain unnoticed.

Anonymous Letter Carriers

As argued above, authorial choice and literary convention regarding naming (and unnaming) had a significant impact on whether individuals and groups were named. Focusing on the processes involved in everyday social practices, such as epistolary communication, can be a valuable means of foregrounding unnamed people. Surviving letters and letter collections give the impression that authoring or receiving letters was an activity predominately practiced by elite men. In the letters themselves, processes of production, such as dictation, delivery, and reading aloud are rarely mentioned.[39] Looking beyond letters themselves and towards narrative descriptions of epistolary communication reveals the involvement of a far broader range of people, including women and non-elites, in a wide variety of intermediary roles, including the scribes who took dictation, made copies, or managed official correspondence and the messengers who navigated the challenges of early medieval travel to ensure that messages reached their destinations.[40]

Two brief case studies of practices of naming and anonymizing in narrative accounts of epistolary communication demonstrate the value of focusing on unnamed participants in the epistolary process. In Gregory of Tours's famous account of the trial of bishop Egidius of Reims, the scribe who recorded the bishop's correspondence with the Neustrian king Chilperic played a crucial role in his downfall.

[38] James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 301.

[39] See the project "Lettercraft and Epistolary Performance in the Merovingian Kingdoms, 476–751," as per the asterisked footnote on p. 101 above.

[40] Jordan Zweck, *Epistolary Acts: Anglo-Saxon Letters and Early English Media* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 6–12.

> After this, letters were brought forward, which had been written to Chilperic, and in which were written many insulting remarks about Brunhild. And likewise letters from Chilperic to the bishop were divulged, in which was included among the rest statements such as "If the root of no matter who is not broken off, the stalk, which is produced from the earth, will not wither." From which it was shown straightaway from what was written that, when Brunhild was overcome, her son would be overthrown. The bishop denied that he had either sent these letters in his own name or received a reply from Chilperic. But a *puer* of his household appeared who kept these things written in shorthand for his book of papers, from which there was no doubt to those sitting in judgement that these things were sent by the same man [Egidius].[41]

As shown in the previous section, Gregory of Tours chose to omit names which must have been known to him. The bishop was present at Egidius's trial and knew (and recorded) the names of the royal officials prosecuting his episcopal colleague. This suggests he had access to the names of those who testified at the trial as well, yet he left the pivotal figure of *puer eius familiaris* unnamed. Why? If the *puer* was a slave, some of the reasons outlined in the previous section may have influenced the bishop's choice to leave out his name. Dictation in late antiquity was regarded as a low-status activity, yet elsewhere Gregory *did* name episcopal secretaries who took dictation, such as Frontonius, a deacon in the diocese of Perigueux.[42] Among the large cast of named characters at the trial, the *puer*'s anonymity stands out and emphasizes his pivotal role in the bishop's conviction. The contrast between the nameless *puer* and Frontonius is even more striking given the other parallels between the two episodes and Gregory's ten-

[41] Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 10.19: "Post haec epistulae prolatae sunt, in quibus multa de inproperiis Brunichildis tenebantur, quae ad Chilpericum scriptae fuerant, similiter et Chilperici ad episcopum dilatae, in quibus inter reliqua habebatur insertum, quia: 'Si radix cuiuslibet rei incisa non fuerit, culmis, qui terris est editus, non ariscit.' Unde prorsus manifestum est, ideo haec scripta, ut, superata Brunichilde, filius eius obpremeretur. Negavit se episcopus has epistulas vel misisse suo nomene vel suscipisse a rescriptum Chilperici. Sed puer eius familiaris adfuit, qui haec notarum titulis per thomus chartarum conprehensa tenebat, unde non dubium fuit resedentibus, haec ab eodem directa." Translation adapted from *Gregory of Tours: The History of the Franks*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (New York: Penguin, 1974), p. 578.

[42] Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 6.22. On the lowly status of dictation, see Ella Kirsch, "'Etched into the Soul': the Education of Shorthand-Writers in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 114 (2024): 61–84, at 61–64.

dency to deliberately mirror events in his narrative to strengthen his moral messaging.[43] Frontonius plays a similar role to the *puer* when near identical allegations are made against Charterius of Perigueux, with Charterius on this occasion being acquitted, and Frontonius condemned.[44] These episodes suggest that we cannot understand an author's decision not to name an individual without reference to those occasions on which they chose to name an individual or individuals. Early medieval authors used anonymity as a means of capturing and directing their readers' attention, as Gregory seems to have done in this case.

A second example, relating to the epistolary strategies of the Merovingian queen Radegund, serves to highlight the contrast between naming and namelessness and illustrates the ways in which naming and anonymity might exist side by side.[45] Named individuals and anonymous groups played an equally significant role in a story of Radegund's exchange of messages with a local holy man, as told by Baudonivia, a nun of the monastic community the former queen had founded. Hearing a rumor that her former husband planned to take her back in marriage, Radegund sent messengers to a local hermit, John of Chinon, with a valuable gift from her royal wardrobe, seeking his support for her efforts to persist in a monastic life. The embassy's leader was a nun of the community—who is *named*—but the other members of the party, also closely associated with the community, are left unnamed: "She had Fridovigia, a senior nun who was her closest companion, with her faithful followers [*suis fidelibus*] take it [the gift] to a venerable man, Dom John."[46] The narrative focuses primarily on the contents of the former queen's requests—that John pray for her, and also send her a hair shirt—and his affirmative response to both requests.

[43] As noted, for example, by Martin Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours: History and Society in the Sixth Century*, trans. Christopher Carroll (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 146–50.

[44] Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 6.22.

[45] Discussed in more detail in Robert Flierman and Hope Williard, "Letters, Gifts and Messengers: The Epistolary Strategies of St Radegund," *Early Medieval Europe* 33.3 (2025): 309–40.

[46] Baudonivia, *De vita sanctae Radegundis* 2.5, MGH, SRM 2, ed. B. Krusch (Hanover: Hahn, 1887), 381. Translation lightly adapted from Jo Ann McNamara and John E. Halborg, with E. Gordon Whatley, *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 88.

Baudonivia's choice to name some characters and leave others nameless both parallels and contrasts with Gregory's. It seems plausible that the names of all members of the party, both Fridovigia and the "faithful followers," were known to her and her community, yet she named the former and not the latter. Anonymizing in communication by letter the members of a group that was involved seems to have been a standard practice, as can be seen in accounts of group letters such as petitions or consensus letters sent by cities on the election of a new bishop.[47] Details of the individual members of a group might be given, as they are in Baudonivia's account, to suggest an exceptional or leadership role. Fridovigia's status as a senior nun and her closeness to Radegund are emphasized, reflecting her prominence within the group; by contrast the brief and anonymizing term *suis fidelibus*, positions the other members of the mission in a subordinate and supporting role.

As these case studies show, in epistolary communication both Gregory and Baudonivia left out the names of people involved. The absence of names did not necessarily reflect a lack of narrative significance. Indeed, the anonymous *puer* at the trial of Egidius of Reims seems to have played a crucial role in confirming the bishop's guilt, and his namelessness makes him stand out among the cast of named characters present at the trial. Neither Radegund's message to John (if indeed, it was a written message and not a verbal one), nor any of Egidius's letters now survive, their loss reflecting the loss of names of participants in the epistolary process.[48]

Exploring practices of naming and anonymization provides an opportunity to explore social phenomena from a wider range of methodological and interpretive perspectives than we might normally adopt. Comparison to other historical periods can be valuable and, in the case of communication by letter, early medieval practices of naming and unnaming participants in the epistolary process can usefully be contrasted with late Roman practices. For instance, scholarship on the wide range of documentary letters suriviving from late antique Egypt provides a particularly useful window into how these practices may have played out in actual

[47] Robert Flierman, "Gregory of Tours and the Merovingian Letter," *Journal of Medieval History* 47.2 (2021): 119–44, at 125–26.

[48] As can be seen from the small number of original letters surviving from our period; see Walter Ysebaert, "Medieval Letters and Letter Collections as Historical Sources: Methodological Questions, Reflections, and Research Perspectives (Sixth-Fifteenth Centuries)," *Studi Medievali* (2009), 41–73, at 52–53.

letters, providing an intriguing—and not always congruent—contrast to what is found in early medieval narratives.[49] In other words, naming and namelessness in letters themselves seem to be quite different from naming and namelessness in writing *about* letters. This further underlines that the decision to name (or not to name) an individual or a group was culturally constucted, constrained by literary considerations, and contingent upon the circumstances in which individual authors were writing.

Digital Humanities and Namelessness

The namelessness of many people in late antique and early medieval sources poses a particular challenge when adopting data-driven approaches. The absence of names in sources makes it difficult to distinguish individuals in the historical record. In digital prosopographies, even the management of names can create problems in this regard, requiring careful disambiguation to avoid inaccurately linking an individual named in one source with a person named in another. It is often impossible to verify such "overlapping" identities even where we have a name, a problem which is compounded when digitally dealing with nameless individuals. As mentioned above, the usual approach to such individuals, creating lists of anonymous people (e.g., *anonyma1*, *anonyma*2, etc.), can be reductive and serves to render the nameless virtually irrelevant. One way of overcoming this concern is to assign unique identifiers to the people who are unnamed in our sources. Here, one could use emic attributes of distinction, drawn from how individuals are described in the sources themselves, such as "cupbearer at dinner"[50] or "mysterious stranger."[51] Such attributes are undeniably limiting, although the identifier can convey something of an individual's role in the narrative. This approach is less of a challenge when dealing with

[49] Hilla Halla-aho, "Scribes in Private Letter Writing: Lingustic Perspectives," in *Scribal Repertoires in Egypt from the New Kingdom to the Early Islamic Period*, ed. Jennifer Cromwell and Eitan Grossman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 227–39, at 228–30.

[50] As exemplified by the "Gendered Networks" project (see n. 29) for Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 5.46.

[51] As exemplified by the "Gendered Networks" project (see n. 29) for Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum* 2.12, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969, repr. 2001).

elite members of society. For example, a nameless seventh-century queen of Northumbria can be identified through the marriage alliance between her father, King Cynegisl of the West Saxons (r. ca. 611–ca. 642), and her husband, King Oswald of Northumbria (r. 634–642): she was recorded in the "Gendered Networks" research project as "Daughter of Cynegisl" because she is introduced to the reader in the source through her connection to her father.[52] When dealing with lower social orders, we generally lack such precise relational data and are usually unable to fill the gaps in our sources through inference. The problems of disambiguation mentioned above become particularly acute here. It is entirely possible that "cupbearer at dinner" could appear—unnamed—multiple times under different identifiers. It is also possible, but very difficult to tell, whether an individual was named on some occasions but not on others. However, erring on the side of over-representation of the lower levels of society seems preferable to overlooking a cohort that is often left invisible in historical analyses.[53]

Paying close attention to how each person is presented in our sources highlights the value of data-driven analysis in Humanities research. Adopting such an approach requires a structured method for handling evidence: for example, creating datasets to record all characters in relevant sources, along with their attribute information (e.g., gender, status, name [or lack thereof], etc.) and other details (such as all their connections) in order to facilitate social network analysis. Conducting this kind of systematic analysis of early medieval narrative sources for the "Gendered Networks" research project determined that, on average, over half of the characters in the texts examined were nameless, and the incidence of namelessness was higher for women than men.[54] Nuances in the presentation of people at various levels of society became apparent during researcher-led data gathering, insights that would have been much less likely to occur had computer-generated data gathering methods been applied alone. For example, translators vary in their approach to naming compared to their Latin and Greek sources, with a greater incidence of names in translations compared with the originals, which may be ascribed to the fact that trans-

[52] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum* 3.7.

[53] Ginés-Blasi, *Intentional Invisibilization*.

[54] Hillner, MacCarron, and Vihervalli, "The Politics of Female Namelessness," 369 and 397 (appendix).

lators determined that only the addition of names could achieve the clarity expressed in the original language.[55] Additionally, a more quantitative, data-driven analysis revealed that authors employed a variety of strategies in relation to the unnaming of individuals and groups, such as delayed naming and use of titles rather than names: for example, using a title like *augusta* for an empress or referring to someone as a mother rather than providing her name.[56] Balancing qualitative and quantitative approaches to generating and analyzing data can thus be a powerful means of foregrounding and better understanding the phenomenon of namelessness.

Extrapolation and Social Modelling

If the use of unique identifiers in digital humanities projects and traditional prosopographies can help us to give a richer impression of society—especially below the elite level—than has previously been possible, so too might taking more creative approaches to how we enumerate the nameless majority. By aggregating and quantifying the nameless people who are mentioned in our sources, we know that many more were not deemed worthy of even an anonymous reference. But this does not mean that they did not exist, or that they did not matter. We can study them if we read the sources imaginatively and model them into our interpretations, in the process repopulating the late antique and early medieval world from the bottom-up.

Although the point can no doubt be extended to other social and institutional formations, the late antique and early medieval church offers rich opportunities for modeling the nameless. While it would be interesting to explore the issue of namelessness for institutions of a comparable size to the church, such as the late Roman military or bureaucracy, there

[55] A particularly striking incident in a text from Late Antiquity of naming individuals who had been left unnamed in another is Rufinus's naming of women in his translation of Eusebius of Caesarea's church history. For example, he names the wife of the urban prefect harassed by the usurper Maxentius as Sophronia, while Eusebius had left her nameless: Eusebius of Caesarea, *Historia ecclesiastica* 8.14, Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller 9.1–2, ed. E. Schwarz (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1903–1909); Rufinus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 8.14, Eusebius Werke 2.2=Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller 9.2, ed. E. Schwarz and Th. Mommsen (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1908).

[56] For example, see how rarely Venantius Fortunatus used Radegund's name in his *Vita Radegundis*: Hillner, MacCarron and Vihervalli, "Politics of Female Namelessness," 381.

is insufficient surviving evidence to support a large-scale analysis.[57] Most of our extant sources were written and/or preserved in ecclesiastical and monastic contexts, making the undercounting of clerics and lack of knowledge of their names especially instructive. For example, Raymond Van Dam modeled the numbers of bishops and clerics across the late Roman empire by mapping demographic data against the few raw numbers that the sources give us, by counting bishops and clerics where the evidence allows, and by thinking about clerical career pathways, both as they were articulated in normative sources and as they seem to have worked out in practice. He estimated that by 400 there were about 100,000 clerics, both major and minor, giving an average of about 50 clerics for each of 2,000 dioceses across the empire.[58] Obviously, it is possible to quibble with his specific calculations, but it cannot seriously be doubted that there were large numbers of bishops and clerics. We do not know—and cannot realistically hope to know—the names of most of these people.

But we can think through the implications of these calculations for how churches might have functioned as social organisms. Van Dam considered clerical careers, asserting that "if the number of clerics exceeded the number of bishops by at least fifty-fold, then clearly most clerics never became bishops, and never had even a chance of becoming bishops."[59] While some bishops are very well attested, the tendency of scholars to focus on them is "inherently constricting" because it inhibits the development of a broader appreciation of the ubiquity of the clergy within late Roman society.[60] And for most bishops we possess little more than a name. What about the clergy, who are even more likely to be left unnamed?[61] We may not be able to name even a fraction of these people, but by estimating

[57] Raymond Van Dam, "Bishops and Clerics during the Fourth Century: Numbers and Their Implications," *Episcopal Elections in Late Antiquity*, ed. Johan Leemans, Peter Van Nuffelen, Shawn W. J Keough and Carla Nicolaye (Berlin, Boston, De Gruyter, 2011), 217–42, at 226 notes that the only comparable institution in terms of size in the late Roman world was the army.

[58] Van Dam, "Bishops," 226, noting that there was considerable variation according to the size, location, and importance of the bishopric.

[59] Van Dam, "Bishops," 234–35.

[60] Van Dam, "Bishops," 240.

[61] Robert Wisniewski, "How Numerous and How Busy were Late-Antique Presbyters," *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 25.1 (2021): 3–37, at 5, in this case discussing Tours under Gregory.

numbers and then modelling them into our interpretations we can perhaps get a sense of how the church worked as a social organism.[62] This can then feed back into how we situate and interpret the experiences of the (still incompletely attested) people who are named.

Normative evidence can be deployed to think through the manpower that would have been required to enable the church to function. For instance, church council records are irrefutable evidence for the existence of many hundreds of messengers, even though very few individuals are mentioned as having carried letters to the councils, a further example of the erasure of letter carriers—to add to those from the Merovingian period mentioned above. In the case of the thirty-four councils that took place in the Iberian Peninsula in the sixth and seventh centuries, several rulings refer to the procedures for the convocation of councils. For instance, canon 5 of the provincial Council of Mérida, held in 666, states that when the metropolitan decides to call a council with king's command (*regiam iussionem*), all suffragan bishops should come together, with no excuses. It goes on to rule that, should a bishop be sick or on royal business, he must explain in a signed letter (*epistolam manu sua subscriptam*) so that he can be questioned later. If the bishop is unable to make it, he should send an archpresbyter; if no archpresbyter is available, a presbyter should be dispatched. The canon forbade bishops from sending deacons as substitutes, although they often acted as messengers for bishops and the subscription lists demonstrate that deacons did frequently act on behalf of their bishops at councils.[63] Although earlier councils had laid down different convocation procedures, the Mérida canon can be used to model the scale of epistolary communication that must have been involved in calling a council and, concomitantly, the numbers of people who were necessary to facilitate the process—scribes, couriers, archivists, and so on. While, in theory, only twelve letters would have been needed to bring together the bishops who attended the Mérida council itself, the

[62] Van Dam, "Bishops," 239–40: high numbers of clerics and low numbers of episcopal posts can help to explain, for instance, the stress created by vacancies in bishoprics as potential successors jockeyed for succession. In contrast, the concern of existing professional priests to protect their income may have checked expansion of overall clerical numbers, Wisniewski, "How Numerous," 30–36.

[63] Council of Mérida, canon 5, in *Concilios Visigóticos e Hispano-Romanos*, ed. José Vives (Barcelona, Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Instituto Enrique Flórez, 1963), 328–29; E. A. Thompson, *The Goths in Spain* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), 286–87.

general councils at Toledo, some of which were attended by around one hundred individuals, with many bishops represented by deputies, would have required the exchange of potentially hundreds of letters, carried by scores of unrecorded—and therefore unnamed—messengers.[64]

Similar efforts have been made to use the lists of subscriptions to church councils to model total attendance figures. Late antique and early medieval bishops did not travel alone, but with (often quite large) entourages, the members of which are only very rarely named but which included slaves, freed-people, servants, and clerics.[65] This means that the subscription of one (named) bishop or member of his lower clergy masks the presence of a significantly larger number of people at the council, or in its environs. Shane Bobyrcki used Frankish subscription lists and estimates for entourage sizes to model the scale of attendance at councils in the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries. Using data on the numbers of signatories assembled by Gregory Halfond and estimates for those accompanying the bishop based on "low" and "high" entourage estimates, Bobrycki generated ranges from 60–160 (Poitiers 589–590, to which four bishops subscribed) to 1145–3070 attendees (Paris 614, to which seventy-six bishops and one abbot subscribed).[66] The figures on which these estimates are based do not derive from accounts of councils—but rather from other contemporary sources—and there is no way of knowing whether they represent the actual number of people who attended the councils along

[64] There were just over 700 episcopal subscriptions to the councils that took place in Iberia in the sixth and seventh centuries, with just over 100 bishops sending deputies.

[65] On the composition of episcopal entourages, see Jamie Kreiner, "About the Bishop: The Episcopal Entourage and the Economy of Government in Post-Roman Gaul," *Speculum* 86 (2011): 321–60, at 340.

[66] Shane Bobrycki, *The Crowd in the Early Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024), 57–62, extrapolating from Gregory Halfond, *The Archaeology of Frankish Church Councils, AD 511–768* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 223–64. The low coefficient is taken from Kreiner, "About the Bishop," 341 n. 85, who estimated Merovingian episcopal entourages "at a guess" at 10–20 men. The high coefficient is from Michael McCormick, "Diplomacy and the Carolingian Encounter with Byzantium Down to the Accession of Charles the Bald," in *Eriugena: East and West; Papers of the Eighth International Colloquium, of the Society for the Promotion of Eriugenian Studies, Chicago and Notre Dame, 18–20 October 1991*, ed. Bernard McGinn and Willemien Otten (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 15–48, at 26–27, who calculated numerical limits of ninth-century entourages at: for bishops (40 persons), for abbots or counts (30), and for vassals (17). Numbers of episcopal entourages (between 2 to 300 individuals) can also be deduced from sources on late antique banishments of bishops, see Julia Hillner, "Approaches to Clerical

with their bishops, but they do give us a means of extrapolating from the recorded presence of named elites to model broader social groups.[67]

We can apply these insights to evidence from elsewhere in the post-Roman West. Bobrycki notes that the Seventh Council of Toledo, held in 646, had ordered bishops visiting their diocese to limit their retinues to fifty people so as not to place "a burden on account of a multitude (*prae multitudine*)."[68] Taking Bobrycki's figures as a starting point, the thirty bishops and eleven deputies (one archpresbyter, one abbot, five presbyters, four deacons) who attended VII Toledo could have been accompanied by, as a low estimate, 475 members of their collective entourages and, as a high estimate, 1400 people.[69] Using the VII Toledo figure for entourage size would amend our high estimate of the overall size of the entourages accompanying bishops and deputies to VII Toledo upwards to 1700 people. In terms of numbers of subscribers, VII Toledo was mid-ranking amongst the Iberian councils of the seventh century; the sixty-one bishops who subscribed to XV Toledo in 688 would have been accompanied by a collective entourage of over 3000 people. Of course, these are estimates and there were significant disparities in size and wealth between bishoprics—some bishops may have struggled to put on a particularly impressive showing—yet extrapolating from those we know existed (the named bishops who subscribed to councils) to those we can assume existed (the unnamed members of their entourages) is another means of modelling the late antique church from the bottom up.[70]

These kinds of exercises in modelling social formations also raise significant methodological and interpretive challenges for prosopographers and social historians. As we have seen in the previous discussion

Exile: Strategies, Experiences, Memories and Social Networks," in *Clerical Exile in Late Antiquity*, ed. Julia Hillner, Jörg Ulrich, and Jakob Engberg (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2016), 11–46, at 34–35, with the database *The Migration of Faith: Clerical Exile in Late Antiquity*, https://www.clericalexile.org/.

[67] As noted by Bobrycki, *The Crowd*, 58.

[68] VII Toledo, canon 4, in *La colección canónica hispana*, ed. Gonzalo Martínez Díez and Félix Rodríguez, 6 vols. (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Instituto Enrique Flórez, 1966–2002), vol. 5, 350–52, trans. Bobrycki, *The Crowd*, 56.

[69] Bobrycki, *The Crowd*, 224 n. 294: low: 475 (15 per bishop: 450; 5 per abbot; 2 per other person: 20); high: 1400 (40 per bishop: 1200; 30 per abbot; 17 per other person: 170).

[70] Thompson, *The Goths*, 284–85 lists potential reasons for non-attendance of bishops, including long distances and the poverty of some bishoprics.

of nameless individuals, it is potentially problematic to extrapolate from the evidence that we do possess to identify individuals who did not necessarily exist. It could be even riskier to do the same for entire social groups. Nonetheless, by counting the unnamed people that we have, by extrapolating from those we can reasonably assume *should* have been there, and by reading the normative sources creatively, we can perhaps come closer to a holistic sociology of late antiquity that gives us a richer sense of the scale of namelessness.[71]

Conclusion

The increasing appetite for considering what we can and should do with late antique and early medieval *anonymi* poses significant methodological, interpretive, and ethical challenges, but also opens up new possibilities. Of course, in most cases there is no hope of ever recovering the lost names of ancient and medieval *anonymi.* This makes ancient and medieval historians into experts in the silences, fragments, absences, and gaps with which all historians, ancient to modern, must grapple. Therefore, we should not only think about how we can apply some of the insights gained by scholars of later periods to investigating ancient and medieval namelessness but also contemplate how studies of medieval and ancient namelessness could assist early modern and modern historians in approaching their sources. In fact, as Annette Joseph-Gabriel argues with respect to transatlantic slavery, even where we might be able to find a name, it is useful "to hesitate" before immediately proceeding to "recovery" through naming, because this pause allows us to consider what else constitutes personhood beyond a name.[72] Ancient and medieval historians have, by necessity, internalized this "hesitation" and are beginning to develop new methods of talking about a life, such as through an individual's relationships, the social and cultural practices in which they engaged, or the spaces they moved in, at the same time as we remain aware that identity markers such as gender, ethnicity, status, and occupation can be reductive and reflect hegemonic values.

[71] Van Dam, "Bishops," 240 called for a better sociology of the late antique church.

[72] Annette Joseph-Gabriel, "The Unnamed Fugitive and the Unknown Maroon: Anonymity and the Limits of Repair in Black Atlantic Historical Recovery," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 19 (2025), sections 19–29, https://dhq-static.digitalhumanities.org/pdf/000780.pdf.

Yet, ancient and medieval historians continue to be fascinated by names, especially those of some (generally elite) individuals, while also labelling anonymization a patronizing or erasing act that ought to be rectified.[73] As the example of the "Tassilo chalice" shows, we often unwittingly contribute to the loss of even more names, even those that are visible in plain sight. If we study our sources without always giving in to the urge to resort to names, the benefits are significant, for we can learn much more about what ancient and medieval people valued in not just a name but in a life.

[73] For charges of ancient erasure see, e.g., Bremmer, "Plutarch," 425; Margaret R. Miles, "Not Nameless but Unnamed: The Woman Torn from Augustine's Side," in *Feminist Interpretations of Augustine*, ed. Judith Chelius Stark (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 167–88. For made-up names, see above, n. 3.