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# Imperial Cults within local cultural life: Associations in Roman Asia\*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Imperial cults have been a focal point of debate regarding the relation between religion and politics under Roman rule in the provinces, particularly in the Greek East. The problem has often centred on the *nature* of these cultic honours (or acts of worship) addressed to the emperors or imperial family (the *Sebastoi* = *Augusti*) in regions like Asia Minor. Bound up in the debate is the question of where these rituals fit or did not fit within social and cultural life at the local level. On the one hand are scholars such as M.P. Nilsson and A.D. Nock, who tend to view such honours as primarily ‘political’ or ‘public’ and only superficially ‘religious’; the meaning attached to imperial rituals by participants was negligible since these activities did not genuinely engage ‘private’ life.<sup>1</sup> Imperial cult activities were, in this view, clearly set apart from social and religious life associated with other deities at the local level, and they did not really engage the lives of the non-elites. The experiences of participants in such activities were clearly of a different order than those associated with the worship of, say, Demeter, Artemis, Dionysos or Zeus.

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<sup>1</sup>See, for instance, M.P. Nilsson, *Greek Piety* (Oxford 1948) 177-178; id., ‘Royal Mysteries in Egypt’ in *Opuscula Selecta* (Lund 1960) 326-28; id., ‘Kleinasiatische Pseudo-Mysterien’, *Bulgarska akademiia na naukite, sofia arkheologicheski institut* 16 (1959) 17-20; id., *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*, 2nd edition (Munich 1961) 384-394; A.D. Nock, ‘Religious Developments from the Close of the Republic to the Death of Nero’, in S.A. Cook/F.E. Adcock/M.P. Charlesworth (eds.), *The Cambridge Ancient History* (Cambridge 1935) 481-503; id., ‘ΣΥΝΝΑΟΣ ΘΕΟΣ’ in Z Stewart (ed.), *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World* (Oxford 1972) 202-251. Cf. K. Scott, *The Imperial Cult Under the Flavians* (Stuttgart 1936); K.Latte, *Römische Religionsgeschichte* (Munich 1960) 294-326; G.W. Bowersock, *Augustus and the Greek World* (Oxford 1965) 112-121; id., ‘The Imperial Cult: Perceptions and Persistence’ in B.F. Meyer/E.P. Sanders (eds.), *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition* (Philadelphia 1983) 171-182; Ronald Mellor, *ΘΕΑ ΡΩΜΗ: The Worship of the Goddess Roma in the Greek World* (Göttingen 1975); Paul Veyne, *Bread and Circuses: Historical Sociology and Political Pluralism*, trans. by Brian Pearce (London 1990 [1976]) 306-321; D. Fishwick, ‘The Development of Provincial Ruler Worship in the Western Roman Empire’, *ANRW* II.16.2 (1978) 1201-1253; E.G. Huzar, ‘Emperor Worship in Julio-Claudian Egypt’, *ANRW* II.18.5 (1995) 3092-3143.

On the other hand are scholars such as H.W. Pleket, Fergus Millar and Simon Price, who challenge the traditional emphasis on the political to the neglect of other cultural dimensions of imperial cults.<sup>2</sup> They point to clear evidence that cultic honours for the emperors were, in many respects, well-integrated within religious life in regions like Asia Minor and were of importance to a range of social levels of the population. R.R.R. Smith's study of imperial reliefs from the temple for the *Sebasteoi* at Aphrodisias, for instance, speaks of a 'relatively uncomplex equation of gods and emperors' which points to a thoroughgoing integration of the emperors within the social and mythological framework of the Greek East.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to explore one neglected avenue which may contribute towards a solution to this larger puzzle: inscriptional evidence pertaining to local social-religious groups or 'associations' in the Roman province of Asia (western Asia Minor). I further investigate the lives of such associations from a comparative perspective in *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Fortress Press, 2003).<sup>4</sup> A regional case-study of imperial cult activities within these local,

<sup>2</sup>See, for instance, H.W. Pleket, 'An Aspect of the Emperor Cult: Imperial Mysteries', *HTR* 58 (1965) 331-47; Fergus Millar, 'The Imperial Cult and the Persecutions' in *Le culte des souverains dans l'empire Romain* (Geneva 1973) 145-175; S.R.F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge 1984). Cf. R.R.R. Smith, 'The Imperial Reliefs from the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias', *JRS* 77 (1987) 88-138; S.J. Friesen, *Twice Neokoros: Ephesus, Asia and the Cult of the Flavian Imperial Family* (Leiden 1993); S. Mitchell, *Anatolia: Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor I* (Oxford 1993) 110-117. Also see the following works by P.A. Harland: 'Honours and Worship: Emperors, Imperial Cults and Associations at Ephesus (First to Third Centuries C.E.)', *Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses* 25 (1996) 319-334; 'Honouring the Emperor or Assailing the Beast: Participation in Civic Life Among Associations (Jewish, Christian and Other) in Asia Minor and the Apocalypse of John', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 77 (2000) 99-121; 'Claiming a Place in Polis and Empire: The Significance of Imperial Cults and Connections Among Associations, Synagogues, and Christian Groups in Roman Asia (c. 27 B.C.E.-138 C.E.)' (Dissertation, University of Toronto 1999); *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis 2003).

<sup>3</sup>Smith, 'Imperial Reliefs' (as in n. 2) 136.

<sup>4</sup>I use the term 'associations' to refer to small unofficial groups that gathered together on a regular basis for a variety of interconnected social and religious purposes. Common Greek terms for such groups in Asia Minor include: *synodos*, *synedrion*, *thiasos*, *mystai*, *koimon*, *synergasia*. Included in this definition are several types of groups drawing their membership from social network connections associated with 1) the household, 2) common ethnic or geographic origin, 3) the neighbourhood, 4) common occupational activities (i.e. guilds), and 5) common cultic interests (excluding official boards of temple functionaries). For a full discussion of this typology of associations see Harland, 'Claiming a Place' (as in n. 2) 23-60, forthcoming as *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations* (as in n. 2). Cf. J.S. Kloppenborg, 'Collegia and Thiasoi: Issues in Function, Taxonomy and Membership' in J.S. Kloppenborg/S.G. Wilson (eds.), *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World* (London/New York 1996) 16-30; Harland 'Connections with the Elites in the World of the Early Christians' in A.J. Blasi, J.

unofficial associations—which are often viewed by scholars as ‘private’ and represent a variety of social levels among the populace—may provide a new angle of vision on an old problem. (Epigraphical abbreviations throughout this paper follow those recently outlined by G.H.R. Horsley and John A. Lee in *Epigraphica*.)<sup>5</sup>

The cultural landscape of Roman Asia was permeated by festivals, rituals and temples that encompassed the emperors and imperial family, the *Sebastoi* (Greek equivalent of the Latin *Augusti*), and there are associations that reflect this context in their internal life. Seldom have scholars considered the epigraphical evidence for these local groups which may shed new light on the nature of imperial cults, at least for this region. The evidence regarding associations in the cities of Asia, I argue, throws into question some common scholarly views concerning cultic honours for the emperors. Overall, these activities could be a significant and integral part of association-life, telling us something about the self-understanding of such groups and their place within society and the cosmos (as they understood it). Insights from the social sciences and ritual studies will also elucidate the significance of this evidence.

## 2. REASSESSING SCHOLARLY VIEWS OF IMPERIAL CULTS

Before turning to associations, it is important to briefly outline the scholarly position which I challenge here, which posits that imperial cults were *not* well integrated within religious life but rather vastly different in kind from other cultic forms in the Greco-Roman world. Scholars such as Nock, Nilsson, G.W. Bowersock, and Paul Veyne emphasize that imperial cults were political, not religious, public, not private.<sup>6</sup> According to Nilsson, imperial cult ‘lacked all genuine religious content.’<sup>7</sup> The cult’s ‘meaning lay far more in state and social realms, where it served both to express loyalty to the rule of Rome and the emperor and to satisfy the ambition of the leading families’.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, imperial

Duhaime, and P.-A. Turcotte (eds.), *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Science Approaches* (New York/Oxford 2002) 385-408. Among the classic works on associations are J.-P. Waltzing, *Étude historique sur les corporations professionnelles chez les Romains depuis les origines jusqu’à la chute de l’empire d’Occident* (Bruxelles 1895-1900); E. Ziebarth, *Das griechische Vereinswesen* (Stuttgart, 1896); F. Poland, *Geschichte des griechischen Vereinswesens* (Leipzig 1909). For recent studies see, for example: F.M. Ausbüttel, *Untersuchungen zu den Vereinen im Westen des römischen Reiches* (Kallmünz 1982); J.S. Kloppenborg, and S.G. Wilson (eds.), *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World* (London-New York 1996), which provides a useful bibliography.

<sup>5</sup>Horsley and Lee, ‘A Preliminary Checklist of Abbreviations of Greek Epigraphic Volumes’, *Epigraphica* 56 (1994) 129-169.

<sup>6</sup>See works listed in n. 1.

<sup>7</sup>Nilsson, *Greek Piety* (as in n. 1) 178.

<sup>8</sup>Nilsson, *Geschichte* (as in n. 1) 385: ‘Seine religiöse Bedeutung war nicht groß, mit einer Ausnahme, auf die wir zum Schluß zurückkommen; seine Bedeutung lag vielmehr auf staat-

rituals were merely ceremony, ‘a purely mechanical exercise’ which failed to evoke the feelings or emotions of the individuals who participated.<sup>9</sup> No one actually believed that the emperors were gods, and this is reflected in the lack of any ‘private’ forms of religious life, such as votive offerings and ‘genuine’ mysteries.<sup>10</sup>

Underestimating the social and religious significance of imperial cults for the populace is partially the result of the imposition of modern viewpoints and assumptions onto ancient evidence.<sup>11</sup> First, the traditional view reflects modern distinctions between politics and religion which, as Price also stresses, do not fit the ancient context, where the social, religious, economic and political were intricately inter-connected and often inseparable. Second, the view involves, in part, the imposition of modern notions concerning ‘individualism’, ‘private’ vs. ‘public’, and related definitions of religion onto ancient evidence.<sup>12</sup> Some modern definitions of religion (such as those offered by William James and Rudolf Otto) stress emotions or feelings of the individual as the heart of religion, emphasizing an equation between ‘personal’ or ‘private’ and genuine religiosity, and there is a tendency among some scholars to apply this to antiquity.<sup>13</sup> However, such individualistic and (sometimes) anti-ritualistic definitions of religion are problematic when applied to non-western (or even non-Protestant) religious phenomena, modern or ancient, as we shall see (in section 5 below). Even so, there is neglected evidence that imperial cults were important

lichem und sozialem Gebiete, wo er dazu diente, die Loyalität gegen das herrschende Rom und den Kaiser zur bezeugen und den Ehrgeiz der leitenden Familien zu befriedigen.’ Cf. Bowersock, *Augustus* (as in n. 1) 115.

<sup>9</sup>Fishwick, ‘The Development’ (as in n. 1) 1252-1253. Cf. Veyne, *Bread and Circuses* (as in n. 1) 315.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Nock, ‘Religious Developments’ 481; Bowersock, ‘The Imperial Cult’ 180, 206; Veyne, *Bread and Circuses* 307; Fishwick, ‘The Development’ 1251-1253 (all as in n.1).

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Harland, ‘Honours and Worship’ (as in n. 2).

<sup>12</sup>For a discussion of how modern notions of individualism and the ‘private’ vs. ‘public’ distinction have affected the study of social and religious life in the ancient context see: P.A. Harland, ‘The Declining *Polis*? Religious Rivalries in Ancient Civic Context’ in L.E. Vaage (ed.), *Religious Rivalries and Relations Among Pagans, Jews and Christians in Antiquity* (Waterloo, forthcoming [paper originally presented at the Religious Rivalries Seminar of the Canadian Society of Biblical Literature, May 2000]).

<sup>13</sup>See W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902* (New York, 1963) 50; R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London, 1923). For examples of this individualism-focused approach to the ancient world see, for example, A.-J. Festugière, *Personal Religion Among the Greeks* (Berkeley 1960) 1-4; E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley 1959) 243; id., *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety: Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine* (Cambridge 1965) 2; Nilsson, *Geschichte* (as in n. 1) 711-712; P. Green, *Alexander to Actium: The Historical Evolution of the Hellenistic Age* (Berkeley 1990) 588.

within contexts that many of these scholars would consider ‘private’, including the associations which I discuss at length.<sup>14</sup>

This scholarly view which emphasizes a fundamental difference between cults for emperors and those for other gods is not without opponents. Millar’s overall impression is that imperial cults were not fundamentally different from other cults, but rather ‘fully and extensively integrated into the local cults of the provinces, with the consequence that the Emperors were the object of the *same cult-acts as the other gods*.’<sup>15</sup> ‘Unless we deny the name ‘religion’ to all pagan cults,’ he states, ‘our evidence compels us to grant it also to the Imperial cult.’<sup>16</sup> Pleket’s article on the evidence for ‘imperial mysteries’, including those practiced among the hymn-singers at Pergamon, draws attention to certain instances of what he would call genuine piety in relation to the emperors in certain settings.<sup>17</sup> Recent research on imperial cults in Asia Minor specifically likewise provides an alternative understanding to that of the traditional paradigm. Studies by Price, Steven J. Friesen and Stephen Mitchell point to the integration of imperial cults within civic life in this region, with political, social and religious significance for various social strata of the population.<sup>18</sup> And Smith’s recent work on the symbolic significance of the reliefs of the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias shows how emperors were ‘added to the old gods, not as successors or replacements, but as a new branch of the Olympian pantheon.’<sup>19</sup> Although such scholars present compelling evidence with respect to the varied significance of imperial cults

<sup>14</sup>Cf. Price, *Rituals and Power* (as in n. 2) 117-21. Also note the following: At least one votive offering, perhaps indicative of the existence of others, was found (in the 1950s) at Claudiopolis in Asia Minor: Sosthenes sets up a structure in fulfillment of a vow (*euchē*) to the ‘new god, Antinoos’ to whom he had prayed and from whom he received his request (*IKlaudiop* 56; cf. L. Robert, *A travers l’Asie Mineure: Poètes et prosateurs, monnaies grecques, voyageurs et géographie* [Paris 1980] 133). On prayers to the emperors see Aristides, *Orationes* 26 and *ISardBR* 8.13-14; cf. Price, *Rituals and Power* (as in n. 2) 232-233. H.S. Versnel points out that the term *epēkoos*, ‘one whose nature is to hear’, which is often associated with prayer, could be attributed to emperors; see Versnel, ‘Religious Mentality in Ancient Prayer’ in Versnel (ed.), *Faith, Hope and Worship: Aspects of Religious Mentality in the Ancient World* (Leiden 1981) 36-37. As with the sacred places and statues of other gods, individuals could take refuge in times of trouble at the statues of emperors (see Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii* 1.15) and there are examples of persons leaving petitions at the feet of imperial statues. Cf. *POxy* 2130 (267 C.E.); *Corpus Papyrorum Raineri* I 20 (c. 250 C.E.); *PLond* inv. no. 1589 (295 C.E.); P.J. Alexander, *The Oracle of Baalbek: The Tiburtine Sibyl in Greek Dress* (Dumbarton Oaks 1967) 31-32. For the involvement of households in royal sacrifices and other ‘private’ dimensions of ruler cult in Hellenistic times at Ilion and in Egypt see L. Robert, ‘Sur un décret d’Ilion et sur un papyrus concernant des cultes royaux’ in *Essays in Honor of C. Bradford Welles* (New Haven 1966) 175-210.

<sup>15</sup>Millar, ‘The Imperial Cult’ (as in n. 2) 164 (italics mine).

<sup>16</sup>Millar ‘The Imperial Cult’ (as in n. 2) 148.

<sup>17</sup>Pleket, ‘An Aspect of the Emperor Cult’ (as in n. 2).

<sup>18</sup>See works cited in n. 2.

<sup>19</sup>Smith, ‘The Imperial Reliefs’ (as in n. 2) 136.

(beyond the political), they do not devote special attention to the inscriptional evidence for associations specifically, to which we now turn.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. THE CASE OF THE DEMETRIASTS AT EPHEOS

An association of Demeter-worshippers at Ephesos will serve as a foray into imperial cults within associations. Unfortunately, we do not usually have sufficient evidence to discuss in any detail the history of a particular association in a specific locality, let alone the place of the *Sebastoi* or ‘imperial gods’ (as I call them here) within that history; in most cases we are lucky if we even have two or three extant, though incomplete or fragmentary, inscriptions pertaining to a particular group. So it is significant that in the case of the Demetriasts of Ephesos we at least get momentary glimpses of their history from the beginning of the first to the mid-second century, and that two inscriptions reveal, among other things, the ongoing importance of the emperors or imperial family within the cultic life of this association (*IEph* 213, 1595, 4337; cf. *IEph* 1210, 1270 [c. 90-110 C.E.]; *IMagnMai* 158 [c. 38-42 C.E.]). The case of the Demetriasts, which is not isolated, suggests that the imperial gods could be an important aspect of group-identity and -practice, revealing to us something about how the members of such associations felt about their place within society and the cosmos.

The earliest evidence we have for this group dates to the time of Tiberius, between 19 and 23 C.E. (*IEph* 4337 = *SEG* IV 515).<sup>21</sup> The inscription, whose beginning is missing, preserves for us a decree of the Demetriasts concerning honours for particular benefactors who were also priests or priestesses. The civic institutions (council and people) of Ephesos had evidently acknowledged the contributions of these same persons towards the city (*polis*); one of them, probably the man named Bassos, had assumed liturgies associated with the gymnasiarchate and the night-watch, besides being priest of Artemis. In connection with the civic institution’s acknowledgement, the Demetriasts decided that they, too, would grant these persons special honours both for their contributions to the life of the city and for their good-will towards the association specifically. They arranged to have images or statues of these benefactors set up in a publicly visible place.

What is especially significant for our present purposes are the imperial cult-related connections associated with the priesthoods of the honorees. Along with the priest of Artemis (Bassos) is mentioned Proklos, who is called priest of the

<sup>20</sup>Price does at least note the importance of associations in connection with imperial cults from time to time. See *Rituals and Power* (as in n. 2) 50 n.122, 85, 88, 90, 105, 118, 190-191. Pleket deals with some associations in his discussion of imperial mysteries. See ‘An Aspect of the Emperor Cult’ (as in n. 2).

<sup>21</sup>Cf. J. Keil, ‘XIII. Vorläufiger Bericht über die Ausgrabungen in Ephesos’, *JÖAI* 24 (1928), Beibl. 61-66.

‘new Dioskoroï’, the sons of Drusus Caesar (cf. Tacitus, *Ann.* 2.84). There was evidently a cult devoted to the twin sons of Drusus Caesar and Livilla identifying them as the sons of Zeus, perhaps alongside other members of the imperial family identified as gods. The third honoree, Servilia Secunda, is referred to as the priestess of ‘Sebaste Demeter Karpophoros’. Here we have the Demetriasts, in a manner typical of associations,<sup>22</sup> honouring prominent persons who had assumed priesthoods associated with cults for the imperial family. More importantly here is the fact that the Demetriasts themselves identify their own patron deity with a member of the imperial family, Sebaste (the wife of Augustus). This suggests that cultic honours for such members of the imperial family were integrated within the traditional practices for Demeter within group-life.

There are further indications that cultic honours for members of the imperial family were an integral and ongoing part of the life and identity of this group at Ephesos. Another important inscription from the time of Domitian confirms this, and it is worthwhile quoting this letter in full (*IEph* 213 = *SIG*<sup>3</sup> 820 = *NewDocs* IV 22; c. 88-89 C.E.):

To Lucius Mestrius Florus, proconsul, from Lucius Pompeius Apollonios of Ephesos. Mysteries and sacrifices are performed each year in Ephesos, lord, to Demeter Karpophoros and Thesmophoros and to the *Sebastoi* gods by initiates with great purity and lawful customs, together with the priestesses. In most years these practices were protected by kings and emperors, as well as the proconsul of the period, as contained in their enclosed letters. Accordingly, as the mysteries are pressing upon us during your time of office, through my agency the ones obligated to accomplish the mysteries necessarily petition you, lord, in order that, acknowledging their rights...

Λουκίῳ Μεστρίῳ Φλώρῳ ἀνθυπάτῳ παρὰ | Λουκίου Πομπηίου  
Ἀπολλωνίου Ἐφεσίου· | Μυστήρια καὶ θυσίαι, κύριε, καθ’ ἕκαστον |  
ἐνιαυτὸν ἐπιτελοῦνται ἐν Ἐφέσῳ Δήμητρι || Καρποφόρῳ καὶ Θεσμοφόρῳ  
καὶ θεοῖς | Σεβαστοῖς ὑπὸ μυστῶν μετὰ πολλῆς | ἀγνείας καὶ νομίμων  
ἔθῶν σὺν ταῖς | ἱερίαις ἀπὸ πλείστων ἐτῶν συντετηρημένα | ἀπὸ  
βασιλέων καὶ Σεβαστῶν καὶ τῶν || κατ’ ἐνιαυτὸν ἀνθυπάτων, καθὼς αἱ |  
παρακείμεναι ἐπιστολαὶ αὐτῶν περιέχουσιν· | ὅθεν, ἐπειγόντων καὶ ἐπὶ  
σοῦ τῶν μυστηρίων, | ἀναγκαίως, κύριε, ἐντυγχάνουσί σοι δι’ | ἐμοῦ οἱ  
ὠφείλοντες τὰ μυστήρια ἐπιτελεῖν, || ἵνα ἐπιγνοῦς αὐτῶν τὰ δίκαια [—]

It does not seem that this group is gaining permission to engage in the celebration, but rather seeking the prestige which further acknowledgement by important officials could offer. As G.H.R. Horsley also points out, the manner in which the association’s representative addresses the proconsul and emphasizes the precedents for such recognition—even including copies of previous correspondence—would make it hard for the official to deny what they wanted (see the notes to *NewDocs* IV 22). After all, there was a long history of kings,

<sup>22</sup>See Harland, ‘Claiming a Place’ (as in n. 2) 153-193.

emperors and proconsuls acknowledging the rites long before Florus arrived on the scene during the time of Domitian.

The manner in which this history is cited suggests that rituals for the imperial gods were not something new added to simply appease a Roman official, but rather a continuation of the sort of practices hinted at in the inscription from the time of Tiberius. This group included ‘sacrifices and mysteries’ not only dedicated to Demeter but also to the imperial gods in one of its most important yearly celebrations, and there is no clear distinction made in the inscription between the godly recipients of these honours. The *Sebastoi* found themselves alongside the likes of Demeter in the realm of the gods. The offering of sacrifices ‘to’ (not just ‘on behalf of’) the emperors as gods alongside other deities, as we shall see further below, was not at all limited to this particular association.

Also significant here is the incorporation of the imperial gods within the ritual life of this group. Alongside the central ritual of sacrifice, mysteries were among the most respected and revered acts of piety in the Greco-Roman world. Few human actions so effectively maintained fitting relations between the realm of humans and that of the gods, ensuring benefaction and protection for the individual, group or community in question. Unfortunately, the inscription does not give us any information concerning the actual content of these practices, so we are left wondering what exactly was entailed. This lacuna in our knowledge about the precise nature of these rituals, though never completely filled, will diminish somewhat when we turn to other evidence for imperial mysteries further below.

When Nock encounters this evidence for the association of Demeter-worshippers he discounts it, stating that it ‘is hardly likely that the Emperor or the Empress identified with Demeter figures in the mysteries.... The promoters of a secret rite were perhaps eager to avoid any suspicion of cloaking disloyalty under secrecy.’<sup>23</sup> Nilsson briefly considers such imperial mysteries within small-group settings, but he readily categorizes them as politically-motivated clichés or ‘pseudo-mysteries’.<sup>24</sup> Writing before both Nock and Nilsson, Franz Poland’s summary statement does not come as a surprise in light of the commonly held assumptions within some scholarship: ‘the cult of the emperors appears relatively seldom [within associations] and, where it does occur, has little independent meaning’.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, he asserts, such activities had little significance for an association’s ‘self-understanding’.<sup>26</sup> Contrary to what these scholars hold, how-

<sup>23</sup>Nock, ‘ΣΥΝΝΑΟΣ ΘΕΟΣ’ (as in n. 1) 248.

<sup>24</sup>Nilsson ‘Kleinasiatische Pseudo-Mysterion’ (as in n. 1); cf. Nilsson, *Geschichte* (as in n. 1) 370-371.

<sup>25</sup>Poland, *Geschichte* (as in n. 4) 234-235: ‘Auch sonst erscheint der Kaiserkult zunächst verhältnismäßig selten und, wo er auftritt, hat er wenig selbständige Bedeutung.’

<sup>26</sup> Poland, *Geschichte* (as in n. 4) 532.



ever, this example of imperial rituals is not simply an isolated, superficial exception.

#### 4. ASSOCIATIONS AND CULTIC HONOURS FOR THE *SEBASTOI*

Despite the limitations of epigraphical sources, there is considerable evidence of imperial cult related activities within associations in various cities of Roman Asia, associations which reflect the social spectrum of that society. The nature and extent of the practices we encounter in these settings suggest that a similar range of practices may have taken place within other associations about whom we happen to know far less. Overall, cultic honours for the imperial gods (*Sebastoi*) could be a significant component in the internal life of numerous associations, suggesting something to us about the self-understanding or identity of these groups, about how they understood their place within the context of city (*polis*), empire and cosmos.

##### a) Official Settings

Some associations could participate in official civic or provincial celebrations and festivals in honour of emperors, but such participation was primarily limited to the more official organizations of the gymnasia and professional associations of performers or athletes, which are not the focus of this paper.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, there were some other associations which could on occasion participate in provincial or civic imperial cult celebrations in Asia specifically. I am thinking, in particular, of associations called ‘hymn-singers’ (*hymnodoi*), such as those at Pergamon.<sup>28</sup> Hymn-singers dedicated to the imperial gods are attested in several other places in Asia including: Ephesos, where there appears to have been more than one group using this self-designation, one being connected with a temple of Hadrian;<sup>29</sup> and Smyrna, where there appear to be

<sup>27</sup>The Salutaris inscription from Ephesos provides a good example of the participation of youth organizations in imperial cults. See *IEph* 27 and the discussion by G.M. Rogers, *The Sacred Identity of Ephesos: Foundation Myths of a Roman City* (London 1991); cf. *IEph* 18d.4-24; Josephus, *Ant.* 19.30, 104. Various guilds of performers and athletes, which adopted the emperors as patron deities alongside other gods (esp. Dionysos or Herakles), frequently participated in festivals and contests in honour of the emperors. A decree of the world-wide Dionysiac performers found at Ankyra, for instance, involves this group thanking a benefactor for his contributions to the ‘mystery’ (*mystērion*), supplying funds for the performers’ competition in a ‘mystical contest’ (*mystikos agōn*) involving sacred plays in honour of both Dionysos and Hadrian, the ‘new Dionysos’ (*IAnkyraBosch* 128 = *SEG* VI 59, esp. lines 10-11, 20-25). See W.H. Buckler, and Josef Keil, ‘Two Resolutions of the Dionysiac Artists from Angora’, *JRS* 16 (1926) 245-252; cf. *IAnkyraBosch* 127, 129-130.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. Franz Poland, ‘Griechische Sängervereinigungen im Altertum’, in *700-Jahr-Feier der Kreuzschule zu Dresden 1926* (Dresden 1926) 46-56.

<sup>29</sup>*IEph* 645 (Artemision; III C.E.), 742 (Hadrian), 921 (Hadrian), 3247 (Artemis; time of Philip the Arab). It is not certain whether individual hymn-singers identified in lists of Kuretes or priests from the times of Tiberius (*IEph* 1004) and Commodus (*IEph* 1061, 1600) belong to

two groups by this name, one a sub-group of the elders' association (*gerousia*) and the other calling itself 'the fellow hymn-singers of god Hadrian', a group which continued long after that emperor's time.<sup>30</sup> Unlike associations of performers and athletes, however, it seems that these groups were *not* usually professionals.

We know of the group at Pergamon from several inscriptions of the first and early-second centuries. By the beginning of the second century, at least, the membership consisted primarily if not solely of Roman citizens, some of whom were from among the wealthy elites (*IPergamon* 374).<sup>31</sup> There is earlier evidence from the time of Claudius concerning these and other hymn-singers (*IEph* 3801 = *SEG* IV 641 = *IGR* IV 1608c; cf. *IEph* 18d.4-24 [c. 44 C.E.]).<sup>32</sup> The first part of the inscription reveals that the hymn-singers had previously received a letter from Claudius himself acknowledging the decree which they had sent to him, probably honouring the imperial household (only the beginning is legible). They decided to monumentalize this instance of contact with an emperor, a practice attested among other associations in Asia Minor.<sup>33</sup>

More importantly here, the second part of the monument preserves a document concerning a provincial celebration held at the temple of god Augustus and goddess Roma at Pergamon. It is a resolution of the provincial assembly of Asia thanking the hymn-singers for their participation in the celebration of the emperor's birthday:

Since it is proper to offer a visible exhibition of piety and of every intention befitting the sacred to the revered (*sebastos*) household each year, the hymn-singers from all Asia, coming together in Pergamon for the most sacred birthday of god Augustus Tiberius Caesar, accomplish a magnificent work for the glory of

one of the other known associations of hymn-singers or whether these were simply functionaries assigned the title within other cultic contexts. Also unknown is which association we are dealing with in *IEph* 18d, which certainly did sing hymns to the emperors before the time of Claudius (see note 34 below).

<sup>30</sup>*ISmyrna* 595 (c. 200 C.E.), 644 (elders), 697 (c. 124 C.E.), 758. Cf. Rogers, *Sacred Identity* (as in n. 27) 55, 76. There were also hymn-singers at Akmonia (*IGR* IV 657) and Didyma (*IDidyma* 50), though in these cases we know nothing of their patron deities or practices. There was an association at Nikopolis in Moesia which called itself the 'friends-of-the-*Sebastoi* hymn-singers', or, alternatively, 'presbyter hymn-singers' (*IGBulg* 666-668; cf. *IGBulg* 15ter [Dionysopolis]).

<sup>31</sup>T. Claudius Procillianus, for example, was a member who had been a galatarch at Ankyra; a civic tribe there honoured him as benefactor (*IAnkyraBosch* 142 = *OGIS* 542 = *IGR* III 194). His father, T. Claudius Bocchus, from the equestrian order, had served as a tribune in the army; he was a high-priest and *sebastophant* in the provincial imperial cult of Galatia, as well as a member in an elite-association called the 'sacrificial priests' (*hierourgoi*) at Ankyra (*IAnkyraBosch* 98).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Josef Keil, 'Zur Geschichte der Hymnoden in der Provinz Asia', *JÖAI* 11 (1908) 101-110; W.H. Buckler, 'Auguste, Zeus Patroos', *RPh* 9 (1935) 177-188.

<sup>33</sup>Cf. Harland, 'Claiming a Place' (as in n. 2) 153-193.

the association, hymning the revered household, accomplishing sacrifices to the *Sebastoi* gods, leading festivals and banquets...

[ἐπεὶ δέ]ον πρὸς τὸν Σεβαστὸν οἶκον εὐσε|[βείας κ]αὶ πάσης ἱεροπρεποῦς ἐπινοίας | [δειξιν φαν]ερὰν κατ' ἐνιαυτὸν παρέχεσ|[θαι, οἱ ἀπὸ πά]σης Ἀσίας ὑμνωδοὶ τῇ ἱερῶ|[τάτῃ τοῦ Σεβα]στοῦ Τιβερίου Καίσαρος || [θεοῦ γενεθλίῳ ἡ]μέρᾳ συνερχόμενοι εἰς | [Πέργαμον μεγα]λοπρεπὲς ἔργον εἰς τὴν | [τῆς συνόδου δόξ]αν ἐπιτελοῦσιν καθυ|[μνοῦντες τὸν Σεβα]στὸν οἶκον καὶ το[ῖς | Σεβαστοῖς θεοῖς θυσία]ς ἐπιτελοῦν[τες || καὶ ἐορτὰς ἄγοντες καὶ ἐσ]τιάσεις [καὶ | --]παν[--]

It seems that on some important occasions associations of hymn-singers from various cities of Asia, perhaps including those we hear of at Ephesos and Smyrna, joined together with the more prominent group at Pergamon to honour the *Sebastoi* gods at official celebrations; the provincial civic communities, who bore the cost involved, appreciated the hymn-singers' piety in this regard.<sup>34</sup>

#### b) Group Settings

By far the majority of evidence for the participation of associations in imperial cult related activities pertains to internal group life. The names of some associations suggest that members of the imperial household could be chosen as patron deities of an association, being recipients of regular cultic honours.<sup>35</sup> We have numerous examples from throughout Asia: the 'friends-of-Agrippa' (*philagrippai*) association at Smyrna (*ISmyrna* 331; cf. *IG VI* 374); the 'friends-of-the-*Sebastoi*' (*philosebas[toi]*) at Pergamon (*IPergamonAsklep* 84); the 'friends-of-Caesar brotherhood' (*phratraōn philokesareōn* [sic]) at Ilion;<sup>36</sup> and the Tiberians (*Tibeireioi*) at Didyma, who had benches reserved for them in the stadium alongside other individuals and groups, including hymn-singers (*IDidyma* 50.1a.65).<sup>37</sup> But we also encounter similar gatherings outside the walls of the

<sup>34</sup>In connection with his attempt to correct abuses in the management of the Artemision at Ephesos around 44 C.E., the proconsul Paullus Fabius Persicus refers to a group of hymn-singers at Ephesos. They had received funds to perform during civic imperial cult celebrations. He agrees with the decision of the civic council of Ephesos that the youths (ephebes) would be a more appropriate, and less expensive, replacement for the liturgy. The proconsul was careful to re-acknowledge the special position of the Pergamon group, however (*IEph* 18d.4-24). This same inscription reveals that the cost of the Pergamene hymn-singers' services at the provincial celebration was borne by the provincial communities since the time of Augustus.

<sup>35</sup>Cf. H.W. Pleket, *The Greek Inscriptions in the 'Rijksmuseum Van Oudheden' at Leyden* (Leiden 1958) 4-10; L. Robert, 'Inscriptions d'Asie Mineure au Musée de Leyde', *Hellenica* 11-12 (1960) 220-228; Price, *Rituals and Power* (as in n. 2) 118.

<sup>36</sup>Pleket, *Greek Inscriptions* (as in n. 35) 4, no. 4.

<sup>37</sup>Pleket (*Greek Inscriptions* [as in n. 35] 4-10) suggests that the donors of the imperial cult temple for Caligula at Miletos probably also consisted of an association calling themselves the *philosebastoi* (*IDidyma* 148). See also *IMagnMai* 119, which refers to a benefactor as 'the son of the friends-of-the-*Sebastoi* (*huos tōn phil[lo]s[ebastō]n* [sic]), probably an association. Moving out of our region of focus, we find a 'company' (*taxis*) called the 'Trajanians' at Portu near

city (*polis*): the Caesarists (*kaisariastai*) in a village near Smyrna (Mostenai) honoured a man for his contributions to the association (*koinon*) in connection with its sacrifices for the *Sebastoi* and accompanying banquets (*ILydiaB* 6 = *IGR* IV 1348; cf. *IEph* 3817, from the village of Azoulenon). In these cases we are clearly seeing the importance of the emperors, and cults for them, in the self-understanding of the groups in question.

There are indications that associations based on occupational and ethnic-geographic connections engaged in similar rituals for the imperial gods. Dio Cassius, for instance, refers to the fact that groups of Romans resident in Ephesos and in Nikaia granted cultic honours to both Roma and Julius Caesar in connection with the sanctuaries established for these deities around 29 B.C.E. (51.20.6-7; cf. *IEph* 409, 3019; *MAMA* VI 177 [Phrygian Apameia; all statues of imperial figures dedicated by associations of Romans]). Later on, the guild of shippers at Nikomedia in Bithynia dedicated its sanctuary (*temenos*) to Vespasian, indicative of the shippers' rituals in honour of that emperor (*TAM* IV 22; 70-71 C.E.).

Unfortunately, remains of guild-halls in Asia Minor have seldom been found or identified, but those that have been discovered elsewhere suggest a similar picture regarding the importance of the emperors within group-life. The meeting-place of the merchants and shippers from Berytos, which has been excavated at Delos, contained a sanctuary with a shrine for goddess Roma which was set up 'on account of her goodwill towards the association and the homeland' (*IDelos* 1778; II B.C.E.). Certainly this group returned her goodwill with the appropriate cultic honours, especially sacrifice. Several of the guild-halls at Ostia in Italy contained portrait heads, busts, and statues of members of the imperial household, and Russell Meiggs even concludes that 'some form of imperial cult [was] common to all guilds.'<sup>38</sup> I would suggest that we can imagine a similar integration of the emperors within the religious life of other occupational or ethnic-geographic associations, and we do in fact encounter more direct evidence in Asia that includes guilds.

### *i) Sacrificial Rituals*

The religious activities of other associations which we do encounter more fully suggest a parallelism between cultic honours addressed to the traditional gods and those addressed to the imperial gods. I have already mentioned the performance of sacrifice, the most important ritual in antiquity, within

Rome (*IGR* I 385). Other associations included the descriptive term *philosebastoi* when they decided on a name for the group (cf. *IEph* 293 [initiates]; *ITrall* 77, 93, 145 [young men]; *IGBulg* 667-668 [hymn-singers at Nikopolis in Moesia Inferior]). Such groups have comparable predecessors in Hellenistic times as well, such as the association of *Attalistsai*, devoted to the Attalid rulers, which met near the theatre at Teos in the mid-second century B.C.E (*OGIS* 325-326; cf. *OGIS* 130 [Setis, Egypt; c. 143-142 B.C.E.]; *IG* XII.3 443).

<sup>38</sup>R. Meiggs, *Roman Ostia* (Oxford 1960) 325-327.

associations. Sacrifices or other forms of offerings for the gods inevitably involved a complex of other ritual actions including prayers, hymns, libations, burning of incense and, of course, the accompanying meal.

Recent studies regarding the meaning and function of sacrifice, which often employ insights from the social sciences, emphasize two main elements or functions of sacrifice within the ancient Greek context.<sup>39</sup> On the one hand, sacrifice was a setting in which the bonds of human community were expressed and reinforced, revealing the nature of social relations and hierarchies within society. On the other, sacrifice was a means of communication or relation with the gods in order to solicit or maintain protection and avoid punishment for the group or community. Sacrifice was a symbolic expression of a world view concerning the nature of the cosmos and fitting relations within it. In other words, sacrifice, like other forms of ritual, encompassed a set of symbols which communicated a certain understanding of relations between humans within the group (or community) and between human groups and the gods. The incorporation of the emperors within the Greek system of sacrifice, therefore, tells us something about both group-identity and the place of the imperial gods within the world view of the members of associations.

There is considerable evidence for the importance of sacrifice in connection with the imperial gods within association-life. Associations in Asia sometimes dedicated altars to the imperial gods generally or a particular member of the imperial family (cf. *IGR* IV 603 [near Aizanoi]; *IEph* 1506; *AE* (1984) 250, no. 855 [Hierapolis]; *IMylasa* 403 [neighbourhood association]). The hymn-singers at Pergamon, whose internal activities definitely involved various rituals for the emperors including sacrifices, dedicated an altar to Hadrian, 'Olympios, saviour and founder' (*IPergamon* 374). These dedications of altars are indicative of the inclusion of the imperial gods in at least sacrifice and likely other rituals of the groups in question. It is not a stretch to imagine that associations who dedicated other structures to the 'Sebastoi gods', such as the guild of merchants at Thyatira (*TAM* V 862), would also engage in sacrifices for these same gods within their internal life as well.

There is also more direct evidence that sacrifices were made to imperial deities alongside other gods (or alone) within associations. We have already encountered the practices of the devotees of Demeter at Ephesos. Another inscription involving an occupational association from Ephesos (*IEph* 719) reveals the customary practices of the group in its self-designation as the

<sup>39</sup>Cf. Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. by John Raffan (Cambridge 1985) 54-75; M. Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant (eds.), *The Cuisine of Sacrifice Among the Greeks*, trans. by Paula Wissing (Chicago 1989 [1979]); Price, *Rituals and Power* (as in n. 2) 207-233; L. Bruit Zaidman and P. Schmitt Pantel, *Religion in the Ancient Greek City*, trans. by Paul Cartledge (Cambridge 1992) 27-45; A.M. Bowie, 'Greek Sacrifice: Forms and Functions' in A. Powell (ed.), *The Greek World* (London 1995) 463-482.

‘physicians who sacrifice to the ancestor Asklepios and to the *Sebastoi*’ (*hoi thyontes tō propatori Asklēpiō kai tois Sebastois iatroī*). Compare also an earlier reconstructed inscription which mentions a freedman dedicating money to a ‘synod’, perhaps Roman businessmen, ‘in order to perform the sacrifice to Roma and the goddess’ (*epitelesth[eisan tēi Rōmēi kai] tēi theōi thysian* [c. 27 B.C.E.]).<sup>40</sup>

These inscriptions pertaining to sacrifice are particularly relevant in regard to one of Price’s claims. Despite his recognition of the varied importance of imperial cults (beyond the political), Price argues that, in general, sacrifices were consciously made ‘on behalf of’ the emperors rather than ‘to’ the emperors (using the dative), and that the majority of the evidence from Asia Minor reflects a conscious effort to use the former terminology.<sup>41</sup> This argument, coupled with other claims regarding imperial statues, is fundamental to his overall suggestion that in ritual practice the emperors were *not* equated with the gods but, rather, ontologically located ‘at the focal point between human and the divine.’<sup>42</sup> The above inscriptions involving local associations, as well as the evidence for the Demetriasts and the hymn-singers discussed earlier (both of which use the dative of sacrifice), are examples where no such distinction is made. As Friesen argues in reference to Price’s theory on this point, ‘the vast majority of evidence does not distinguish gods from emperors.’<sup>43</sup> The emperors could function as gods within religious life at the local level in Roman Asia.

## ii) *Mysteries*

There was a range of other possibilities in the ritual practices of associations, some of which we can discuss in connection with ‘mysteries’ in honour of the imperial gods, a topic also explored with fruitful results by Pleket.<sup>44</sup> These imperial mysteries deserve particular attention since scholars such as Nock and Nilsson are especially concerned with downplaying their significance in order to argue that imperial cults were not genuinely religious.

Some important background information will be useful before looking at the internal imperial mysteries of associations. Sometimes mysteries—like some of those associated with other gods—could be performed within civic or provincial

<sup>40</sup>H. Engelmann, ‘Ephesische Inschriften’, *ZPE* 84 (1990) 93-94, revising *IEph* 859a.

<sup>41</sup>Price, *Rituals and Power* (as in n. 2) 207-233; cf. Nock, ‘ΣΥΝΝΑΟΣ ΤΗΕΟΣ’ (as in n. 1).

<sup>42</sup>Price, *Rituals and Power* (as in n. 2) 233. Price’s other suggestion (*Rituals and Power* 146-156; cf. Nock, ‘ΣΥΝΝΑΟΣ ΘΕΟΣ’), that when imperial images appeared in temples of other traditional gods they were always subordinate, is also problematic, since even traditional gods did not share fully in the temples of other gods. Both of Price’s reasons for suggesting that the emperors were not perceived as divine (as true gods) but rather as somewhere between human and divine can be viewed as problematic. Cf. Friesen, *Twice Neokoros* (as in n. 2) 73-75.

<sup>43</sup>Friesen, *Twice Neokoros* (as in n. 2) 149.

<sup>44</sup>Pleket, ‘An Aspect of the Emperor Cult’ (as in n. 1); cf. L. Robert, ‘Recherches épigraphiques’, *REA* 62 (1960) 321-324; Price, *Rituals and Power* (as in n. 2) 190-191; Harland, ‘Honours and Worship’ (as in n. 2) 328-333.

cult contexts (cf. *IG XII.2 205* [mysteries for Tiberius at Mytilene on Lesbos]). For instance, there were mysteries and related honours in connection with cults of ‘god Antinoos’ (the beloved teenage companion of Hadrian) at various locations in the empire, including Mantinea in Greece, Antinoopolis in Egypt and Claudiopolis in Bithynia (Antinoos’ home-town).<sup>45</sup> Comparable mysteries were practiced in honour of other imperial gods in some of the official civic and provincial cults of Asia Minor as well. In the inscriptions of Asia, Bithynia and Galatia, for example, we come across functionaries of both civic and provincial cults called ‘sebastophants’, that is, revealers of the *Sebastoi* in imperial mysteries; this is a functionary that we will also find in unofficial cults or mysteries as well.<sup>46</sup> Evidence of this kind from civic and provincial cults shows how, in some regards, associations that engaged in imperial mysteries also reflected the context of the city or province. Through participating in similar practices in a small-group setting, the members of an association could feel a sense of belonging not only within the group, but also within this broader civic or imperial framework. But to say that associations’ practices were, in part, a reflection of their surroundings is not to undermine the significance of these rituals for participants in the group-setting.

Some Egyptian papyrological evidence provides a fitting transition to our discussion of imperial mysteries within associations. One papyrus fragment from Antinoopolis, perhaps from a novel, makes reference to royal mysteries in Egypt from an earlier period: ‘Triptolemus..., not for you have I now performed initiation; neither Kore abducted did I see nor Demeter in her grief, but kings in

<sup>45</sup>Cf. Robert, *A travers l’Asie Mineure* (as in n. 14) 132-38; R. Lambert, *Beloved and God: The Story of Hadrian and Antinous* (London 1984). There was a temple and cult for ‘god Antinoos’ at Mantinea, which involved sacrifices, games and mystic rites (*teletē*; see Pausanias, 8.9.7-8; *IG V.2 312, 281*). Pausanias mentions that similar rituals were practiced elsewhere, which is confirmed by Origen’s reference to mysteries for Antinoos at Antinoopolis (Origen, *c. Celsum* 3.36). At Claudiopolis, a votive offering for the ‘new god, Antinoos’ has been discovered, and a chief-initiate appears to have led mysteries in this god’s honour, perhaps involving a continuing association of initiates. See *IKlaudiop 7* (bronze medallion dedicated to god Antinoos by the homeland), 56 (votive), 65 (*mystarchēs*); cf. Price, *Rituals and Power* (as in n. 2) 266, catalogue no. 95. Regarding other cultic honours, for instance, a ‘Hadrianic association’ (probably performers) honoured Antinoos as ‘the new god Hermes’ (*IG XIV 978a*), an association (*collegium*) at Lanuvium in Italy was devoted to both Diana and Antinoos (*CIL XIV 2112; 136 C.E.*), and a hymn has been recently found at Kurion on Cyprus which praises Antinoos as Adonis. See W.D. Lebek, ‘Ein Hymnus auf Antinoos Mitford, (The Inscriptions of Kourion No. 104)’, *ZPE 12* (1973) 101-137.

<sup>46</sup>For Sebastophants in Asia see: *IGR IV 522* (Dorylaion); *IGR IV 643* (Akmoneia), *IEph 2037, 2061, 2063* (early-II C.E.); *ISardBR 62* (an association honours a Sebastophant and hierophant of the mysteries); *IGR IV 1410* (Smyrna). In Bithynia and Galatia Sebastophants were often officials in the provincial imperial cult: *IPrusiasHyp 17, 46, 47* (Bithynia); *IGR III 22* (Kios, Bithynia); *CCCA I 59-60* (Pessinos, Galatia); *IGR III 162, 173, 194, 204* (Ankyra, Galatia).

their victory' (*PAntinoopolis* I 18; late-II C.E.).<sup>47</sup> Reference to royal mysteries, this time in connection with Dionysiac mysteries, also appears in an honorary poem for the king by Euphronios, which refers to celebrants in the mysteries of 'new Dionysos', that is, Ptolemy IV.<sup>48</sup> J. Tondriau traces the history of a continuing connection between Dionysiac mysteries and the royal court, including evidence for a 'cult-society' (*thiasos*) within the court during the reigns of Ptolemy IV Philopater (221-203 B.C.E.), Ptolemy XII Aulete (80-51 B.C.E.) and Cleopatra and Mark Antony (42-20 B.C.E.).<sup>49</sup> Here we have various references to mystic rites, akin to the traditional mysteries of Demeter, Kore, Dionysos and others, associated with Hellenistic royalty, foreshadowing the sorts of practices we encounter during the Roman era.

Another papyrus fragment found at Oxyrhynchus brings us into the Roman era and provides an interesting link between Egypt and Asia Minor in regard to imperial mysteries. The papyrus, which dates to the third century of our era, preserves part of a novel in which a character condemns what he sees as the imitation of Demeter's Eleusinian mysteries in the performance of mysteries to magnify 'Caesar' in Egypt. The critic attributes the origins of such rites to Bithynia in Asia Minor: 'It was not we who originally invented those rites, which is to our credit, but it was a Nikaian who was the first to institute them...let the rites be his, and let them be performed among his people alone...unless we wish to commit sacrilege against Caesar himself, as we should commit sacrilege against Demeter also, if we performed to her here the ritual used there; for she is unwilling to allow any rites of that sort...' (*POxy* 1612 [with trans.]).<sup>50</sup> The critic seems concerned with impiety against both Caesar and Demeter, but we know too little to assess precisely why he objects to these rituals. Nonetheless, this papyrus further demonstrates that mysteries were performed in honour of rulers or emperors in regions of the Greek East such as Egypt and Asia Minor, and that they could closely mirror the mysteries in honour of deities such as Demeter.

Now that we have some background to the practice of royal and imperial mysteries we can turn to the practices of associations in Asia. We have already discussed at some length the mysteries of the Demetriasts at Ephesos, who, similar to those critiqued by the character in the novel, integrated the emperors

<sup>47</sup>Walter Burkert, 'Bacchic *Teletai* in the Hellenistic Age' in T.H. Carpenter/C. A. Faraone (eds.), *Masks of Dionysus* (Ithaca 1993) 269.

<sup>48</sup>Burkert, 'Bacchic *Teletai*' (as in n. 47) 268-269.

<sup>49</sup>J. Tondriau, 'Les thiasos dionysiaques royaux de la cour ptolémaïque', *CE* 21 (1946) 149-71. It is quite possible that similar royal rituals and mysteries took place within the known associations devoted to Egyptian rulers, such as the associations of *Basilistai* at Thera (*IG* XII.3 443) and at Setis (*OGIS* 130; II B.C.E.), and the *Eupatoristai* at Delos (*OGIS* 367).

<sup>50</sup>Cf. L. Deubner, *Bemerkungen zu einigen literarischen Papyri aus Oxyrhynchus*, Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse, 17 (Heidelberg 1919) 8-11.



within mysteries of Demeter. Yet there were comparable practices within other groups as well, which suggest that imperial mysteries were not uncommon within associations, though probably not as widespread as were sacrificial rituals for the emperors.

The imperial gods could be incorporated within the rituals and mysteries of Dionysiac associations. We find Hellenistic precedents for the importance of ruler cults in these groups in Asia Minor as well. In one inscription from Pergamon, for instance, ‘the bacchantes of the god to whom you call ‘euoi!’ [i.e. Dionysos]’ dedicate an altar ‘to King Eumenes, god, saviour and benefactor’ (197-159 B.C.E.).<sup>51</sup> The civic cult and mysteries of Dionysos Kathegemon, ‘the Leader’, at Pergamon had a history of close connections with the royal Attalid family and ruler cult.<sup>52</sup> There is also evidence of close connections between the association of Dionysiac performers centred at Teos, the cult of Kathegemon at Pergamon, and Attalid rulers.<sup>53</sup> In light of this context, it would not be far-fetched to suggest the continuing importance of similar honours involving the imperial gods alongside Dionysos within the association of cowherds in Roman Pergamon, though this is not directly attested. It is worth noting that one member of the hymn-singers, a group whose imperial rituals are clear, was also apparently a member of the cowherds (L. Aninius Flaccus; *IPergamon* 374 A 11).

There are other indications of the integration of imperial gods within the mysteries of Dionysiac and other groups. According to a fragmentary inscription from the time of Commodus found at Ephesus, for instance, mysteries were performed there in honour of Dionysos, Zeus Panhellenios and Hephaistos (*IEph* 1600 = *GIBM* 600). More importantly, it seems that those who led the mysteries—most likely the Dionysiac initiates we encounter in other inscriptions from Ephesus—also included the emperor, identified as ‘new Dionysos’ (line 46), in the mysteries and sacrifices (cf. *IEph* 275, 293, 434, 1020, 1595, 1601). E. L. Hicks (*GIBM* 600) even suggests the possibility that the list of participants and priests along with names of deities may indicate that the festival involved the impersonation of the gods (including imperial personages) in some sort of dramatic play—similar to those of the Iobacchoi at Athens and the performers at Ankyra.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>51</sup>H. von Prott and W. Kolbe, ‘Die Arbeiten zu Pergamon: Inschriften’, *MDAI(A)* 27 (1902) 94-95, no.86.

<sup>52</sup>H. von Prott, ‘Dionysos Kathegemon’, *MDAI(A)* 27 (1902) 161-188; E. Ohlemutz, *Die Kulte und Heiligtümer der Götter in Pergamon* (Darmstadt 1968 [1940]) 90-122; Burkert, ‘Bacchic Teletai’ (as in n. 47) 264-268.

<sup>53</sup>See von Prott, ‘Dionysos Kathegemon’ (as in n. 52); R.E. Allen, *The Attalid Kingdom: A Constitutional History* (Oxford 1983) 145-158.

<sup>54</sup>On the Iobacchoi at Athens see *IG* II.2 1368 = *LSCG* 51, esp. lines 44-46, 64-67, 121-127. On the performers at Ankyra see Buckler and Keil, ‘Two Resolutions’ (as in n. 27) 245-52. Some other evidence for imperial mysteries is worth mentioning. Herrmann points out the

Unfortunately, due to the nature of the evidence, mysteries and other related practices of the Demetriasts, Dionysiac initiates and others are only mentioned in passing, telling us little of the actual details of what was involved. But one monument from Pergamon may help to clarify some of what was involved in the various internal cultic honours for the imperial gods, serving as an appropriate conclusion to this section.

Besides their occasional participation in singing within civic or provincial celebrations, the association of hymn-singers at Pergamon engaged in imperial mysteries and sacrifices internally. One monument, which was dedicated to Hadrian, includes an inscription that outlines the provision of food and wine for the group's calendar of meetings, including the celebrations of the birthday of Augustus and the mysteries which lasted several days (*IPergamon* 374, B lines 10, 16). The celebrations and mysteries included sacrifices to Augustus and Roma (D line 14) and accompanying banquets, as well as the use of sacrificial cakes, incense and, notably, lamps for 'the *Sebastos*', probably an image of Augustus (B line 18-19). Further on, 'images of the *Sebastoi*' (C line 13) are mentioned again which, as Pleket also suggests, were a significant component in this group's mysteries. Apparently images of Augustus or other imperial gods were revealed in the lamplight by the equivalent of the hierophant in the Eleusinian mysteries: that is, by a *sebastophant*, a functionary we have encountered several times already. This scenario concerning the nature of imperial mysteries also coincides with the case of a Dionysiac 'company' (*speira*) in Thracia, for instance, where there were functionaries responsible for lamps and several 'sebastophants' alongside other titles associated with Dionysiac mysteries (*IGBulg* 1517; Cillae, 241-44 C.E.). It is quite possible that the mysteries of the Demetriasts at Ephesos, or of other associations, included similar rituals to those of the hymn-singers.

Pleket concludes from his study of imperial mysteries that Nilsson's use of the term 'pseudo-mysteries' to refer to such rites is unwarranted since 'the mysteries at Pergamum as far as their rites are concerned were true copies of the traditional mysteries; both include hymns, glorification..., showing of the image.'<sup>55</sup> Nilsson's assertions that these imperial mysteries, like other cultic

possibility that a quite heavily reconstructed inscription from Sardis, which seems to refer to a *sebastophant* and *hierophant* of the mysteries (*se[bastophantēn kai tōn] mystē[riōn hierphantēn]*) in connection with an association, may well pertain to imperial mysteries within that group; see P. Herrmann, 'Mystenvereine in Sardeis', *Chiron* 26 (1996) 340-41 on *ISardBR* 62 (II C.E.). Although we do not find reference to the imperial gods in the evidence we have for groups devoted to Isis or Sarapis in Asia, it is noteworthy that the 'company' (*taxis*) of *Paianistai* at Rome (probably consisting of members originally from the Greek East) chose both Sarapis and the *Sebastoi* gods as its patrons, suggesting rituals for the imperial gods as a normal part of this group's life (*IG XIV* 1084; 146 C.E.).

<sup>55</sup> Pleket, 'An Aspect of the Emperor Cult' (as in n. 2) 346. Cf. Price, *Rituals and Power* (as in n. 2) 191.

activities associated with the emperors, were merely ‘a public demonstration of loyalty’ and were ‘really devoid of any mystical content’<sup>56</sup> is based less on evidence than on his own presuppositions and overall paradigm with regard to the nature of imperial cults generally.

## 5. INSIGHTS FROM THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND RITUAL STUDIES

This traditional paradigm of imperial cults corresponds to a particular theoretical trajectory in the modern study of religion, a trajectory that favours the personal feelings of the individual over communal actions or rituals in defining what it accepts as meaningful religion. From this perspective corporate ceremonies or rituals are often merely outward or mechanical actions (‘empty shells’) with little significance to the essence of religion. As Mary Douglas points out, this modern tendency to devalue ritual as synonymous with meaningless and mechanical forms of religion has its roots, in part, in the anti-ritualist tradition of the Protestant reformations.<sup>57</sup> But this theoretical framework does not do justice to the function and meaning of ritual actions, including ‘political’ rituals, by which I mean rituals closely associated with power relations within society.

A discussion of some insights of sociologists and anthropologists concerning the meaning and function of ritual will help to clarify the significance of imperial cults in antiquity, including rituals within associations. Here I use the term ‘ritual’, as do many others in this field, to refer to ‘symbolic behaviour that is socially standardized and repetitive’, as ‘action wrapped in a web of symbolism’ (to quote D.I. Kertzer).<sup>58</sup>

At a time when many scholars of religion understood religion primarily in terms of the psychological realm, the emotional states or feelings of individuals, Emile Durkheim, although not lacking in some psychological explanations (e.g. ‘effervescence’), stressed the social functions of religion and of rituals specifically.<sup>59</sup> Although we need not accept Durkheim’s identification of God with society itself, his insights are useful in terms of ritual’s function or role in bringing together individuals into a collectivity, thereby strengthening group identity and the attachment of individuals to the group and society. These insights have had a considerable impact on subsequent developments in the study of religion and ritual in the social sciences.

<sup>56</sup> Nilsson, *Geschichte* (as in n. 1) 370: ‘Das eine Extrem vertreten die Mysterien im Kaiserkult, der, wenn irgendeiner, eine öffentliche Kundgebung der Loyalität und mystischen Inhaltes wirklich bar war.’

<sup>57</sup> M. Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (2nd ed. London 1973) 19-39.

<sup>58</sup> D.I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven 1988) 9. Cf. Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (as in n. 57) 26-27; C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz* (New York 1973) 112-114.

<sup>59</sup> E. Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York, 1965 [1912]).

Turning to more recent developments in the study of ritual, Clifford Geertz's influential studies of religion from an anthropological perspective provide useful insights here. Geertz is in many ways representative of a now common approach to the study of culture, and religion within it, which understands religion as a cultural system of symbols or inherited conceptions, analogous to language, which communicates meanings.<sup>60</sup> A symbol in this sense is 'any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception—the conception is the symbol's meaning.'<sup>61</sup> As a system of symbols, religion acts to coordinate and maintain both the ethos, or way of life, and the world view of a particular group, community or society: 'Religious symbols formulate a basic congruence between a particular style of life and a specific (if, most often, implicit) metaphysic, and in so doing sustain each with the borrowed authority of the other.'<sup>62</sup>

According to Geertz, ritual plays a very important role in sustaining the interplay between social experience and world view (or notions of the overall cosmic framework). As concrete actions performed in the realm of lived reality, rituals reinforce the apparent truth of the world view: 'For it is in ritual...that this conviction that religious conceptions are veridical and that religious directives are sound is somehow generated. It is in some sort of ceremonial form...that the moods and motivations [ethos] which sacred symbols induce in men [and women] and the general conceptions of the order of existence [world view] which they formulate for men [and women] meet and reinforce one another. In a ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world.'<sup>63</sup> Ritual, then, plays an important role in reinforcing a set of conceptions and symbols concerning the order of the cosmos and society. Another related point which should be made is that ritual actions can be concrete expressions or even performances of what people think of the world and their place within it. As Catherine Bell puts it, 'the fundamental efficacy of ritual activity lies in its ability to have people embody assumptions about their place in a larger order of things.'<sup>64</sup>

Some of these insights have been applied in studies of rituals associated with power and politics, something worth discussing since our present focus is on imperial cults, which are often dismissed as meaningless political ceremonies. Studies in this area show that even those public rites and ceremonies that we as moderns categorize as 'political' can have meaningful and even cosmological

<sup>60</sup>Geertz, *Interpretation* (as in n. 58) 87-141. Cf. Vernant's similar view of Greek religion, cited in Zaidman and Pantel, *Religion* (as in n. 39) 22-23.

<sup>61</sup>Geertz, *Interpretation* (as in n. 58) 91.

<sup>62</sup>Geertz, *Interpretation* (as in n. 58) 90.

<sup>63</sup>Geertz, *Interpretation* (as in n. 58) 112.

<sup>64</sup>C. Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford 1997) xi.

significance.<sup>65</sup> It is in Geertz's cross-cultural study of royal rituals in Elizabethan England, fourteenth-century Java, and nineteenth-century Morocco, for example, that he speaks of 'the inherent sacredness of sovereign power.'<sup>66</sup> He goes on to argue that it is royal ceremonies 'that mark the center as center and give what goes on there its aura of being not merely important, but in some odd fashion *connected with the way the world is built*. The gravity of high politics and the solemnity of high worship spring from liker impulses than might first appear' (italics mine).<sup>67</sup>

Other instructive generalizations come from Maurice Bloch's anthropological case study of the royal bath ceremony in nineteenth century Madagascar, in which he proposes a dual understanding of royal rituals. On the one hand, royal rituals function to legitimate authority by 'making royal power an essential aspect of a cosmic social and emotional order.'<sup>68</sup> On the other, the effectiveness of this function is rooted in how royal rituals employ symbolism from the rituals of the everyday life of ordinary people. As Bell states:

Political rituals display symbols and organize symbolic action in ways that attempt to demonstrate that the values and forms of social organization to which the ritual testifies are neither arbitrary nor temporary but follow naturally from the way the world is organized. For this reason, ritual has long been considered more effective than coercive force in securing people's assent to a particular order.<sup>69</sup>

Price's study of imperial cult rituals in Roman Asia Minor specifically reflects insights similar to those I have just outlined. He rejects the conventional approach of many scholars of Greco-Roman religion who have focussed on the mental states of individuals. Instead, he approaches imperial rituals as a 'way of conceptualizing the world.'<sup>70</sup> This system involving imperial rituals, he suggests, was important for all levels of society and functioned in various ways:

Using their traditional symbolic system [inhabitants of Asia Minor] represented the emperor to themselves in the familiar terms of divine power. The imperial cult, like the cults of the traditional gods, created a relationship of power

<sup>65</sup>Cf. D. Cannadine/S. Price, (eds.), *Rituals of Royalty: Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge, 1987); Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics* (as in n. 58).

<sup>66</sup>C. Geertz, 'Centers, Kings, and Charisma: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power' in J. Ben-David/T. N. Clark (eds.), *Culture and Its Creators: Essays in Honor of Edward Shils* (Chicago 1977) 150-171, quoting from 151.

<sup>67</sup>Geertz, 'Centers, Kings, and Charisma' (as in n. 66) 52-53.

<sup>68</sup>M. Bloch, 'The Ritual of the Royal Bath in Madagascar: The Dissolution of Death, Birth and Fertility Into Authority' in Cannadine/Price (eds.), *Rituals of Royalty* (as in n. 65) 271-297, esp. 294-297.

<sup>69</sup>Bell, *Ritual* (as in n. 64) 135.

<sup>70</sup>Price, *Rituals and Power* (as in n. 2) 7-11. As I discussed earlier, I do not agree with Price's specific understanding of the position of the emperor as located somewhere between humans and the divine.

between subject and ruler. It also enhanced the dominance of local elites over the populace, of cities over other cities, and of Greek over indigenous cultures. That is, the cult was a major part of the web of power that formed the fabric of society.<sup>71</sup>

The broadly-based nature of Price's insightful analysis of imperial cults did not allow him to focus attention on the significance of rituals within small-group settings or associations, however.

In light of recent studies of the nature, function and meaning of ritual, we can better understand imperial rituals within associations. Contrary to what Poland and others suggest, we need to realize that the imperial gods were an important and integrated component within the self-understanding or identity of many associations. The performance of sacrifice, mysteries or other rituals for emperors in the group-setting was not simply an outward and meaningless statement of political loyalty, but rather a symbolic expression of a world view held in common by those participating. This world view encompassed interconnected social, religious and political dimensions. Within this cosmic framework or conception of reality the imperial gods (*Sebastoi*) were placed at the height of power alongside other gods in a realm above, though in interaction with, humans and human groups. Concrete ritual actions not only expressed this conception of reality but also reinforced the participants' sense that this conception corresponded to the way things actually were in real life.

We have observed that imperial rituals were closely bound up in, and reflect the system of symbols associated with, cults for the gods more generally. As Bloch's insights also suggest, this close link between symbols within imperial rituals and those of the everyday life of persons living within cities in Roman Asia suggests the meaningfulness of both for the participants. This helps to explain the effectiveness of the former for legitimating the existing structures of power or authority. Yet it is important to stress the grass-roots or spontaneous nature of these honours and ritual actions; they served to legitimate the authority and ideology of Roman rule within a framework not incompatible with many aspects of the developing ideology or world view of the city (*polis*) and its inhabitants. It seems that there was not always a need for Roman authorities to systematically propagate or enforce an ideology which legitimated their position of power within the Greek East. They simply had to take advantage and encourage aspects of a developing ideological or symbolic framework that already existed.

Rituals within associations functioned and expressed cultural meaning in a variety of ways. The understanding of the cosmos—encompassing the emperors—which was expressed in ritual strengthened the sense of belonging within the group. Yet it simultaneously made a statement regarding the place of

<sup>71</sup>Price, *Rituals and Power* (as in n. 2) 248.

that group or community—its sense of belonging—within the societal and cosmic order of things. It said something of how the members of such a group regarded their relation to the most important figures of power in the Greco-Roman world. The group played a part—an important one in its own view, and perhaps in the view of others in the civic context—in the overall maintenance of fitting relations within the webs of connections that linked individuals (elites and non-elites), groups, civic or provincial communities, imperial officials, and the gods. In doing so, an association was also reflecting, often unconsciously, many features of cultural life in the civic context.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Overall, the evidence from Asia suggests that cultic honours for the imperial gods, which paralleled the sacrifices, mysteries and other rituals directed at traditional deities, were a significant component within numerous associations. There is no reason evident in the inscriptions themselves to suggest that these rituals were any less meaningful, mystic or religious than those connected with worship of the traditional gods in that context. Rituals for the emperors were one means by which such groups engaged in what was considered by their contemporaries as fitting relations with those at the pinnacle of the networks and hierarchies of society and the cosmos. The imperial-related internal activities of these groups tell of their tendency towards integration within society and evince one of several factors involved in their finding a home within the city and empire. The case of associations illustrates how local social and religious life could facilitate, directly or indirectly, the maintenance of Roman rule in the Greek East.