# A historian's perspective: Composing a prosopographical corpus

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I would like to start with two definitions of prosopography that help us understand its importance for historiographical research. The first is quoted from a concise presentation of prosopographical methodologies that was published in 2007:[1]

"Prosopography is a collective biography, describing the external features of a population group that has something in common (profession, social origins, geographic origins, etc.). Starting from a questionnaire biographical data are collected about a well-defined group of people. On the basis of these data answers may be found to historical questions."[2]

The second is the classical definition by Lawrence Stone that lets us glimpse the analytical value of prosopography:

"Prosopography is the investigation of the common background characteristics of a group of actors in history by means of a collective study of their lives. The method employed is to establish a universe to be studied, and then to ask a set of uniform questions about birth and death, marriage and family, social origins and inherited economic position, place of residence, education, amount and source of personal wealth, occupation, religion, experience of office, and so on. The various types of information about the individuals in the universe are then juxtaposed and combined,

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[1] Verboven Koenraad, Carlier Myriam, and Dumolyn Jan, "A short manual to the art of prosopography", in: K.S.B. Keats-Rohan (ed.), *Prosopography Approaches and Applications. A Handbook*, Oxford: Unit for Prosopographical Research (Linacre College), 2007, p. 35-69.

[2] H. de Ridder-Symoens, H. de Ridder-Symoens, "Prosopografie en middeleeuwse geschiedenis: een onmogelijke mogelijkheid?", in *Handelingen der Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent* 45 (1991), 95-117; id., "Prosopographical Research in the Low Countries concerning the Middle Ages and the Sixteenth Century", *Medieval Prosopography* 14.2 (1993), 27-120.

and are examined for significant variables. They are tested both for internal correlations and for correlations with other forms of behavior or action."[3]

Prosopography is a precious analytical tool for the historian, as it can provide unique insights in the past. It can help us reconstruct social, political, economic and cultural realities from the point of view of individual life courses, activities, and interrelations. This is true not only for prosopographies that deal with specific groups of people (e.g. writers, officials, professionals, artists) but also (and maybe even more) for prosopograpies that include all individuals mentioned in a corpus of sources about a particular place in a particular period.

For those who are familiar with historical research on the Balkans during the early modern period, that is, from the 15th until the 18th century, it would not come as a surprise to say that we do not dispose of a significant corpus of prosopographical research. This is not the case with Roman and Byzantine history, in the framework of which extensive prosopographies have been compiled from the 1970s onwards. Here are no less than four seminal works:

- A.H.M. Jones, J.R. Martindale, J. R., J. Morris (eds), *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, Vol. 1, *260-395*, Cambridge 1971, Vol. 2: *395-527*, Cambridge 1980, Vols 3A and 3B, *527-641*, Cambridge 1992.
- Erich Trapp (ed.), *Prosopographisches Lexikon der Palaiologenzeit*, 12 vols, Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences, 1976-1996.
- Ralph-Johannes Lilie et al. (eds), *Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit. Erste Abteilung (641–867)*, 7 vols, Berlin–New York: W. de Gruyter 1998–2001, online edition available at http://pom.bbaw.de/pmbz/index.html.
- John Martindale et al. (eds), *Prosopography of the Byzantine Empire (641-867)*, online edition available at http://www.pbe.kcl.ac.uk.

Admittedly, a prosopographical project on the Balkans in the early modern period, when most of the area was under Ottoman rule, presents much more difficulties than the works mentioned above. The main reason is that the sources are written in different languages (Ottoman Turkish, Greek, Church Slavonic, Bulgarian, Serbian, Romanian, Ladino) and scripts (Arabic, Greek, Cyrillic, Hebrew), and, moreover, represent quite different literary and textual genres.

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[3] Lawrence Stone, "Prosopography", *Daedalus* 100 (1971), p. 46.

But let us say that a group of historians with the necessary specializations to tackle this linguistic and textual diversity, as well as with enough time and funding, embark on a journey to fill -wholly or partly- the void of prosopographical research in the early modern Balkan history.

Before they even start, they will have to deal with the problem of which vocabulary they will use to describe the persons they will come across in the sources. An option is to organise in a controlled vocabulary the various attributes of the people recorded in the sources (profession, position in a guild, religious or military office, title, etc.). The elaboration of a controlled vocabulary can help the research team not only manage and analyse their material, but also provide new knowledge about the specific period and place, presenting in a structured way the range of economic, administrative, judicial, ecclesiastical, and other activities. Moreover, the construction of a controlled vocabulary can allow for fruitful comparisons with relevant material from other historical contexts in time and space.

A characteristic example is the one of professional occupation. There are, of course, several controlled vocabularies of professions but they are of little help if one is to deal with past societies and economic activities much different from the ones of today. The researchers would have to follow a bottom-up course, that is, to start from the sources. However, the sources would give us a universe of terms that is not always easy to decipher and may even be inconsistent or even self-contradictory. After all, the terms in the sources are not analytical categories; they are rather "native categories", in the words of the social anthropologists, that is, classifications coined by a society to describe itself. There is often a gap, therefore, between the conceptual world of past societies and the concepts of historiographical analysis and interpretation. Let us take an example.

TABLE IV.: Breakdown of Crafts & Trades Held Jointly by the Muslim & Christian Residents of Siroz (Serres) Preserved in *Tapu-Tahrir Defter # 7* (1478)

Crafts and trades in Ottoman Serres, 1478

| Occupational, Regional & Descriptive Titles: | # Identified: | Muslims & Christians |
|---|---|---|
| Bakkal (Grocers) | 8 | Müslüman |
| Bakkalân (Grocers) | 6 | Gebran |
| Çulâh (Weavers) | 10 | Müslüman |
| Çulâhan (Weavers) | 3 | Gebran |
| Derzi (Tailors) | 4 | Müslüman |
| Derzi (Tailor) | 1 | Gebran |
| Hayyat (Tailors) | 22 | Müslüman |
| Hayyatân (Tailors) | 10 | Gebran |
| Kalaycı (Tinsmiths) | 2 | Müslüman |
| Kalaycı (Tinsmith) | 1 | Gebran |
| Metaksipoli (City's Silk Merchants) | 15 | Gebran |
| Kazzaz (Silk Manufacturers) | 4 | Müslüman |
| İpekçi (Silk Maker or Seller) | 1 | Müslüman |
| Nalband (Blacksmith) | 5 | Gebran |
| Nalband (Blacksmith) | 3 | Müslüman |
| Pabuççı (Shoemaker/Slippermaker) | 13 | Müslüman |
| Pabuççular (Shoemakers/Slippermakers) | 4 | Gebran |
| Sabuncuyân (Soap Makers or Soap Sellers) | 6 | Gebran |
| Sabuncu (Soap Makers or Soap Sellers) | 2 | Müslüman |
| Saraç (Leather Worker / Saddler) | 13 | Müslüman |
| Semericyân (Saddlemakers) | 7 | Gebran |
| Urgancıyân (Rope Makers) | 6 | Gebran |
| Urgancı (Rope Makers) | 1 | Müslüman |

| Derzi (Tailors) | 4 | Müslüman |
|---|---|---|
| Derzi (Tailor) | 1 | Gebran |
| Hayyat (Tailors) | 22 | Müslüman |
| Hayyatân (Tailors) | 10 | Gebran |

H. Lowry, *The Shaping of the Ottoman Balkans 1350-1550: The Conquest, Settlement and Infrastructural Development of Northern Greece*, Istanbul 2008, p. 192.

The historian Heath Lowry has made a catalogue of the crafts and trades mentioned in the Ottoman survey register of 1478 for the town of Serres (Ottoman Siroz), today in northern Greece.[4] The register recorded all adult males and heads of households, men or widows. It is striking that in the sources there are two terms for tailors: *hayyat* (an Arabic word) and *terzi* (from the Persian *derzi*). It is unclear whether there was any difference between *hayyat* and *terzi* in terms of professional specializations or whether the terms denoted people who belonged to different guilds. Perhaps the scribes used interchangeably the Arabic and the Persian term. However it may be, the researchers of the prosopography project would have to preserve the original terms (that is, as they appear in the sources) in their database. But for analytical reasons it would be advisable to build a wider term -let us say "tailor"- that would include both *hayyat* and *terzi*. This would enable the researchers to have a quick overview of the professionals in Serres who dealt with clothmaking.

In another table from the same source containing the "high-end" crafts and professions likely to have shops in the covered market (*bezesten*) we find two terms for manufacturers and sellers of silk textiles, that is, *kazzaz*, an Arabic word, and *metaksipoli*, a Greek word (the term *ipekçi* denotes the makers of silk thread).[5]

### "High-end" crafts and professions in Serres, 1478

TABLE VII.: Breakdown of 'High-End' Crafts & Professions Likely to have had Shops in the Market Hall (*Bezzâzistân*) as Preserved in *Tapu-Tahrir Defter #7* (1478)

| Profession or Craft Titles: | # Christians | # Muslims | Muslims & Christians |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Attar* (Perfumer) | - | 2 | Müslüman |
| *Hacegi* (Wealthy Merchants) | 11 | - | Gebran |
| *Hevaci* (Wealthy Merchants) | - | 6 | Müslüman |
| *Kazzaz* (Silk Manufacturers or Merchants) | - | 4 | Müslüman |
| *İpekçi* (Silk Maker or Seller) | - | 1 | Müslüman |
| *Kürkçüyân* (Furriers) | 8 | - | Gebran |
| *Metaksipoli* (Silk Manufacturers or Merchants) | 15 | - | Gebran |
| *Sarrafân* (Moneychangers) | 7 | - | Gebran |
| *Sayyag* (Gold or Silver Smith) | - | 1 | Müslüman |
| *Zergerân* (Goldsmiths) | 3 | - | Gebran |
| TOTALS: | 44 | 14 | |

Lowry, H., *The Shaping of the Ottoman Balkans 1350-1550: The Conquest, Settlement and Infrastructural Development of Northern Greece*, Istanbul 2008, p. 194.

Obviously the difference in the terms reflects religious difference: all *kazzaz* in the source are Muslims, while all *metaksipoli* are Christians. Again, the researchers would

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[4] Heath Lowry, *The Shaping of the Ottoman Balkans 1350-1550: The Conquest, Settlement and Infrastructural Development of Northern Greece*, Istanbul 2008, p. 192.
[5] Heath Lowry, *The Shaping of the Ottoman Balkans 1350-1550: The Conquest, Settlement and Infrastructural Development of Northern Greece*, Istanbul 2008, p. 194.

have to preserve the original terms, but it would be advisable to subsume them both under a wider term to have an overview of silk merchants in Serres irrespectively of religion. This would be advisable for another reason as well: with the passing of time the term *metaksipoli* was largely abandoned; silk merchants, Muslim, Orthodox Christian, Gregorian Armenian or Jewish, were all recorded as *kazzaz*. A wider term for silk manufacturers and merchants would compensate also for changes in time.

Here is a table with a simple classification of professions in the town of Trikala (Ottoman *Tırhala*) in Central Greece from 1455 to 1570.[6]

Leather-processing and textile-making in Trikala, 1455-1570

| Profession | 1455 | 1506 | 1521 | 1570 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Leather tanners | 45 | 69 | 47 | 80 |
| Textile makers | 34 | 39 | 30 | 21 |
| Leather procession (percentage of the total) | 38 | 46.9 | 38.8 | 59.7 |
| Textile making (percentage of the total) | 28.8 | 26.5 | 24.8 | 15.7 |

Based on a table by Phokion Kotzageorgis, *The Early Ottoman City*, Thessaloniki: Vivliorama, 2019 (in Greek), p. 172.

The analysis has shown that professionals dealing with leather procession and textiles accounted for more than 50% of the town's craftsmen, and that the production of leather goods became gradually predominant in the city, a fact reflecting changes in consumption and the rise of stockbreeding in the nearby mountain range of eastern Pindos. This kind of comparative analysis, with its evident importance for economic history, would have been impossible without the construction of a hierarchy of terms subsuming the various professions and occupations under those two wider concepts.

Issues of change in time are also evident in an excerpt form a Greek source of the mid-17th century (also from the town of Serres). The excerpt concerns Gabriel, the former abbot of the Monastery of St John the Precursor, who converted to Islam because, according to the text, "whenever he saw a woman, he lost his head".[7]

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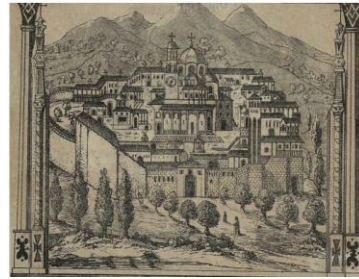[6] Phokion Kotzageorgis, *The Early Ottoman Ci*ty, Thessaloniki: Vivliorama, 2019 (in Greek), p. 172.
[7] Paolo Odorico (ed.), *Conseils et mémoires de Synadinos, prêtre de Serrès en Macédoine (XVIIe siècle)*, Paris: Association Pierre Belon, 1996, p. 91.

> La même année se fit musulman le papas Gabriel, le prohigoumène du monastère de Saint-Jean-Prodrome, de sa volonté et par choix. Et c'était un homme de 45 ans, lourd, gros, fort, lettré, qui aimait lire, et avait une belle écriture, une belle voix, un chantre parfait; mais il était très ivrogne, et un peu débile, et débauché, car s'il voyait une femme, il perdait la tête.

The monk Gabriel, former abbot of the Monastery of St John the Precursor, converts to Islam in 1623

Paolo Odorico (ed.), *Conseils et mémoires de Synadinos, prêtre de Serrès en Macédoine (XVIIe siècle)*, Paris: Association Pierre Belon,1996, p. 91.

The Monastery of St John the Precursor near Serres
https://bit.ly/3E1KQSz

Obviously Gabriel, a man of standing and learning, could not just quit priesthood and monkhood and expect to preserve his social status among his coreligionists, so he chose to become a Muslim instead. The change brought about by his conversion concerned not only his religious affiliation and his monastic office but his name as well (that is, his second Christian name, the one he had taken when he became a monk). The changes would have to be captured in the prosopography in relation with the specific time spans in Gabriel's life. But it would be nice if at least some of these changes were presented as separate entities under a wider term called "events" or suchlike. Tracking down instances like religious conversions, divorces, appointments to office etc. would be of much service to social history analysis. In the same vein, scholars of economic history would be much interested in tracking down in the prosopography money-lending activities together with the relations between lenders and debtors. This line of thinking, of course, can expand infinitely; the research team would have to set their limits according to a sensible calculation of time, effort, and result. But it would be rewarding for academic research to employ such methods to study in detail the social universe of prosopography. The evolution in digital humanities can provide help in moving from a paradigm of rather flat representation to one of sensible sophistication.

The advanced search interface from the online version of the *Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit* (https://rb.gy/1vesi). The list of titles, offices and occupations includes only the terms used in the sources and their German translations.

Any such endeavor, ambitious or modest, would require the construction of controlled vocabularies with some degree of hierarchical structure to tackle issues of time, place, occupation, titles, offices, interpersonal relations, marriages and divorces, social groups, religious categories etc.

An option for the research team would be to organize their vocabularies into a thesaurus, that is, into "a controlled and structured vocabulary in which concepts are represented by terms, organized so that relationships between concepts are made explicit", to use the definition in the current official version of the DARIAH Backbone Thesaurus (BBT).

### Thesaurus

A *Thesaurus* is a controlled and structured vocabulary in which concepts are represented by terms, organized so that relationships between concepts are made explicit, and preferred terms are accompanied by lead-in entries for synonyms or quasi-synonyms (see ISO 25964-1 sections 2.62 thesaurus and 2.35 multilingual thesaurus).

*DARIAH Backbone Thesaurus (BBT): Definition of a model for sustainable interoperable thesauri maintenance*, p. 6.

https://www.backbonethesaurus.eu/sites/default/files/DARIAH_BBT%20v%201.2.8_0.pdf

And this is exactly the point where the BBT can be of help.

The BBT is an overarching thesaurus for the humanities. It focuses on identifying the top-level-concepts (facets and hierarchies) that can become a common basis for thesaurus building according to the demands for objectivity and interdisciplinarity. The definition of the essential properties of the top level-concepts, which are acceptable regardless of the scientific field in which they apply, enables a consistent classification. One of the major advantages of this kind of classification is the potential for a sustainable and manageable expansion of the thesauri into new areas of knowledge, in which it continues to be effective and efficient, without forcing the experts to abandon their terminology. Furthermore, it enables collaboration, cross-disciplinary resource discovery, and detection of common principles; it also ensures compatibility with other thesauri that are restricted to particular areas of knowledge.

The BBT meta-thesaurus can help the researchers of the prosopography projects to build their own thesaurus on solid foundations, to make sensible differentiations between concepts (let us say, between offices, social roles, titles, and occupations), to refine subcategories and to build hierarchies of terms. In addition, communication between individuals and research teams that align their thesauri to the BBT provides feedback with questions that arise along the way; this can lead to further adjustments, refinements and ameliorations of both the BBT and the local thesauri.

The BBT offers the methodological principles and preconditions which can ensure the intersubjective and interdisciplinary character of classification systems and their consistent implementation. Its methodology, based on a faceted classification system, offers not only the necessary steps for building the general concepts that should be used in thesauri, but also practical advice on how to avoid logical and semantical inconsistencies by subsuming terms.

Let us see some examples that would be of interest for the research team of the prosopography and that would help them in their effort to build their own vocabulary of concepts and terms in relation to the "set of uniform questions" Lawrence Stone wrote about in his definition of prosopography.



activities > disciplines

| | |
|---|---|
| PREFERRED TERM | 000010 disciplines |
| BROADER CONCEPT | 000001 activities |
| NOTE | Narrower term examples: "construction of material objects and installations", "conception and comprehension of phenomena", "provision of knowledge and expertise", "production of works and/or phenomena of aesthetic value" |
| SCOPE NOTE | This term classifies professional or potentially professional areas of employment, that are socially and/ or legally recognized on the basis of the criteria of self-coherence, the efficacy of the practices they employ, the adoption of common methods and the ability to transfer knowledge and expertise in the relevant professional sector. Each sector includes types of activities that point to a certain unity of action characteristic of some sort of professional or potentially potential specialization. The specialization may |

https://vocabs.dariah.eu/bbt/en/page/?uri=https%3A%2F%2Fvocabs.dariah.eu%2Fbbt%2FConcept%2F000010

Disciplines: This term classifies professional or potentially professional areas of employment, that are socially and/or institutionally recognized on the basis of the criteria of self-coherence, the efficacy of the practices they employ, the adoption of common methods and the ability to transfer knowledge and expertise in the relevant professional sector.



| | | |
|---|---|---|
| PREFERRED TERM | 000008 roles | |
| NARROWER CONCEPTS | 000025 offices | |
| | 000026 roles of interpersonal relations | |
| SCOPE NOTE | This term classifies attitudes and/or social behaviors that are expected of a person and which result from or are acquired through the relation of that person with other individuals or social groups. | |
| BELONGS TO GROUP | Roles | |
| CREATOR | BBT maintenance WG | |
| NOTATION | 000008 | |
| IN OTHER LANGUAGES | rôles | French |
| | Rollen | German |

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Roles: This term classifies attitudes and/or social behaviors that are expected of a person and which result from or are acquired through the relation of that person with other individuals or social groups.

Offices: This term classifies official roles attributed to individuals, which grant them rights and/or dictate obligations in relation to exerting these rights and/or to performing administrative and management duties of institutional bodies. These properties are institutionally and socially recognized and acquire meaning only in the context of an organized community.

Roles of interpersonal relations: This term classifies attitudes and/or behaviors that characterize the interpersonal relations of people who are linked through kinship, marriage, or adoption. It also comprises the types of attitudes and/or behaviors of people linked through social, religious, spiritual, friendly, rivalrous and/or antagonistic relations.

| PREFERRED TERM | 000011 human interactions |
| --- | --- |
| BROADER CONCEPT | 000001 activities |
| NOTE | Narrower term examples: "social events, confrontations or conflicts", "political", "social and economic occurrences", "group management" |
| SCOPE NOTE | This term classifies intentional activities carried out by at least one actor causing or changing phenomena or states of affairs on the social, political, financial, cultural and intellectual level. |
| BELONGS TO GROUP | Activities |
| CREATOR | BBT maintenance WG |
| NOTATION | 000011 |
| IN OTHER LANGUAGES | interactions humaines — French<br>Menschliche Interaktionen — German<br>γεγονότα, συμβάντα — Greek |

https://vocabs.dariah.eu/bbt/en/page/?uri=https%3A%2F%2Fvocabs.dariah.eu%2Fbbt%2FConcept%2F000011

Human interactions: This term classifies intentional activities carried out by at least one actor causing or changing phenomena or states of affairs on the social, political, financial, cultural and intellectual level.

| PREFERRED TERM | 000007 groups and collectivities |
| --- | --- |
| NOTE | Narrower term examples: "ethnicities", "political parties", "artistic groups", "groups of demonstrators". |
| SCOPE NOTE | This term classifies relations of whatever character (economic, religious, athletic, political, national etc.) that arise from the joint actions of at least two people. These relations should be based on the adoption of common beliefs, traditions, objectives and/or actions as well as showing organizational features. |
| BELONGS TO GROUP | Groups and Collectivities |
| CREATOR | BBT maintenance WG |
| NOTATION | 000007 |
| IN OTHER LANGUAGES | groupes et collectivités — French<br>Gruppen und Vereinigungen — German<br>συλλογικότητες και ομάδες — Greek<br>grupos e coletividades — Portuguese |

https://vocabs.dariah.eu/bbt/en/page/?uri=https%3A%2F%2Fvocabs.dariah.eu%2Fbbt%2FConcept%2F000007

Groups and collectivities: This term classifies relations of whatever character (economic, religious, political, etc.) that arise from the joint actions of at least two people. These relations are based on the adoption of common beliefs, traditions, objectives and/or actions, and exhibit features of some degree of organization.

The narrower term examples, as they appear on the slide, give an idea of how the team of the prosopography project could ogranise their own narrower vocabulary in accordance with their own research questions in relation to the specific historical context and the sources they want to tackle. Their vocabularies could be then used as metadata in the database of the prosopography and in the faceted searches offered to the users of a digital platform.

This slide shows a part of the mapping of traditional occupations in the thesaurus of the Academy of Athens, which is aligned to the BBT. This is a -let us say- local thesaurus developed by a specific project team, much like as the hypothetical team of the prosopography project I used an example. As mentioned before, the BBT is an overarching thesaurus, a meta-thesaurus; that is, it does not identify the terms and concepts that would be suitable for any thesaurus in the field of the humanities. This is a work for the specialists from the specific disciplines (in our example: for the historians of the prosopography project team).

The BBT identifies the top-level-concepts (facets and hierarchies) that can become a common basis for thesaurus building. A collaboration with the BBT can help researchers and institutions build their own controlled vocabularies, their own local thesauri, within a scientific environment of methodological sophistication and solution finding between colleagues who are willing to discuss, to offer advice and to receive feedback.