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The Declining *Polis*?

Religious Rivalries in Ancient Civic Context

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INTRODUCTION

Any attempt to understand religious rivalries in the ancient Mediterranean world must take into account the social and political structures within which such phenomena took place. Such structures influenced or constrained in various ways the activities and behaviours of the individuals, groups, and communities that attract our historical interest. Thus, it is the city or *polis* of the Greek East, and the larger power structures of which the *polis* was a part, that should frame our investigations. It is important, of course, to remember that, in focusing on the *polis*, we are glimpsing only a small portion of social-religious life in antiquity; we are not studying life in the countryside and villages, concerning which the evidence is, unfortunately, far less abundant. Our understanding of the nature and characteristics of the *polis* and empire will have an impact on our assessment of social and religious life. For this reason, it is very important to be self-conscious about the models and presuppositions that have not only informed past scholarship in this area but also, for better or for worse, continue to shape our perceptions of civic life in regions like the Roman province of Asia.

It is common, in discussions of the *polis* under Hellenistic and Roman rule, to read about the corrosion of civic spirit or identity, about interference by ruling authorities, about the hollowness of civic institutions and structures, which are supposed to have accompanied a fundamental decline. In recent years, some scholars have begun to question key aspects of this traditional scenario of decline. As we shall soon see, theories concerning the

degeneration of the *polis*, including its religious life, are based more on a debatable selection, interpretation, and employment of evidence—informed by an underlying model of decline—than they are by the weight of the evidence itself. Indeed, I shall argue that despite changes and developments in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, we can properly speak of the continuing vitality of civic life, especially in its social and religious aspects.

I begin by discussing and questioning notions of decline in the study of the *polis* (*Models of Decline in the Study of the Polis*), before outlining ways in which this notion has influenced studies of ancient religious life in this context (*Models of Decline in the Study of Social-Religious Life*). I then provide evidence for the continuing vitality of civic life by using the inscriptional evidence for small social-religious groups in the cities of Roman Asia (*Evidence for the Vitality of the Polis in Asia Minor*). This evidence gives us a glimpse into the importance of networks of benefaction, and provides a picture of the *polis* as a locus of identity, pride, co-operation, and competition among various levels of society. Finally, I discuss how this overall picture of the *polis* might inform our discussion of religious rivalries (*Implications for the Study of Religious Rivalries*).

MODELS OF DECLINE IN THE STUDY OF THE *POLIS*

Pausanias, the ancient travel guide, makes a sarcastic statement which provides us with a rare description of how an ancient Greek defined the *polis*: “From Chaironeia it is two and a half miles to the *polis* of Panopeus in Phokis: if you can call it a *polis* when it has no civic offices, no gymnasium, no theatre, and no market-place, when it has no running water at a fountain and they live on the edge of a torrent in hovels like mountain huts. Still, their territory has boundary stones, and they send delegates to the Phokian assembly” (Pausanias, *Descr.* 10.4.1; trans. adapted from Levi 1971). Evidently, Pausanias viewed the buildings and related institutions that accompanied civilized Hellenistic life as the essence of a Greek *polis*, and he qualifies his sarcasm by noting that Panopeus did, at least, participate in its regional political assembly. Conspicuously absent from Pausanias’s description, however, is something that seems to be the focus of many modern attempts to define what is or is not a real *polis*: the idea that without true autonomy, or genuine democracy on the model of classical Athens, there is no *polis* at all, or at best only a *polis* in decay.

According to the common view, changes that took place in the fourth century BCE led to the failure of the Greek *polis*, followed by a steady degeneration of virtually every political, social, cultural, and other facet of civic life in the Hellenistic and Roman periods (cf. Tarn and Griffith 1952, 47–125;

Ehrenberg 1969 and 1965; Mossé 1973; Kreissig 1974; Ste. Croix 1981). A particular interpretation and employment of two interrelated developments form the basis for this view. First, the Hellenistic Age was a period in which the authority of the kings over their territories brought true freedom to an end and seriously undermined local autonomy through the rulers' policy of active interference in internal civic life. In this view, autonomy in its strict sense is the essential ingredient without which the *polis* becomes an empty shell, causing a corresponding decay in other dimensions of civic life (cf. Finley 1977, 306–307; Thomas 1981, 40; Runciman 1990).

More often than not, the turning point of the loss of autonomy and, hence, the beginning of the end of the *polis*, is placed either at the battle of Chaironeia in 338 BCE—echoing Lykurgos's statement that, "With the bodies of [those who died at the battle] was buried the freedom of the other Greeks" (*Leoc.* 50)—or at the beginning of the Hellenistic Age, at the death of Alexander in 323 BCE (cf. Thomas 1981, 40). Other scholars, such as A.H.M. Jones (1940), argue that, although the Hellenistic era saw the beginning of limited interference by the kings in civic life, thereby undermining self-government to some degree, such interference was limited and indirect. Jones places the climax of such control and intervention five centuries or so later than most other scholars, under the Roman emperors, especially emphasizing its negative impact on civic life from the second century CE onward.

Second, most scholars who speak of decline also focus on the supposed degeneration of democracy and the declining role of the assembly (*ekklesia*) of the people (*demos*) (Ste. Croix 1981, 300–306, 518 ff., is representative). While democracy in the classical period is thought to have permitted the real participation of all strata of the population, giving even the lower classes an avenue of political activity and a sense of belonging, there is often presumed to have been a gradual disintegration of democracy in the Hellenistic era, with a corresponding detachment, by the majority of the population, from civic structures. The interfering policies of the Hellenistic kings and, even more, the Roman emperors—especially their active favouring of the establishment of oligarchic rule in the cities—assisted the local elites in taking real power away from the people. Democracy by means of the assembly of the people was already in "full decay" by the beginning of the Roman era and, shortly thereafter, died out altogether, as G.E.M. de Ste. Croix argues. Corresponding to the death of democracy was the detachment of most inhabitants from civic identity or pride, especially in the lower social strata of society.

There are several respects in which this overall scenario of decline is exaggerated and inadequate. For this reason, some scholars have begun to

deconstruct it. First of all, it seems that a broad set of assumptions and value judgments plays a role in many scholars' implicit plotting of historical developments as the tragic decline and fall of the ancient city from the glorious days of classical Athens. Seldom is the underlying plot line or meta-narrative as explicit as when Kathleen Freeman states that the history of Greece "reads like a tragedy in three acts": the glorious emergence of city states like Athens; the intellectual and political achievements of science and philosophy in the fifth and early fourth centuries; and the unfortunate "break-up of the city-state system" in the later fourth century which brought with it the end of the distinctive thought and work of ancient Hellas (Freeman 1950, xv–xx).

Quite often, it seems to be an idealization of classical Athens—a reflection of scholars' value judgments—that serves as the archetype against which the inferiority of cities in Hellenistic and Roman times is established. Rarely are the value judgments that accompany the idealization of the classical *polis* as blatant as when Ernest Barker laments that "those who have been touched by the tradition, and educated by the philosophy, of the Greek city-state may be permitted to stand by its grave and remember its life; to wonder what, under happier auspices, it might have achieved" (1927, 535). In a critique of Ste. Croix's affirmation of the popularity of the Athenian empire, Donald W. Bradeen perceptively notes: "most of us ancient historians have a sympathy for Athens and her Empire; no matter how impartial we try to be, our whole training as classicists, and possibly our political bent as well, incline us that way" (1975, 405).

Classical Athens itself, however, may not have lived up to the scholarly ideal. Arlene W. Saxonhouse's recent study suggests that scholars "still bring to the study of ancient democracy our conceptions of democracy as it has emerged in the nineteenth and...twentieth centuries," often allowing modern values to shape a romantic view of Athenian democracy (1996, 7, 1–29). We must also be cautious about assuming that classical Athens was typical, since it is the only *polis* of that era for which substantial evidence survives; as P.J. Rhodes points out, a variety of different constitutions were adopted by other cities in the classical era, some of which included varying combinations of democracy, oligarchy, and monarchy (1994, 579; cf. Pecirka 1976, 6–7).

Even if democratic Athens was, in some respects, typical of the earlier forms of the *polis*, and even if the decline-scholars are justified in the degree to which they emphasize the loss of autonomy and democracy in subsequent years, such historical developments do not demonstrate the precipitous decline in civic life and identity scholars usually presume. Changes in one

specific area, such as political participation, do not always equal degeneration in all others. A trend toward oligarchy, for example, does not mean that the lower social strata (which play less of a role in official political life) will necessarily feel dislocated and isolated from the social and religious facets of the *polis*, or lack a sense of identity in relation to civic structures.

Moreover, recent years have seen the beginning of a shift away from the overall paradigm of decline, although the wake of such a shift has not yet reached disciplines such as our own. The shift is evident, for example, in a comparison of the first and second editions of *The Cambridge Ancient History*. Whereas a contributor to the 1927 edition concluded his discussion of politics in the fourth century BCE with a section entitled, "The end of the *polis*," P.J. Rhodes's corresponding article in the 1994 edition concludes with a conspicuously interrogative section entitled, "The failure of the *polis*?" Louis Robert, whose knowledge of the inscriptions of Asia Minor remains unparalleled, states: "la cité grecque n'est pas morte à Chéronée, ni sous Alexandre, ni dans le cours de toute l'époque hellénistique" (1969, 42). Robert goes on to say that although cities such as Athens and Sparta no longer possessed their former power in international affairs, the internal structures of civic life in most cities remained largely unchanged: "La vie de la cité continue dans le même cadre et avec les mêmes idéaux" (1969, 42). What was relatively new, however, was the emerging system of benefaction (see below, Models of Decline in the Study of Social-Religious Life).

P.J. Rhodes (1994), Walter Eder (1995), Mogens Herman Hansen (1993, 1994, 1995), Erich Gruen (1993), and others question many of the key interpretations of previous scholars concerning the early crisis and decline of the *polis*, emphasizing instead the vitality of civic life in the Hellenistic and Roman eras, despite changes and developments (see, e.g., Gauthier 1985, 1993). Stephen Mitchell argues that, despite the loss of complete autonomy for cities in Asia Minor, there was still considerable continuity from earlier times: the cities continued as effective centres of administration and, perhaps more importantly, the cities were, in a very positive sense, communities (1993, 1:199).

These and other recent studies call into question many scholars' specific historical interpretations concerning both autonomy and democracy, which are in need of considerable qualification or, in some cases, rejection. Most scholars who speak of decline hold in common a definition of the *polis*, which emphasizes autonomy (*autonomia*) or sovereignty as its essential ingredient; hence, dependence on an outside power such as a king or emperor means loss of identity as a genuine *polis*, and subsequent decline. This definition of the *polis*, however, is largely a product of modern schol-

arship, as Hansen's recent studies convincingly show. No ancient discussion of the nature of the *polis* mentions autonomy as a defining characteristic; furthermore, *hypêkoos* ("dependent") is the opposite of *autonomos*, yet the term *hypêkoos polis* is well attested, which would be a nonsensical statement if ancients considered autonomy an essential ingredient (Hansen 1993, 18–20; 1994, 15–17; 1995). Moreover, Hansen states, every "city-state would of course have preferred to be autonomous, but obviously a city-state did not lose its identity as a *polis* by being subjected to another city-state or, for example, to the king of Persia, or Macedon, or a Hellenistic ruler, or Rome" (1993, 19; cf. Brunt 1990, 272).

Furthermore, many scholars have overstated the degree to which the Hellenistic kings and Roman authorities actively interfered in the affairs of the cities. Recent studies of the nature of Roman rule by scholars such as Fergus Millar (1967, 1977, 1984) and G. P. Burton (1975) point to its passive and reactive character. G.P. Burton (1993, 24–25) points to some of the "severe constraints" and practical limitations on the effective power of proconsuls and other Roman officials: the province of Asia, for example, included about 300–500 civic communities, under the direction of only the proconsul, three legates and a *quaestor*. Keith Hopkins (1980, 121) estimates that, in the middle of the second century, there was one elite official (of senatorial or equestrian rank) for every 350,000–400,000 subjects. Seldom did Roman emperors or authorities actively interfere in civic affairs, unless public disorders could not be handled locally or action was requested from below. As Peter Anthony Brunt states: "it was not the practice of the Romans to govern much. The governor had only a small staff, and he did little more than defend his province, ensure the collection of the taxes and decide the most important criminal and civil cases. The local communities were left in the main to run their own affairs" (1990, 116–17).

Such a picture of Roman rule contradicts, for example, David Magie's argument that the self-government of the cities in Asia Minor was fundamentally undermined by active interference through a requirement for the governor's approval in connection with civic decrees (1950, 1:641, 2:1504n. 21). As James H. Oliver (1954) convincingly argues, the inscriptional evidence which Magie interprets as support for this view in fact represents quite a different situation: cities were not regularly required to gain permission from Roman authorities for their enactments, but rather sought occasional support from Roman governors, who were otherwise hesitant to get involved.

It is against this background that the passages in Plutarch's *Political Precepts* ought to be understood: with Plutarch not so much protesting the active interference of Roman authorities as exhorting Menemachos to avoid

the practice of other civic officials who actively and unnecessarily seek their governor's involvement, thereby forcing "the governors to be their masters more than the governors wish" (814e-815a; translation by Oliver 1954, 163). Certainly there are other passages, in which Plutarch laments the loss of total freedom by the *polis*, for instance, when he cautions Menemachos to beware of the "boots of Roman soldiers just above your head" (813e). But, shortly thereafter, he advises Menemachos to foster friendships with Roman officials in order to further the welfare of the *polis* (814d). Plutarch evidently believed that the continued success of Roman rule was a consequence of divine providence; to struggle against it was to challenge the will of the gods. To categorize him as either anti- or pro-Roman, as Simon Swain points out, is to oversimplify a far more complex picture (1996, 135–86).

The second main point cited in support of a theory of decline, which is in need of qualification, is the degree to which the typical *polis* of the Hellenistic and Roman periods represents the degeneration of an earlier form of democracy. I have already noted that many scholars uphold an ideal vision of Athenian democracy, which is shaped by modern values and does not accurately reflect the reality of the ancient situation. For example, it is quite common for scholars to stress the increasing importance of the wealthy in political life, and the emerging dominance of oligarchy in the Hellenistic and Roman eras. Already in classical Athens, however, the wealthy, rather than average citizens, seem to have been dominant in the important political positions (Rhodes 1994, 566, 573; cf. A.H.M. Jones 1940, 166–69). Scholars such as Hansen (cf. Ste. Croix 1981, 284) also question the degree to which we can speak of ancient democracy in terms of the majority vote of all citizens when, in fact, the evidence concerning the number of citizens who could actually attend meetings of the assembly in classical Athens suggests otherwise (e.g., the seating capacity of the Pnyx accommodated only one-third to one-quarter of the citizen population in the fourth century BCE; see Saxonhouse 1996, 5–6).

Even so, as Rhodes states in reference to Ste. Croix's theories, "the failure of democracy would not be the same thing as the failure of the *polis*, and it is not obvious that either occurred" (Rhodes 1994, 189n.102). There is evidence that the assembly of the people could continue to play a significant role, in the Hellenistic and Roman eras, despite the prominence of the wealthy in civic affairs. Gruen points to the surviving attendance records for the Hellenistic era in various cities of Asia Minor and states that, contrary to the clichés in scholarship, "popular participation in the Hellenistic city-states did not consist merely in empty slogans, but rather involved

the participation of citizens in the various legislative and judicial activities alongside honorary ones" (1993, 354). Furthermore, scholars such as Stephen Mitchell and Guy MacLean Rogers have begun to question the common view that, in the Roman era, the council so completely usurped the role of the people that the latter possessed very little, if any, real power, but merely approved lists of candidates for office.¹

These various new studies mount a fundamental challenge to key interpretations of historical developments that have served as the basis of the theory of decline, which itself rests on questionable value judgments, models, and assumptions. Although important changes and developments definitely did take place under Hellenistic and Roman rule, these changes are not best understood in terms of a broad notion of decline. Further positive evidence for the continued vitality of the *polis* will be presented shortly. But first, the implications of the theory of decline for the study of social, cultural, and religious facets of civic life needs more attention, especially in light of our focus on religious rivalries.

MODELS OF DECLINE IN THE STUDY OF SOCIAL-RELIGIOUS LIFE

Unfortunately, the model of civic decline has often been used to explain other social and cultural phenomena in the Hellenistic and Roman eras. Many scholars correlate this decline with a degeneration of traditional religious life. As S.R.F. Price notes, "the conventional model, which has been applied to both Greek and Roman cults, posits an early apogee followed by a long and continuous decline, until the last embers were extinguished by Christianity" (1984, 14). As we shall see, the application to these other social and religious developments of both the model of civic decline and its related assumptions can produce misleading and exaggerated conclusions. One can also discern the role of modern value judgments in such scenarios; parallel to some scholars' use of classical Athens as a foil against which all subsequent developments are evaluated in negative terms, an ideal view of Christianity serves as a measure of genuine religion, over against which most, but not all, preceding phenomena are evaluated as superficial, less than genuine, and therefore in decay.

¹ For the common view, see A.H.M. Jones 1940, 177; Magie 1950, 1:640–41 (cf. Lane Fox 1986, 51; Sheppard 1984–1986, 247); also Mitchell 1993, 1:201–4; Rogers 1992. Regarding activities of the assemblies in the Roman era, see C.P. Jones's discussion (1978, 97–98) of passages in Dio's orations, which indicate the working of the assembly (40.1, 5–6; 45.15–16; 47.12–13); also A.H.M. Jones 1940, 177–78, 340–41, and Oliver 1970, 61–63, who argues for considerable continuity in the constitution of Athens from classical times up to the time of Marcus Aurelius.

W.S. Ferguson's outline (1928) in *The Cambridge Ancient History* of the leading ideas of the Hellenistic Age reflects widespread views evident in the works of such influential scholars of Greco-Roman religion as Martin P. Nilsson (1961; 1964), André-Jean Festugière (1954; 1972), Eric Robertson Dodds (1959, 179–206, 236–69), and those who depend on them, such as Peter Green (1990, 382–413, 586–601).² According to these scholars, the vitality of traditional Greek religion was bound to the effectiveness of the autonomous and democratic *polis* in such a way that the decline of the *polis*, between the fourth and third centuries BCE, brought about the downfall of the civic religious system, leaving an “empty shell” having little vestige of “genuine religion,” so that, in Nilsson's words, “the ancient gods were tottering” (1964, 260–62, 274–75, 285; cf. Murray 1935, 106–108, 158–63). More recently, Luther H. Martin claims to discern a parallel between the modern condition and that of the Hellenistic age: “Both are shaped in periods of transformation characterized by...altered sociopolitical systems...[by] the influx of strange new gods from the East. For both, the traditional gods might well be termed dead” (1987, 3). It seems, however, that this is less recognition of actual similarities between the ancient situation and the modern one than it is an imposition of modern concepts and historical developments on the description of the ancient world.

Even if individuals continued to participate in traditional religious ceremonies, it is assumed that their feelings and attitudes were no longer involved. Some scholars appear to possess additional knowledge, beyond what the evidence of continued participation in traditional forms of religion suggests. Festugière, for example, asserts that the decline of civic religions is an “undeniable fact.” What it comes down to is that this “undeniable fact” is based on Festugière's claim to be able to distinguish between the “outer form” of the cults, which, he admits, continued to function largely unchanged, according to the only evidence we have, and the “feelings” and “attitudes” of those who participated, which, Festugière asserts, were no longer attached to the civic cults and, correspondingly, to the *polis* (1954, 37–38; cf. Dodds 1959, 243–44; Carcopino 1941, 137–44; P. Green 1990, 587). Nilsson similarly discounts the evidence for the continued vitality of

² Peter Green favourably cites or footnotes both Nilsson and Dodds on a regular basis; cf. Guthrie 1950. My discussion, in what follows, is based on views shared by W.S. Ferguson, Nilsson, and Festugière, and echoes earlier evaluations by L.R. Farnell (1912), G. Murray (1935), and Tarn and Griffith (1952, 325–60). Nock (1933, 65, 99–121) has a similar view of the decline of traditional religion, though he states it more moderately. Some of the essential aspects of this view are still presented, albeit in modified form, by recent scholars (cf. J.K. Davies 1984; L.H. Martin 1987).

civic religion by categorizing it as a sign not of continued vitality but of an historical interest from a romantic and sentimental background characteristic of an age “weary of its culture” (1964, 295).

The decline of civic structures also led to other important trends, including the rise of individualism, which was “the dominant feature of the age” (W.S. Ferguson 1928, 4; cf. Nilsson 1964, 282–83, 287; Farnell 1912, 137, 140–41, 147–50, who speaks of the rise of a spirit of individualism and a corresponding waning in the old religion; Guthrie 1950, 256, 334). Tarn and Griffith state: “Man as a political animal, a fraction of the *polis* or self-governing city state, had ended with Aristotle; with Alexander begins man as an individual” (1952, 79). Luther H. Martin seems to have had a change of mind on the issue of individualism (contrast 1987 and 1994). Moreover, individuals in the Hellenistic era suffered from a general malaise characterized by feelings of detachment, isolation, and uncertainty: “loneliness and helplessness in a vast disintegrating world” (W.S. Ferguson 1928, 35), which led them to seek substitutes for the attachment they had previously felt toward the *polis* and its social and religious structures. Scholars who hold these views often explain and group together various religious phenomena in the Hellenistic world, including the addiction to foreign cults or mystery religions, the supposed preoccupation with Tyche, the popularity of both magic and astrology, and the rise of ruler cults, as (often misguided) responses to a social and spiritual vacuum, as relatively new compensatory phenomena.³

It is worth pointing out the place of ruler cults in this overall scenario, since it reveals some of the underlying assumptions and value judgments involved. For Nilsson and others, ruler cults were the epitome of faltering religious life, and foreshadowed the fall that was yet to come: “The origin of the cult of men in Greece is to be sought in the convulsions of the dying religion” (Nilsson 1964, 288, italics mine; cf. W.S. Ferguson 1928, 13–22). Nilsson’s opinion is the same in his very influential *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*, where he states: “dass der Herrscherkult eine Verfallserscheinung der griechischen Religion ist, der es an wirklich religiösem Gehalt mangelt” (1961, 182). Lily Ross Taylor gives a similar assessment of the imperial cult when she states that “the inclusion of a mortal among the gods would not bring to the men of the day the same shock that it would have

³ For a recent restatement of the view, see P. Green 1990, 396–413, 586–601, esp. p. 396. Green is clearly reiterating the perspectives of Dodds and Nilsson. Such questionable conceptions of individualism and widespread deracination have also influenced the study and interpretation of Greco-Roman novels (see Swain 1996, 104–109, for a critique of associated assumptions and theories).

caused in a time when the native religion was strong" (1931, 54). According to Dodds, such cults were "expressions of helpless dependence; he who treats another human being as divine thereby assigns to himself the relative status of a child or an animal" (1959, 242).

Through such cults, rulers became a somewhat superficial replacement for the "old gods," whose importance was waning. Nilsson's strictly negative evaluation of ruler cults, within his overall story of a "dying religion" (which is paralleled in the works of other scholars, e.g., P. Green 1990, 396–413), evinces the convergence of the two modernizing concerns—the one regarding superior political life (i.e., the idealized picture of classical Athens) and the other regarding genuine religion (i.e., the idealized picture of Christianity)—which together serve as the basis for evaluating whether something is degeneration, rather than simply change or development. On the one hand, ruler cults involved the inhabitants of the *polis* in the worship of the same outside, interfering power that was already undermining their freedom and democracy. On the other hand, they also embodied a strictly outward, state-supported, and artificial form of religion, far removed from the personal religion that otherwise might have evoked the genuine feeling of individual participation. Nilsson and other scholars have similar things to say regarding imperial cults in the Roman era, which ostensibly had very little meaning for those who were involved and "lacked all genuine religious content" (Nilsson 1948, 178; cf. 1961, 385; for discussion and criticism of such oversimplifications, see Pleket 1965; Price 1984; Harland 1996, 2000). Once again, value judgments, informed by modern concerns rather than the weight of the evidence, play a significant role in the development of this overall scenario of a tragic decline, with a touch of romance being added to the plot through reference to the forthcoming triumph of Christianity. In chapter 1 of this book, Vaage gives examples of how similar assumptions by historians have shaped perceptions of early Christianity and its competitors.

According to the common view, one of the most important responses to feelings of deracination was the rise of what scholars such as Nilsson and Festugière call private or personal religion. This was, supposedly, a replacement for the outward and in many ways artificial public or civic religion, which no longer evoked the feeling of the individuals who participated. As traditional civic religious structures declined, private clubs, mysteries, and associations (which often involved not only the individual's personal choice, but also some notion of salvation) were the most successful social-religious units (Festugière 1954, 40; Dodds 1959, 243). This was because they responded to feelings of helplessness, isolation, and uncertainty by providing a replacement for the sense of belonging and attachment that indi-

viduals previously had felt toward the civic community and its social structures, including the household. In the case of the mysteries, they offered a religious system of salvation from uncertain conditions; in this sense, they were similar to Christianity.

Many scholars who hold similar views would stop short of explicitly stating, as George Herbert Box does, what seems to underlie such evaluations concerning the notion of a preparation for the triumph of Christianity: “[The mysteries] and the religious brotherhoods which made purity of life a condition of membership are genuine manifestations of the religious spirit, and may be regarded as a real preparation for Christianity” (1929, 45). Many scholars who suggest that the mysteries approached the status of a genuine religion (i.e., Christianity) are also careful to assert Christianity’s difference from contemporary mysteries. The mysteries serve a twofold function in such theories: establishing preparation for, and serving as a foil against which, the superiority and uniqueness of Christianity is established (cf. Gasparro 1985, xiii-xxiii; J.Z. Smith 1990).

In the preceding scenario, associations are viewed as a compensatory phenomenon or symptom of decline, which accordingly should be defined in contrast with social structures of the *polis*, sometimes in subversive terms; according to John Kenyon Davies, for example, these groups “ran counter to city-based religion and society” (1984, 318). This view of associations as a compensation for the decline of the *polis* is widespread in scholarship (see, e.g., Ziebarth 1896, 191–93; Poland 1909, 516; Tod 1932, 71–73; Guthrie 1950, 265–68; Dill 1956, 256; Herrmann, Waszink and Köting 1978, 94; J.Z. Smith 1978, 187).

Only a few of the general problems with the notion of religious decline can be mentioned here. The most fundamental problem is the evidence to the contrary. Some recent, as well as older, studies of civic religious life, namely, those that do not begin with an a priori model of decline, have convincingly interpreted the evidence quite differently. Moreover, as Johannes Geffcken saw in 1920 (1978), and both Ramsay MacMullen (1981) and Robin Lane Fox (1986) have vividly demonstrated more recently, the weight of the evidence demonstrates that Greco-Roman religion, traditional and otherwise, far from showing signs of deathly illness already in the third century BCE, thrived at least into the third century CE, even though there were certainly changes, developments, and differences from one region to another. MacMullen points out the quality of our evidence: “Religion, like many another aspect of life, rises and falls on the quantity of surviving evidence like a boat on the tide. Highs and lows of attestation, if they only follow the line on the table, indicate no change at all” (1981, 127).

Second, theories regarding widespread social-religious decline share the problems of the parallel notion of the decline of the *polis* (which is assumed rather than substantiated), including, for example, the tendency to neglect the possibility that innovations are not always negative, nor signs of degeneration, but simply changes (North 1976, 10–12).

Third, it seems that some scholars impose on the ancient evidence concepts and models of historical development (cultural and intellectual) borrowed from the modern era, which are not appropriate for the study of the Greco-Roman world. For example, such scholars claim to find in the Hellenistic Age the rise of individualism and corresponding feelings of detachment and uncertainty. The tendency to look for parallels, in the ancient world, to modern developments is perhaps most obvious in Dodds's *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1959): besides his emphasis on the rise of individualism, he sees in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE the Greek "Enlightenment" and "the rise of rationalism," to which many later developments in the Hellenistic era are viewed as an irrational response (for a critique of Dodds's views, see Gordon 1972b; also Paul Veyne 1990, 41).

A developed concept of individualism, however, and the related concepts of private versus public did not emerge until the sixteenth century, and developed fully only with the European Enlightenment; such concepts are, accordingly, inappropriate for studying pre-modern societies. The developments that W.S. Ferguson, Festugière, Dodds, and others claim to find in the ancient world, and emphasize the most, are precisely those that came with the European Enlightenment and modern individualism: the individual's detachment from the larger community, freedom of choice, cultural mobility, critique of traditional forms of religion, and affinity for privatized, mystical religion. Take, for example, the imposition of many such details on the ancient world in the article about "Individualism" by Lawrence Hazelrigg in the *Encyclopedia of Sociology* (1992), and compare this description with what scholars such as Festugière like to find in the Greco-Roman world.

Hazelrigg rightly emphasizes the contrast between pre-modern societies, in which social relations are largely organic, corporate, and group-based, and the individualism of the modern era. Furthermore, as Peter Brown observes: "many modern accounts of religious evolution of the Roman world place great emphasis on the malaise of life in great cities in Hellenistic and Roman times. Yet the loneliness of the great city and the rapid deculturation of immigrants from traditionalist areas are modern ills: they should not be overworked as explanatory devices for the society we are studying. We can be far from certain that [as Dodds states] 'such

loneliness must have been felt by millions” (1978, 2–3). Consider also Jonathan Barnes’s comment: “life in Hellenistic Greece was no more upsetting, no more at the mercy of fickle fortune or malign foes, than it had been in an earlier era” (1986, 365).

Festugière’s tendency to see in the ancient context parallels to the modern is evident in his statement: “la civilisation gréco-romaine est déjà une civilisation de grandes villes. Dans ces grandes villes la majorité des habitants vivent comme aujourd’hui” (cited in P. Brown 1978, 3; cf. P. Green 1990, 404). La Piana’s study of immigrant groups in Rome likewise tends to see parallels between the situation of immigrants in the ancient and modern context; he alludes to a universal experience, which he imagines that all immigrants in all times, at least to some degree, shared (1927, 201–205, 225–26). In their enthusiasm to find important connections or similarities between the ancient Greco-Roman world and our own, such historians sometimes implicitly impose (rather than discover) structural and developmental parallels between the modern and ancient situations. This tendency is perhaps related to the fact that the Greco-Roman world is considered formative for the development of Western culture, and is thus closely connected with the values and sentiments of such historians. This factor is especially evident in Luther H. Martin’s introduction to Hellenistic religions (1987, 3).

Another problematic aspect of this overall scenario of decline in religious life is that an anachronistic approach sometimes plays a role, modernizing and Christianizing the conception of religion. Because the civic cults of paganism eventually “lost” to the adopted religion of empire (=Christianity), such cults must have been inadequate in addressing people’s needs, and accordingly began their inevitable decline long before. Any religious activity during this age of decline, which can be construed as private, personal, individualistic religion, involving genuine feelings or notions of salvation, i.e., any religious activity approximating what such scholars understand Christianity to have been (according to a modern Jamesian definition of genuine religion), is viewed as more vital than, or superior to, other traditional forms of religious life, though still inferior to Christianity, which was in other ways unique.

What seems to underlie, for example, Festugière’s notion of personal or genuine religion closely resembles William James’s definition of religion as “the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (1902, 50; cf. Festugière 1954, 1–4; Dodds 1959, 243; 1965, 2; Nilsson 1961, 711–12; P. Green 1990, 588). Festugière is

not alone in adopting such a limited definition of religion; it is not hard to see how the application to the ancient world (or to any non-western culture, for that matter) of such a modern, western, Christian, individualist conception of religion can obscure the vast majority of religious life, categorizing it (*a priori*) as artificial and less than genuine.

Hence the misguided and all-consuming focus, in some scholarship, on the mystery religions. Giulia Sfameni Gasparro (1985, xiii–xxiii) and Walter Burkert (1987), among others, question the Christianizing interpretations of the mysteries that were previously prevalent. As Burkert points out, mysteries were an optional activity within the broader context of traditional religious forms, not a separate movement or religion over against the *polis* and its structures. Associations and groups that engaged in mysteries were often fully integrated into the complex structures of family and *polis* (Burkert 1987, 32) rather than being their replacements.

EVIDENCE FOR THE VITALITY OF THE *POLIS* IN ASIA MINOR

Now that we have challenged some scholarly portraits of the *polis*, we can go on to discuss more positive evidence concerning the continuing vitality of civic life. I begin by addressing the significance, for the *polis*, of social networks of benefaction in the Hellenistic and Roman eras; then, I continue by using inscriptional evidence for associations in Roman Asia as an indication of involvements in, attachments to, and identifications with numerous dimensions of the *polis* on the part of its inhabitants from various social strata.

Social Networks of Benefaction

One can see important continuities within many of the central political, social, and cultural institutions and structures of the *polis*, from the classical period into the Hellenistic and Roman eras. The constitutions of cities that were founded on the model of the Greek *polis* continued to consist of the two main bodies of civic authority: the council (*boulê*), which usually numbered between two hundred and five hundred members; and the people (*dêmos*), which included the citizen body divided according to tribes (*phylai*), along with various civic official positions and boards (whose titles could differ from one city to the next). Social-cultural institutions, including some mentioned earlier by Pausanias, remained prominent in civic life. Yet one of the most significant developments in the structure of the *polis* in the late-Hellenistic and Roman eras, which is also essential for understanding competition, rivalry, and co-operation between different groups, was the emergence of a systematic pattern of benefaction (euergetism),

which relied upon social network connections and was accompanied by a particular cultural world view.

By the time the regions of western Asia Minor were incorporated into the Roman province of Asia (ca. 133 BCE), this system of benefaction—an elaboration and systematization of conventions that characterized the Greek *polis* in earlier times—had become a prominent structural element with special relevance to the social system and economic well-being of the cities. Space does not permit a discussion of the origins of this system of benefaction or euergetism (see Veyne 1990; 1987, 95–115; Gauthier 1985; 1993; cf. Wallace-Hadrill 1990, 150–54; Mitchell 1993, 1:210; Sartre 1991, 147–66). Basically, Veyne differs from Gauthier in emphasizing a sharp caesura between the classical/democratic and the Hellenistic/non-democratic period, in connection with the emergence of euergetism as a system in Hellenistic times. Gauthier, on the other hand (correctly, I believe), puts emphasis on the continuing importance of democracy, and suggests that euergetism flows naturally from the competitive ethos of democracy; he sees the era of full-fledged euergetism from the second century BCE onward. Wallace-Hadrill discusses ways in which “the Romans absorbed the Greek honorific idiom gradually, almost without realising it” (1990, 166).

This system involved webs of reciprocal relations within social networks marked by a clearly differentiated hierarchy, though the potential for relations was quite fluid at all levels. The most prominent characteristic of these reciprocal relations within social networks was the exchange of benefits or gifts of numerous kinds (e.g., protection, financial contributions for various purposes) in return for appropriate honours. The system was reciprocal, in the sense that both the benefactor and the beneficiary (whether gods, individuals, groups, or institutions) stood to gain from the exchange, whether the benefit was tangible or otherwise. The system was also self-perpetuating, in that a benefaction was followed by fitting honours, which in turn ensured the probability of further benefactions from the same source in the future, as well as benefactions from others who might seek to outdo their competitors in the pursuit of honour.

The appropriateness of the honours depended on both the nature of the benefits conferred and the position of the benefactor and the beneficiary within the overall hierarchy of relations. Failure fittingly to honour a benefactor resulted in shame (*aischynê*); as Dio of Prusa suggests, this was akin to impiety (*asebeia*) toward the gods (*Or.* 31.57, 65, 80–81, 157). Correspondingly, failure of the wealthy to provide such benefactions appropriately was a threat to the position they strove to maintain within society: in this sense, benefaction became an obligation, not simply a voluntary action. The pro-

vision of benefactions and the granting of honours reaffirmed the relative positions of both the benefactor and the beneficiary within the social system of the *polis* and cosmos.

At the top of this hierarchy, as powers external to the *polis*, were both the gods and the rulers, whose ongoing protection and benefaction ensured the well-being of the *polis* and its constituent groups. The deities' protection of the *polis* and its inhabitants, holding off earthquakes, famine, and other natural disasters, while providing safety (*sôtêria*), stability, and peace, was deserving of the utmost honours, especially cultic. Dio Chrysostom, for example, describes the role of the gods in causing (or preventing) such natural disasters (*Or.* 38.20). A deadly plague in various cities of Asia in the mid-second century CE led the city of Hierapolis to consult Apollo at Klaros, whose oracular response advised that sacrifices be made to several gods in order to appease their wrathful displeasures (Parke 1985:153–54). When natural disasters occurred, it was assumed that the gods had not been fittingly honoured; Jews or Christians accordingly became more likely to face local harassment and sporadic persecution (cf. Tertullian, *Apol.* 40.1–2). By the Roman era, the rulers' relation to the *polis* was considered to be parallel to that of the gods, and rulers whose beneficence and provision of stability were comparable to those of the gods were thought to be equally deserving of cultic honours. Examples of this parallelism between the roles of the gods and of the rulers can be drawn from various upper-class authors from Asia Minor, for instance, Artemidoros, who says: "rulers, like gods, also have the power to treat people well or badly" (*Onir.* 3.13).

Scholars who think that cultic honours given to rulers epitomize the failure of the *polis* and represent the utter debasement of its ideals and values fundamentally misunderstand the meaning and function of such honorary activities (cf. Price 1984; Friesen 1993; Harland 1996). Instead, the incorporation of emperors within the existing framework of the *polis* actually served to reinforce the ideals, values, and structures of civic society, rather than to undermine them (cf. Price 1984; R.R.R. Smith 1987; Wallace-Hadrill 1990, 152–53). What this incorporation of the emperors also means, as Fergus Millar (1993) stresses, is that having a relationship with the distant emperor was very much a part of what the *polis* was in Roman times.

The gods and emperors may have been at the top of the social networks upon which the system of benefaction rested, but they were certainly not the only important players. Imperial officials in the provinces also held sufficiently high positions within this hierarchy that local elites and groups were sure to cultivate contacts with these powerful figures. Per-

haps more importantly for the everyday life of the average *polis*, the wealthy elites and other inhabitants or groups in the cities were expected to provide various services and benefactions for the well-being of the *polis* and its inhabitants. Such contributions could take the form of official liturgies or magistracies, both of which required considerable financial outlay (which led to a blurring between the two). But, apart from these official roles, inhabitants could also make benefactions to the *polis* or its constituent groups in the form of financial contributions for the establishment of buildings, festivals, statues, and other structures that were dedicated to honour civic institutions, gods, or emperors. Benefactions could also take the form of banquets or food distributions in times of famine, such as the provisions made for the inhabitants at Termessos in Pamphylia by a wealthy woman named Atalante (*TAM* III 4, 62). The beneficiaries of such actions were expected to reciprocate with appropriate honours, such as the erection of an inscription of gratitude or a statue, in honour of the benefactor. Gratitude for the benefaction of a festival could be shown in less tangible ways; a statement by Petronius well sums up this mentality: “He gave me a spectacle, but I applauded it. We’re even: one hand washes the other” (cited in Veyne 1987, 113).

This leads to the question of what motivated such contributions to the life of the *polis*, thereby ensuring the stability of this systematic pattern of benefactions. Motivations naturally differed from one person and situation to the next, but three main components tend to stand out. First, the role of genuine feelings of civic pride should not be discounted. Second, honour (*timê*) was highly valued in and of itself, and its pursuit (*philotimia*) was among the most highly praised virtues. The desire to have one’s benefactions or deeds remembered after death, in order to preserve one’s reputation for posterity, was accordingly significant (cf. Dio, *Or.* 31.16; Polybius 20.6.5–6; Laum 1964 [passim]; Woolf 1996, 25–27).

A third motivating factor, however, must not be forgotten: the wealthy elites’ fear of what might happen if conspicuous donations were not made. There was a set of values and expectations which made such benefactions virtually a duty; failure to meet these expectations, especially at critical times, could result in angry mobs seeking revenge against the wealthy, as happened during a food shortage in Prusa, when an angry mob came after Dio and his neighbour (*Or.* 46, 7.25–26; cf. Philostratos, *Vit. Apoll.* 1.15). Contributions by the wealthy on a regular basis ensured the maintenance of their position and prestige within the city, while also limiting the potential for social conflicts when the contrasts between rich and poor, ruler and ruled, were particularly stark (Mitchell 1993, 1:206).

It is not hard to see how competition and rivalry, as well as co-operation, played important roles within ancient social systems. Competition for pre-eminence among wealthy elites was matched by competition among the potential recipients of such benefactions. The constituent groups of the *polis* were in many ways competitors with one another in their attempts to maintain contacts with and receive ongoing support from important persons within social networks. Beneficiaries also had something to gain from publicly advertising, through the medium of honorary inscriptions, their connections: namely, the advantage that such connections accrued, in their competition for prestige within the civic context. In setting up an honorary inscription, for example, an association or guild was not only honouring its benefactor but also making a claim regarding its own place within society, reaffirming in a very concrete way its ties within the networks of the *polis* (cf. Woolf 1996, 29; Harland 1999).

Yet co-operation was also essential to the system. Individual inhabitants of the lower social strata—such as a purple-dyer alone, for instance—were not very likely to gain the attention and benefaction of a wealthy imperial or civic official. But by co-operating together in the form of an association, united purple-dyers could ensure the possibility of such relations within the social networks of the *polis* and empire. On a broader scale, too, apart from its own intramural competitions, the sense of civic pride and identity, belonging to the *polis* as such, meant that its inhabitants as a whole co-operated together in broader-scale competitions and rivalries with other cities (cf. Dio, *Or.* 38–39).

Associations and the Civic Framework

Now that we have a framework within which to discuss the *polis* in Roman times, we can provide some concrete examples of the working of this system of benefaction and the nature of social relations within it. I have chosen to use as a starting point for this discussion the epigraphic evidence for small social-religious groups or associations in Roman Asia (for abbreviations for primary sources in this section, see G.H.R. Horsley and Lee 1994), not only because it happens to be the area with which I am most familiar (cf. Harland 1996, 1999, 2000), but for two other reasons as well. First, associations play a key role in common scholarly scenarios of civic and religious decline; second, many of these groups represent the lower strata of society which many scholars of the decline-theories think were the farthest removed from civic identity and participation. Therefore, if an investigation of the actual evidence for these groups shows signs of continuing attachments to the civic community and its institutions and structures,

along with a sense of belonging among their members, then the theories of decline are questionable from another angle.

Strong feelings of civic pride and identification with the *polis* or homeland (*patris*) are clearly evident not only among wealthy benefactors or elite authors, such as Aristides of Smyrna, Dio of Prusa, Artemidoros of Daldis, and Strabo of Amaseia, but also among various other segments of society, including those represented within occupational and other associations. Regarding the first group, Aelius Aristides delivered an epideictic speech in praise of his homeland, Smyrna, speaking of the *polis* as “the very model of a city,” which “recommends a love of itself among all mankind” (*Or.* 17.8). When an earthquake heavily damaged Smyrna, Aristides mourned over this catastrophe that had struck the most beautiful city, “the eye of Asia”; his letter to Marcus Aurelius requesting support for rebuilding was a success (*Or.* 18, 19, 20). Dio’s epideictic speech in response to the honours that his homeland of Prusa granted him is full of references to his pride and attachment in relation to the *polis* (*Or.* 44). Artemidoros dedicates Book Three of his dream interpretations to Daldis, “his native land...in gratitude for my upbringing” (*Onir.* 3.66). Strabo is sure to specify that Amaseia is his city and homeland (*patris*), and his description is wholly positive (*Geogr.* 12.3.15.39).

Individuals or groups could express their sense of belonging to the *polis* or homeland through their involvement in benefactions for (or dedications to) the *polis* and its institutions, either as benefactors or as beneficiaries. The association of fishermen and fishmongers at Ephesus, for example, representing a spectrum of social-economic levels, built and dedicated the fishery toll-office to the imperial family of Nero, the people (*dêmos*) of the Romans, and the people of the Ephesians (*IEph* 20; mid-first century CE; cf. *IEph* 1501; G.H.R. Horsley 1989). The guild of silversmiths and goldsmiths at Smyrna expressed both its piety toward the goddess Athena and the civic pride of its members by repairing her statue “for the homeland” (*ISmyrna* 721; ca. 14–37 CE). The dyers at Hierapolis (Lykos valley) who set up a statue of personified Council (*Boulê*) evidently identified with the institutions of their *polis* (*SEG* 41, 1201; ca. 100–150 CE). Several civic officials and some groups at Smyrna, including theologians (*theologoi*), an association of hymn-singers (*hymnodoi*), and, likely, an immigrant group of Judeans (*hoi pote Ioudaioi*), displayed civic-mindedness by joining together to provide financial contributions toward a project of the *polis* in the early second century (*ISmyrna* 697; ca. 124 CE).

Civic inhabitants might also express their identification with the *polis* by honouring an individual who acted as a benefactor and showed good-

will toward the homeland. Examples of occupational and religious associations participating in this aspect of the civic networks of benefaction could be cited for many cities in Asia.⁴ An inscription from Smyrna, for example, involves the sacred *synodos* of performers (*technitai*) and initiates (*mystai*) gathered round Dionysos Breseus, who are honouring Marcus Aurelius Julianus, a civic official and benefactor, “because of his piety towards the god and his goodwill towards the *polis*” (*ISmyrna* 639; mid-late second century CE).

What is perhaps even more telling, concerning the involvement and participation of various segments of society within these networks of civic life, is the degree of co-operation and contact between such groups and important civic and imperial officials and institutions. There is abundant evidence for associations honouring on their own important civic officials, thereby maintaining connections with powerful citizens of the *polis*, such as when the *therapeutai* of Zeus honoured a foremost leader of Sardis for his piety toward the deity (*ISardBR* 22; ca. 100 BCE).⁵

The institutions and inhabitants of the cities often maintained important links with Roman imperial officials of equestrian or senatorial rank (who could also be local notables). The involvement of associations in imperial aspects of the honorific system further attests to some of the ways in which they cemented their relationship with the *polis*, identifying with its interests (see Harland 1999). In various cities, for example, several associations honoured members of the prestigious Julius family, who were descendants of Galatian royalty, entered imperial service as equestrians, then became senators as early as the late first century CE. Julia Severa, at Acmonia, was a high priestess in the local imperial cult, who acted as benefactor to both the local elders’ association (*gerousia*) and the group of Judeans, for whom she built a synagogue (*MAMA* VI 263, 264; mid-first century CE). Her relative, C. Antius Aulus Julius Quadratus, was a prominent Pergamene, who reached consular rank and held important imperial posi-

4 Attaleia (near Pergamon; *IGR* IV 1169, leather-workers); Hierapolis (*IHierapJ* 40, second-third century CE, wool-cleaners); Miletos (*SEG* 36, 1051-1055, linen-workers and sack-bearers devoted to Hermes); Temenothyrai (*AE* [1977], no. 802, late first century CE, clothing cleaners); Thyatira (*TAM* V 932, 933, 986, 989, 1098, slave merchants, linen-workers, tanners, dyers, *Juliastai* association devoted to a hero); Tralles (*ITrall* 74, third century CE, *mystai*).

5 Cf. *IEph* 425 (ca. 81–117 CE): The silversmiths honour T. Claudius Aristion, *grammateus* of the people and imperial high priest; *TAM* IV 33 (late first century CE): The shippers at Nikomedia (in Bithynia) honour a leader of the *polis* and high priest; *TAM* V 955 (third century CE): The hymn-singers (*hymnodoi*) of the Mother of the gods honour a civic magistrate and liturgist.

tions in various provinces of the Greek East, including the proconsulate of Asia; he was honoured as a benefactor by various cities, including Pergamon. But he was also the benefactor of local associations at Pergamon, including the young men (*neoi*) and the Dionysiac dancing cowherds, who honoured him on more than one occasion (early second century CE).⁶ One of his cousins, Julius Amyntianus, likely the brother of C. Julius Severus of Ankyra, was a member in the Panhellenion institution of Athens and also, for a time, the priest of Isis and Sarapis at Tralles, for which the initiates (*mystai*) honoured him with a monument (*ITrall* 86; post-131 CE). Evidently, associations and the spectrum of inhabitants who belonged to them were very much involved in the webs of relationships that characterized civic life and linked the *polis* to the empire.

Yet what is even more striking, and indicative of widespread participation in the life of the *polis*, are the numerous examples of various types of associations and guilds collaborating together with the principal civic institutions (the council and the people) in honouring eminent citizens and benefactors. This is true of the groups of Roman businessmen throughout the cities of Asia who evidently became well integrated within the life of the *polis*, as well as the various age-group organizations officially attached to the gymnasia.⁷ Yet even less official occupational and other associations joined with the political institutions in honouring benefactors.

At Smyrna, for example, the council and the people joined with a *synodos* of initiates (probably devoted to Demeter) in honouring two female theologians for their display of piety toward the goddess in providing their services at a festival of the group (*ISmyrna* 653; first-second century CE). At Thyatira, the *dêmos* and the *Juliastai* joined together to honour posthumously Julius Xenon, a prominent hero and member of the *polis* (*TAM* V 1098; first century CE). At Erythrai, the homeland (*patris*) and the sacred theatrical *synodos* joined together in honouring Antonia Tyrannis Juliane, the *agônothetis* of the great Hadrianic games (*IErythrai* 60; 124 CE). At Tralles, the provincial league of Asia joined with the *dêmos* of Tralles and the Dionysiac performers in honouring the association's high priest (*ITrall* 65; first century CE).

Similarly, it was common for guilds and associations to set up honours for a benefactor on behalf of the civic institutions, often in accordance with

6 For the former, see *IPergamon* 440; for the latter, *IPergamon* 486, and Conze and Schuchhardt 1899, 179, no. 31. On Quadratus and his family, see *PIR* I 507 (with family tree).

7 Cf. Adramytteion (*IAdramytti* 19); Acmonia (*IPhrygR* 533); Assos (*IAssos* 13–14, 19–21, 28); Apameia (*IGR* IV 785–786, 788–791); Iasos (*Iiasos* 90); Tralles (*ITrall* 80).

a specific provision in a decree or decision of the *polis* (see, e.g., *Ieph* 728, 3079, guilds at Ephesus; *IGR* IV 788–791, guilds at Apameia; *IGR* IV 907, leather-workers at Kibyra; Quandt 1913, 177, *mystai* at Sardis; *ITrall* 74, *mystai* at Tralles). Some scholars, such as Ramsay (1895, 105–106), A.H.M. Jones (1940, 15, 17, 43–44), and those who follow them, even suggest that the constitutions of civic communities in Lydia may have been organized by guilds instead of tribes (*phylai*); but this is not a certainty.

Even those citizens who left their native *polis* to pursue business and other activities in other parts of the empire could count on the continuation of attachments to their homeland and its institutions. The city from which one came very much defined who one was in the Greco-Roman world, as Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey emphasize in their 1996 study of the ancient personality. The very existence, throughout the empire, of associations based on common geographic or ethnic origin, with corresponding names, attests to the continuing importance of both civic and regional identity.⁸ When the council and the people of Nysa (east of Ephesus and Tralles) passed a decree honouring their wealthy benefactor, T. Aelius Alkibiades, for his love of honour (*philotimia*) and benefactions, they were also sure to single out for mention his benefactions to an association (*kollégion*) of Nysaian citizens living in Rome, who evidently maintained contacts with the wealthy elites and institutions of their homeland (ca. 142 CE).⁹

This evidence of positive involvement by inhabitants of various social-economic levels with civic institutions in Roman Asia suggests that the situation in Tarsus, Cilicia, toward the end of the first century CE, is more

8 For example, Sardians (*IGR* I 88–89 [Rome]); Ephesians (*IGR* I 147 [Rome]); Smyrnians (*IMagnSip* 18 [Magnesia near Sypos]); Asians (*IGBulg* 480 [Montana, Moesia], *IG* X.2 309, 480 [Thessalonika, Macedonia]); Phrygians (*IG* XIV 701 [Pompeii]); Pergaians (*ILindos* 392 [Rhodes]); Alexandrians (*IGR* I 604 [Tomis, Moesia], I 800 [Heraklea-Perinthos, Thracia], I 446 [Neapolis, Italy]); Tyrians (*OGIS* 595 = *IGR* I 421 [Puteoli, Italy]). Numerous inscriptions from Delos could be cited involving Tyrians, Berytians, Egyptians, and others (cf. *IDelos* 1519, 1521, 1774). On associations of Romans, see Hatzfeld 1919. See La Piana (1927) for a discussion of various immigrant groups at Rome, including Phrygians and Judeans.

9 Alkibiades was also a benefactor of the Roman and Asian branches of the worldwide Dionysiac performers; their honorary inscription to him is found on the other side of the same stone. Side A includes the Dionysiac performers' honorary decree; and side B, the decree of the Nysaian *polis* (see Clerc 1885 for both sides, *Ieph* 22 for side A only). This man was likely the son of Publius Aelius Alkibiades, a freedman who was prefect of the bedchamber for emperor Hadrian, who granted him Roman citizenship (see *PIR*² A134, Robert 1938, 45–53; cf. *FGrHist* II 257.1–34: the father commissions P. Aelius Phlegon of Tralles to write a history).

an exception than the rule. There, linen-workers were consciously excluded from participation in the *polis*. Dio's response (*Or.* 34.21–23) indicates that this was not a regular practice in most other cities. There certainly were occasions when involvement by an association or a guild in certain activities was perceived by either civic or Roman officials to be subversive. Examples of such incidents in Asia Minor include the proconsul's edict regarding the riots of bakers in Ephesus (*IEph* 215, mid-second century CE; cf. Acts 19 and, further, below) and Pliny the Younger's dealings with associations in the cities of Bithynia-Pontus during his special appointment as governor there in the early second century CE (*Ep.* 10.33–34, 92–93, 96–97). In general, however, these sporadic incidents have been overemphasized by many scholars (see Harland 1999, 153–93). Ste. Croix, for example, discusses the involvement of associations in lower-class forms of protest, such as strikes and other disturbances, and the resulting Roman suspicion toward them; he does not mention at all the sort of positive relations between such groups and both civic and imperial officials which are so well attested in the inscriptional evidence (1981, 273, 319–20). Paul J. Achtemeier correctly looks to associations for understanding the social context of the Christian groups addressed by 1 Peter, but wrongly oversimplifies his portrait of associations in stating that they were a “constant problem to the governing authorities” (1996, 25–26; cf. Balch 1981, 65–80).

The preceding evidence clearly shows that the members of many different types of associations, representing a spectrum of social-economic levels within society, from the more prestigious occupations of Roman businessmen and silversmiths to the less desirable professions of dyers and clothing cleaners, actively participated in the networks of civic life and, in important ways, closely identified with the *polis* and its structures. So much, then, for the widespread scholarly view that associations and guilds were a replacement for the declining structures of the *polis*, and the equally untenable view that they were a consistently subversive element in society, removed from civic identity and involved primarily in negative relations with imperial and civic authorities.

This attachment to the institutions of the *polis*, and the accompanying sense of civic identity or pride, is evinced in various other ways as well, besides involvement in civic networks of benefaction. Some of the principal social-cultural institutions of the *polis*, often built or renovated through the benefactions of the wealthy, were marketplaces, baths, gymnasia, stadiums, and theatres. Here, too, there is clear evidence of active participation by inhabitants of the cities. The age-group organizations of girls or boys (*paidēs*), youths (*ephēboi*), young men (*neoi*), and elders (*gerousia*) were

a very prominent feature of gymnasium life for members of citizen families. Jews also could participate in the life of the gymnasia in Asia: there was a group of “younger Judaeans” (*neoteroi Ioudaioi*) at Hypaipa (*CIJ* 755), and several Jewish names are included in lists of *ephêboi* from Iasos and elsewhere (see Robert 1946, 100–101). Guilds of performers and athletes were similarly active in the gymnasia, stadiums, and theatres, where they competed during the various festivals held in honour of gods or emperors.

Yet ordinary associations and guilds also had a place (often in a literal sense) within these institutions of the *polis*. The stadiums at Aphrodisias, Didyma, and Saittai, for example, included bench reservations for guilds and associations of various kinds (*IAphrodSpect* 45; *IDidyma* 50; Kolb 1990). Several latrines at the Vedius bath-gymnasium complex at Ephesus were set aside for groups of bankers, hemp-workers, wool-dealers, and linen-weavers, all of whom evidently frequented the place (*IEph* 454). Quite well known is the Jewish synagogue contained within the bath-gymnasium complex at Sardis in the third century CE, right next door to the imperial cult hall. Such groups could also have special seats reserved for them in the theatre where the assembly of the people, as well as various theatrical and other performances, took place; the theatre at Miletos included reservations for guilds such as the “emperor-loving goldsmiths” and the “Judaeans (or Jews) and God-fearers,” who sat just a few rows from the front, right next to the benches reserved for the “friends of the Augusti” (*philaugustoi*).¹⁰

Discussion of these kinds of social-cultural institutions leads us to another important aspect of civic life, which attests to the vitality, not the decline, of the *polis* and its social-religious life: festivals, processions, and related activities.¹¹ As we noted earlier, the gods, rulers, and emperors were an integral part of the webs of relations that characterized the social systems of the cities; festivals were one means by which appropriate honour could be shown to these godly benefactors, who protected the *polis* and its inhabitants. Thus, Plutarch, who was quite emphatic about the need for moderation in the pursuit of honour (*philotimia*), felt that the best pretext for benefaction was one “connected with the worship of a god [which]

10 Unfortunately, most of the *topos*-inscriptions from the theatre at Miletos are as yet unpublished; on some of these inscriptions, including the Jewish one, see Kleiner 1970, 18–20. The theatre at Aphrodisias included a bench for the butchers, alongside others (*IAphrodSpect* 46).

11 For a general discussion of festivals (especially those in honour of emperors), and their importance for all strata of society, see Price 1984, 101–32. For an excellent study of festivals and foundations in the cities of Asia Minor, focusing on the recently discovered Hadrianic inscription from Oenoanda (one of the most extensive festival-foundation inscriptions yet found), see Wörrle 1988 and Mitchell 1993 (with English translation).

leads the people to piety; for at the same time there springs up in the minds of the masses a strong disposition to believe that the deity is great and majestic, when they see the men whom they themselves honour and regard as great so liberally and zealously vying with each other in honouring the divinity" (*Mor.* 822b).

The pan-Hellenic festival established by Magnesia in honour of Artemis Leukophryene in the second century BCE, after an epiphany of the goddess and a consultation of the oracle of Apollo at Delphi (cf. *IMagnMai* 16, 17–87, 100), is paralleled by similar festivals, both local and regional (pan-Hellenic or provincial), which were established in cities throughout the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The proliferation of associations of athletes and performers in the Hellenistic and, especially, Roman eras is just one clear indication of the continuing popularity and importance of festivals, and the gods and goddesses they honoured.

To cite just one example from the Roman era, Salutaris gave a substantial financial foundation to Ephesus in 104 CE (*IEph* 27). The council and the people decided that the income from the funds would be used for processions expressing various elements of civic identity. Several groups participated, most prominently the youths (*ephēboi*), who carried images not only of Artemis and the Ionian and Hellenistic founders but also of the emperors. As Rogers (1991, 80–127, 136–51) convincingly argues, the composition of the biweekly procession was an expression of the multi-faceted identity of the city, not only encompassing the Roman imperial family and regime but also reaffirming the Ionian origins and sacred identity of Ephesus as the city of Artemis. The procession, in fact, began and ended in her sanctuary.

There is varied evidence for the continuing importance of gods and goddesses (whose popularity was not dying, as some scholars imagine) in the life of the *polis*, especially in connection with civic identity and pride. Virtually every city chose a particular deity as benefactor and protector, to whom proper honour was due. The relation between the civic community and the gods was taken seriously, and any threat to this relationship was a grave offence. The account, in Acts (19:21–41), of the silversmiths' riot at Ephesus, whether documenting an actual event or not, realistically portrays the attachment that inhabitants felt to their patron deity (cf. Oster 1976). In reaction to Paul's preaching that gods made with hands are not gods, the silversmiths are said to have gathered together a considerable crowd of other craftsmen and local inhabitants in the theatre, shouting (for two hours), "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" The more important of the motives Acts mentions for this protest relates to the need appropriately to

honour the goddess: "There is danger...that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be scorned, and she will be deprived of her majesty that brought all Asia and the world to worship her" (Acts 19:27; cf. *IEph* 24 [ca. 160 CE]).

The official patron deity was not the only deity, however, to whom honour was due. Temples and altars for various gods and goddesses, both foreign and local, dotted the cities of Roman Asia. At Ephesus, for example, there is surviving evidence of cultic activity for Zeus, Aphrodite, Apollo, Asklepios, Athena, Demeter, Dionysos, Cybele, Isis and Sarapis, and others; a similar array of evidence has been found at Pergamon (cf. Knibbe 1978; Oster 1990; Ohlemutz 1968). As well, possession of an official provincial imperial-cult temple could be a source of rivalry among cities in Asia, as illustrated by one particular incident Tacitus relates from the reign of Tiberius (*Ann.* 4.55–56). Other local shrines or cults of the emperors, including cultic activities practised within associations, likewise attest to the importance of the emperors as gods within the civic system (cf. Pleket 1965; Price 1984, 190–91; Harland 1996).

The foundation and continuation of cults or associations in honour of gods other than the patron deity of the *polis* were also bound up with civic identity and well-being. An inscription from the second century CE, claiming to be an ancient oracle, records the myth of the introduction of Dionysiac associations (*thiasoi*) to the city of Magnesia (*IMagnMai* 215). It tells a story about the people of Magnesia sending messengers to consult the god Apollo at Delphi concerning a miraculous sign and epiphany of the god Dionysos, which happened at Magnesia "when the clear-aired city was founded but well-cut temples were not yet built for Dionysos" (lines 19–21). The oracular response implied that the well-being of the Magnesians depended upon an obedient response to the will of both gods, Apollo and Dionysos, that associations devoted to Dionysos should be founded. This oracle may have been a useful weapon in establishing the pre-eminence of these particular Dionysiac associations within the context of religious rivalries at Magnesia at the time.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGIOUS RIVALRIES

Reference to competition, of course, brings us back to the focus of this book. I think it appropriate to conclude this chapter by outlining a few of its main implications for the study of different religious rivalries within ancient civic contexts. First, when discussing and explaining religious rivalries, we must avoid adopting models of decline and broad notions of degeneration, even though such assumptions have been widespread in this area

of study in the past. Hopefully, I have shown how pervasively and frequently the predominant model of decline has, in the past, shaped our picture of the *polis* of the Hellenistic and Roman eras. Many recent scholars, however, are beginning to deconstruct this scholarly edifice and build instead a more complex picture with regard to the continuing importance and vitality of the *polis*, despite changes, developments, and regional variations.

Yet conceptions of the decaying *polis* have also been the basis upon which various other questionable theories have been built regarding social-religious life and the general milieu of the Greco-Roman world—theories and assumptions that must no longer be unquestioningly employed in our attempts to understand and explain religious rivalries. I have tried to show ways in which problematic modern concepts and models of historical development have played a significant role in the formation and acceptance of many such theories. The inscriptional evidence from Asia, which I have discussed, has further challenged, in several ways, broad notions of decline. To begin with, it has provided concrete illustrations of the continuing importance of the *polis* and its structures as a locus of identity, co-operation, and competition for members of various strata of society. At the same time, it has also further undermined some of the more commonly accepted theories regarding the effects on religious life of supposedly widespread feelings of detachment from the civic community. Many scholars have thought that such deracination led directly to the emergence of the private religion of the individual, including mystery religions or associations, as a functional replacement for civic structures. But we have found that, far from being a replacement for attachment to the *polis*, many small social-religious groups could be integrated, though some more than others, within the *polis* and its standard structures.

The second main implication of the present study is this: that the practice of competition, or rivalry, was a natural consequence of living within the social system of the *polis*. Even more, the agonistic culture that constituted this social system made rivalries (as well as co-operation) essential to its continued vitality. Within such a context, both rivalries themselves and the potential disturbances that sometimes accompanied them should be understood as signs of vitality, not decline.

Third, it is evident that inhabitants who joined together on a regular basis to form small social-religious groups could indeed find the *polis* to be a home. They could find their place within the *polis*, cement their relationship with its structures, and identify with its interests in a variety of ways, including participation in civic networks of benefaction, direct relations

with the political organs, and participation within social and cultural institutions, including gymnasia and theatres. We also found that emperors and imperial officials were incorporated within the civic system and its webs of relations to such an extent that the relation of a *polis* to the emperors was an important component of civic identity in the Roman era. The participation of inhabitants or groups in imperial aspects of civic life provided another way for people to stake a claim regarding their particular place(s) within society.

Fourth, the vitality of both traditional and other forms of social-religious life means that groups of Jews or Christians, like others, would have to work hard to establish and to maintain their place within the *polis*. Despite their peculiarities, the most important of which may have been a firm rejection of many features of polytheistic cultic life, Jewish and Christian groups, like other associations, could not utterly reject all participation in and involvement with at least some of the varied social, economic, and cultural features of civic life; at least, not if they hoped to persist. Those Jewish groups that found a place (literally) within the bath-gymnasium complex at Sardis, and within the theatre at Miletos, illustrate some of the possibilities, even for putatively exclusive Jewish and Christian groups, of finding a home within the social structures of cities in the Roman Empire.

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