

# *Christ-Bearers and Fellow-Initiates: Local Cultural Life and Christian Identity in Ignatius' Letters*<sup>1</sup>

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In writing to Christian congregations in the cities of Roman Asia, Ignatius draws on imagery from Greco-Roman cultural life to speak about the identity of the Christians. Scholars have given some attention to the cultural images which Ignatius evokes, but often in a cursory way and rarely, if ever, with reference to local religious life. Concentrating on Ignatius' characterization of Christian groups as "Christ-bearers" and "fellow-initiates" (*Eph.* 9.2; 12.2), the paper explores neglected archeological and epigraphical evidence from Asia Minor (and Syria) regarding processions, mysteries, and associations. This sheds important light on what Ignatius may have had in mind and, perhaps more importantly, what the listeners or readers of Ignatius' letters in these cities would think of when he spoke of their identity in this way.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ignatius of Antioch uses several analogies and metaphors in his letters to speak about the identity of Christian assemblies in Roman Asia. The Christians at Ephesos, for instance, are likened to a choral group in a temple, "attuned to the bishop as strings to a lyre" (*Eph.* 4; cf. *Phld.* 1.2). They are "fellow-initiates" (*symmystai*) of Paul that share in the "mysteries" (*Eph.* 12.2; 19.1; cf. *Magn.* 9.1; *Trall.* 2.3). Together they take part in

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a procession in honor of their patron deity, bearing images and sacred objects as groups of “God-bearers” (*theophoroi*) and “Christ-bearers” (*christophoroi*; *Eph.* 9.2; cf. *Smyrn.* inscript.).<sup>2</sup>

Over a century ago, J. B. Lightfoot devoted attention to Ignatius’ “vivid appeal to the local experiences of an Ephesian audience,” particularly regarding the Christ-bearer metaphor and local evidence for processions, but there is far more archeological evidence now available.<sup>3</sup> Other scholars have since given some attention to these metaphors, but often in a cursory way and rarely, if ever, with reference to local cultural life as attested in archeological evidence from Roman Asia. William R. Schoedel’s commentary, for instance, rightly understands the Christ-bearers in terms of a Greek religious procession, noting that “bearers” of sacred things can be found within this context (citing Plutarch, *Moralia* 352B, where the image is also used metaphorically); he also notes the importance of the background of the mysteries for understanding Ignatius’ use of “fellow-initiates.”<sup>4</sup> Yet Schoedel and other scholars largely ignore an abundance of artefactual remains that can illuminate what, concretely, these passages would spark in the imaginations of Ignatius and the addressees of his letters.

This article explores the cultural images Ignatius evokes, particularly with reference to initiates and processions, and provides some insights

2. The Ephesians were by no means the only ones to hear these characterizations, however, as the letters of Ignatius soon circulated more widely to other Christian groups in Asia and elsewhere (cf. Polycarp, *Phil.* 13.2). I rely primarily on the Greek text of Ignatius in Kirsopp Lake, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers*, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985).

3. J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers* (New York: Macmillan, 1889), 2:17–18, 54–57. Lightfoot’s primary material was John Turtle Wood’s then-recent archeological reports, particularly the Salutaris inscription which I discuss further below. See *Discoveries at Ephesus Including the Site and Remains of the Great Temple of Diana* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1975 [1877]).

4. W. R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 67–68, 72–73, 89–90. Cf. W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed., tr. W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979 [1958]), entries for *hagiophoroi* and *naophoroi*; R. M. Grant, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: T. Nelson, 1964–68), 4:40–43. Unfortunately, H. Paulsen’s recent reworking of Bauer’s commentary adds little in explaining these passages regarding Christ-bearers and fellow-initiates (*Die Briefe des Ignatius von Antiochia und der Brief des Polykarp von Smyrna*, Handbuch zum Neuen Testament [Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1985], 35–36; cf. W. Bauer, *Die Briefe des Ignatius von Antiochia und der Polykarpbrief*, Handbuch zum Neuen Testament [Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1920], 209–10).

into how early Christian authors like Ignatius could express Christian identity in terms familiar from local social and cultural life, particularly association-life. Specifically, the article examines neglected epigraphical evidence from Ephesos, Smyrna, Magnesia, Tralles, and other cities that sheds light on what Ignatius may have had in mind and, perhaps more importantly, what the listeners or readers of Ignatius in these cities of Roman Asia (c. 110 C.E.) would think of when Ignatius used these analogies to speak about their identity.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, this study begins to illustrate how epigraphical and archeological evidence for religious life in the Greco-Roman world can provide new perspectives on early Christianity, something that I explore fully in my book: *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society*.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. FELLOW-INITIATES AND THEIR MYSTERIES

Ignatius designates the Christian assembly at Ephesos as “fellow-initiates” (*symmystai*) of Paul engaging in their own “mysteries” (*mysteria*). The specific designation “fellow-initiates” (*symmystai* or *symmystai*) is common for unofficial associations engaging in mysteries throughout Asia Minor, including those cities addressed by Ignatius, and “initiates” (*mystai*) is even more widespread.<sup>7</sup> Ignatius sustains this analogy in several of his letters, including those to the Magnesians and Trallians, and continues to speak of the revelation of “mysteries of Jesus Christ,” which suggests that

5. Epigraphical abbreviations throughout this paper follow the standard outlined by G. H. R. Horsley and John A. L. Lee, “A Preliminary Checklist of Abbreviations of Greek Epigraphic Volumes,” *Epigraphica* 56 (1994): 129–69. All translations of inscriptions are mine unless otherwise stated.

6. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.

7. For “fellow-initiates” see: *ISmyrna* 330; *IStratonikeia* 845–46; *IApamBith* 103; *IPrusiasHyp* 845; *CCCA* 1.60 (Pessinos, Galatia). Though there is a lack of “initiates” (*mystai*) specifically in documented inscriptions from Syria (as collected in *IGLSyria*), Ignatius’ homeland, there were certainly many unofficial associations (*koina*, *thiasoi*, *synodoi*) of Syrians that engaged in similar rituals for various deities throughout the Mediterranean, particularly well-attested on islands in the Aegean. For example, at Delos there was an association (*koinon*) of Berytian traders and shippers and an association (*koinon*) of Tyrian merchants and shippers devoted to gods of their homelands, as well as an “association (*koinon*) of Syrian *thiasotai*.” There was a cult-society (*thiasos*) devoted to Atargatis, the Syrian mother goddess, on Astypalaia. At Nisyros, another island off the southwestern coast of Asia Minor, there were the “Syrian Aphrodisiasts.” At Piraeus there was an association (*koinon*) of Sidonians. W. Ameling, “Koinon TŌN SIDŌNIŌN,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 81 (1990): 189–99, collects the inscriptional evidence (cf. *SEG* 40 1722).

this is a fairly consistent way of expressing Christian identity. The “mysteries” he identifies center on the (virgin) birth, death and resurrection of Jesus, as well as the celebration of these in the Lord’s Supper, which was administered by the “deacons of the mysteries” (*Eph.* 19.1–3; *Magn.* 9.1–2; *Trall.* 2.3).

Alongside the staple ritual of sacrifice, “mysteries” (*mystēria*, *orgia*, *teletē*) were among the most respected ways of honoring the gods in the Roman era.<sup>8</sup> The term could encompass a variety of practices, including sacrifice, communal meals, re-enactment of the myths of the gods, sacred processions, hymn-singing, and, of course, the revelation of holy things. There was an expectation that aspects of these practices were secretive, to be *fully* experienced only by the initiated. In some cases, those who followed the prescribed steps towards initiation, witnessing the mysteries of a given deity, joined together in an ongoing association of initiates (*mystai*). In Asia Minor, it is most common to hear of mysteries in connection with Dionysos, Demeter, the Great Mother (Cybele), and Isis, but there were mysteries for other deities as well. In fact, the notion of some sort of separate “mystery religions” (hence the old scholarly term) is problematic in that one could encounter mysteries as rituals in honor of deities within various contexts, from the official civic and imperial cults to unofficial groups, guilds or associations. It is the latter, more unofficial, associations that best illuminate Ignatius’ descriptions of Christians as initiates with their own mysteries.<sup>9</sup>

8. On the mysteries generally see Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987) and the works cited by him. On the often vexing issue of the relationship between the mysteries and Christianity, which is not the central focus of this paper, see the extensive discussion by Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*, Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); cf. G. S. Gasparro, *Soteriology and Mystic Aspects in the Cult of Cybele and Attis*, EPRO 130 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985), especially the introduction. I discuss how the mysteries have been misused in theories regarding the supposed early decline of Greco-Roman religions and triumph of Christianity in Philip A. Harland, “The Declining Polis? Religious Rivalries in Ancient Civic Context,” in *Religious Rivalries and the Struggle for Success: Methodological Papers*, ed. Leif E. Vaage (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, forthcoming [paper originally presented at the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies, 1999]).

9. For a general introduction to associations along with a useful bibliography, see *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. Stephen G. Wilson and John S. Kloppenborg (London: Routledge, 1996). For recent study of associations (including mystery-groups) in Roman Asia Minor specifically, also consult my works: Harland, “Honours and Worship: Emperors, Imperial Cults, and Associations at Ephesus (first to third centuries C.E.),” *Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses* 25

Despite secretive dimensions of their rituals, associations of initiates were by no means shy in making their presence known within their hometowns. Ignatius and the Christians he addressed would have encountered public statements (inscriptions and visual representations on monuments) by such groups or by individual initiates. On a monument from Magnesia on the Maeander (a city addressed by Ignatius), an initiate (*mystēs*) of Dionysos publicizes the importance of Dionysiac associations in the city (*IMagnMai* 215; mid-second century C.E.; cf. *IMagnMai* 117). The initiate's re-publication of an "ancient oracle" reveals that a divine manifestation of Dionysos, followed by consultation of the oracle of Apollo at Delphi, resulted in the foundation of Dionysiac cult-societies (*thiasoi*) before there were any temples there; implied is that the very foundation and continued well-being of the Magnesian community depended on such initiates and their deity. Secretive though the mysteries were, the presence of associations of initiates was, to say the least, public knowledge in Roman Asia.

There were many such associations of initiates in the cities addressed by Ignatius, including Magnesia, Philadelphia, Tralles, Smyrna and Ephesos.<sup>10</sup> There were several such associations in Smyrna, for instance, where Ignatius spent some time and from which he wrote his letters to Christian assemblies at Ephesos (21.1), Magnesia (15.1) and, probably, Tralles (13.1). Particularly well-attested in monuments from Smyrna are the "initiates" of Dionysos Breseus, an association (*synodos*) that was active in the first century and thrived well into the third.<sup>11</sup> A decade or so

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(1996): 319–34; "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.)," Ph.D. diss. (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1999); "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," *JSNT* 77 (2000): 99–121; "Connections with Elites in the World of the Early Christians," in *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Science Approaches*, ed. Anthony J. Blasi, Paul-André Turcotte, and Jean Duhaime (Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press, 2002), 385–408; *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003); "Imperial Cults within Local Cultural Life: Associations in Roman Asia," *Ancient History Bulletin/Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 17 (2003): 47–69.

10. Cf. *IMagnMai* 117, 215 (Dionysos; early-mid II C.E.); *ILydiaKP* I 42 (Philadelphia; Dionysos Kathegemon; II C.E.); *ITralles* 74, 86 (Isis and Sarapis; II C.E.), 168.

11. *ISmyrna* 600–601 (c. 158 C.E./c. 163 C.E.), 622 (c. 130 C.E.), 639 (late-II C.E.), 652 (I C.E.), 729 (c. 247 C.E.), 731–32 (c. 80 C.E.); cf. *ISmyrna* 728 (Dionysiac-Orphic cult regulation).

after Ignatius, we find these “initiates of the great Dionysos Breseus, preeminent before the city,” publicizing their honors for emperor “Hadrian, Olympios, savior and founder” (*ISmyrna* 622). Another association (*synodos*) of initiates at Smyrna devoted to Demeter could make similar claims of preeminence (*pro poleōs*) in the city around the time of Ignatius (*ISmyrna* 655, cf. nos. 653–55, 726 [Kore]; all I–II c.E.).<sup>12</sup> We know little about another group of “fellow-initiates” (*synmystai*) mentioned on an epitaph for a deceased member (*ISmyrna* 330).

Inscriptions from Ephesos give us glimpses into various such groups of initiates in the first two centuries, some of which would have been relatively well known in that city and likely familiar to the Christians who heard or read Ignatius’ letter. Particularly noteworthy were the initiates of Demeter and those of Dionysos. The worship of Demeter had a long history in Ephesos (Herodotus 6.16). An association devoted to this deity is first attested in inscriptions by the time of Tiberius, when the group honored several priests and priestesses who were important benefactors of the city and the association (*IEph* 4337 [c. 19–23 c.E.]). But it is from a monument dating to the time of Domitian that we learn more of this group of “initiates” led by priestesses (*IEph* 213 [c. 88–89 c.E.]; cf. nos. 1210, 1270; *NewDocs* IV 22). Among the regular celebrations of these initiates was a special yearly celebration which included “mysteries and sacrifices” performed “with great purity and lawful customs” in honor of both Fruit-Bearing (Karpophoros) Demeter and the *Sebastoi* gods, the revered emperors. It is worth noting that honors for the emperors, often alongside the gods, were a quite common feature within the lives of associations in Roman Asia.<sup>13</sup>

The Ephesian initiates of Dionysos are well attested in the epigraphical record as well, with one monument involving honors for the emperor Hadrian (*IEph* 275; cf. nos. 293, 434, 1020, 1601). Some time in the mid-second century the Dionysiac initiates joined with the initiates of Demeter to become one association, a combination of mysteries attested elsewhere as well (*IEph* 1595; cf. *IG* 9.2:573 [Larisa, Macedonia]). The *Christ-bearing* fellow-initiates (so to speak) at Ephesos had their holy-object-bearing counterparts in many of these same groups of initiates of

12. On the term *pro poleōs* and rivalries among associations see Harland, “Spheres of Contention, Claims of Preeminence: Rivalries Among Associations in Sardis and Smyrna,” *Religious Rivalries and the Struggle for Success in Sardis and Smyrna*, ed. Richard S. Ascough (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, forthcoming [paper originally presented at the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies, 2001]).

13. See Harland, “Honouring the Emperor” and *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations*, chs. 4–5.

Dionysos, Demeter, and others, which brings us to processions and bearers of sacred things.

### 3. PROCESSIONS AND BEARERS OF SACRED THINGS

Ignatius' characterization of the Christian group at Ephesos as "companies" or "fellow-travellers, God-bearers, temple-bearers, Christ-bearers and holy-object-bearers adorned in every respect with the commandments of Jesus Christ" (*synodoi pantes, theophoroi kai naophoroi, christophoroi, hagiophoroi, kata panta kekosmēmenoi en entolais Iēsou Christou*) clearly evokes images from the world of processions (*Eph.* 9.1–2).<sup>14</sup> So, too, his brief, but perhaps no less significant, summary of the Smyrnaeans' identity as, among other things, "the holy-object-bearing" assembly that is "most fitting for its God" (*ekklesia . . . theoprepestatē kai hagiophorō; Smyrn. inscr.*)<sup>15</sup> Ignatius was, of course, not the first to draw on the analogy of processions to express (metaphorically) devotion to the gods, or to the Jewish(-Christian) God specifically, as is clear from Philo, and the analogy (including the term "Christ-bearer") was to persist within Christian circles long after Ignatius as well.<sup>16</sup>

14. Beyond the repeated reference to "bearers," which I discuss at length, Ignatius' use of the term "adorned" here also draws on the terminology of processions in connection with bearing sacred objects or wearing sacred garments and other decorative paraphernalia (esp. "ornament" [*kosmos*] and "to adorn" [*kosmein*]). In connection with Ephesos alone, for instance, we find: the gold-bearers who carried the "ornament" of Artemis, functionaries called "ornament-bearers" associated with Artemis, and the young women that were well adorned (*kekosmēmenas*) in connection with their procession in honor of Artemis (Xenophon of Ephesos, *An Ephesian Tale* 1.2). A. Quacquarelli's study of *hagiophoros* ("Hagiophoros in Ignazio di Antiochia," *Vetera Christianorum* 25 [1988]: 1–10), which attempts to show that the Trinity is in Ignatius' mind more so than "pagan" processions, is unconvincing, especially in light of the evidence I present in this paper. Even if there is an allusion to the Holy Spirit here, the imagery of "bearing" symbols of the Holy Spirit in procession remains, and, in light of the discussion below, it is far more likely that *hagiophoros* finds its closest analogies in connection with mysteries among associations of initiates.

15. In connection with Ignatius' epistolary inscriptions, it is worth mentioning his repeated emphasis on his own name, Theophoros or "God-bearer." One wonders whether this is the name which he thinks is "most fitting for God" (*Magn.* 1.2) when he speaks to the Magnesians; this is further suggested by his simultaneous reference to "bearing" his bonds, which he describes as "spiritual pearls" elsewhere (*Eph.* 11.2). Cf. Grant, *Apostolic Fathers*, 4:57; Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, 2:20–21.

16. In connection with Gaius' attempt to violate Jewish law by putting a statue in Jerusalem, Philo emphasizes the Jews' eagerness to maintain their customs and laws: "Holding that the laws are oracles vouchsafed by God and having been trained in this

The procession (*pompē*) was central to festivals in honor of many gods and goddesses in a variety of settings in the Greco-Roman world, both official (civic and imperial cults) and unofficial (associations).<sup>17</sup> Processional rituals in either setting visually communicated the virtues, power and efficacy of the deity in question, re-mapping sacred space and ensuring the continued favorable actions of the god or goddess (i.e., benefactions) in relation to the community. These rituals expressed concretely the identity of the god and of the community. Sacred objects, implements,

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doctrine from their earliest years, they bear in their souls the images of the commandments (*en tais psychais agalmatophoroussi tas tōn diatetagmenōn eikonas*)” (*Embassy to Gaius* 210; translation, with adaptations, from F. H. Colson, *Philo*, vol. 10, LCL [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962], 109). The parallel with Ignatius’ idea of bearing the commandments of Christ is notable. Elsewhere, Philo speaks of the way in which humanity is made in the image of God, pointing out that it is in respect to “the mind” that humankind is created in the likeness of God: the mind is “in a fashion a god to him who carries and enshrines it as an object of reverence (*tropon tina theos ōn tou pherontos kai agalmatophorountos auton*)” (*On the Creation* 69; LCL). Similarly, both Epictetus and Plutarch speak metaphorically of bearing god, or sacred objects, within the soul as an analogy for fitting worship (*Discourses* 2.8.12–14; *Isis and Osiris* 352B). In seeking to correct someone’s behavior, Epictetus argues that “You are bearing God about with you (*theon periphereis*), you poor wretch, and know it not! Do you suppose I am speaking of some external God, made of silver or gold? It is within yourself that you bear Him, and do not perceive that you are defiling Him with impure thoughts and filthy actions. Yet in the presence of even an image of God you would not dare to do anything of the things you are now doing” (Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.8.12–14; tr. W. A. Oldfather, *Epictetus*, LCL [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967], 263). The processional metaphor of “Christ-bearing” and “God-bearing” continues in the church fathers. For example, in the midst of his condemnation of those who worship the material images of Greek gods, Clement of Alexandria states that Christians “are they who, in this living and moving statue, man, bear about the image of God (*hoi tēn eikona tou theou peripherontes en tō zōnti kai kinoumenō toutō agalmati, tō anthrōpō*), an image which dwells with us, is our counsellor, companion, the sharer of our hearth, which feels with us, feels for us” (Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Greeks* 4, tr. G. W. Butterworth, *Clement of Alexandria*, LCL [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968], 117). Cf. Eusebius, *HE* 8.10 (“Christ-bearing martyrs”); Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, 2:55. The title “Christ-bearer” is attested in papyri. See H. I. Bell, *Jews and Christians in Egypt* (London: British Museum, 1924), 100–102, 108–10, 114–15 (on the fourth-century correspondence of the “Christ-bearing” Paphnutius).

17. There are few studies of processions in the Roman era specifically, but see M. P. Nilsson, “Die Prozessionstypen im griechischen Kult,” in *Opuscula Selecta* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1951 [1916]), 1:166–214; Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, tr. John Raffan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 99–101; S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 110–12; Guy MacLean Rogers, *The Sacred Identity of Ephesos: Foundation Myths of a Roman City* (London: Routledge, 1991), 80–126.



images and statues of various kinds were an essential component in this visual communication for both observers and participants. Those who participated in the procession by proudly carrying the holy objects, even the gods themselves, provided an especially praiseworthy service to deity and community. There were corresponding titles for the participants or functionaries who bore objects sacred to particular deities, several of which correspond directly to Ignatius' list: god-bearers (*theophoroi*), sacred-object-bearers (*hieraphoroi*; *hagiophoroi*), basket-bearers (*liknaphoroi*, *kalalthēphoroi*), altar-bearers (*bōmophoroi*), wand-bearers (*thyrsophoroi*), symbol-bearers (*synbolophoroi*), sign-bearers (*sēmeiaphoroi*), sacred-stone-bearers (*lithophoroi*), and phallus-bearers (*phallophoroi*), to name a few.<sup>18</sup>

One second-century literary description of such rituals that reflects Ignatius' region of origin, Syria, will serve to illustrate the importance of processions and the carrying of holy objects. In *The Syrian Goddess*, Lucian of Samosata describes the rituals and festivals associated with the sanctuary of Atargatis ("Hera" in Lucian's terms), the mother goddess at Syrian Hierapolis.<sup>19</sup> Evidently, processions and "bearers" of holy things played an important role in honorary activities for Atargatis and two other male deities, likely El and Baal ("Zeus" and "Apollo"). Twice yearly, worshippers participated in carrying water from the sea up to the sanctuary in commemoration of a legendary flood which, it is said, ended as a result of a great chasm—a sizable drain—sent by the gods at the site of the sanctuary (*Syrian Goddess* 12–13). It is on this occasion that a special golden "image" (*xoanon*) or "sign" (*sēmeion*) affixed with symbols associated with Atargatis and the other Syrian gods made its journey, carried by temple-functionaries, down to the sea "to fetch the water" (33). Archeological evidence (coins from Syrian Hierapolis and Carrhae and a relief from Dura) helps to visualize the sign or standard in question, which would consist of a "shaft, the divine symbol or the figure of the deity at the top, symbols or images of deities attached to the shaft" (resembling Roman military standards), as M. Rostovtzeff states.<sup>20</sup> Groups

18. H. W. Pleket, "Nine Greek Inscriptions from the Cayster-Valley in Lydia: A Republication," *Talanta* 2 (1970): 55–88, especially 66 n. 15.

19. Recent scholarship tends to accept the writing's authenticity and to view it as a relatively reliable source of information on the Syrian goddess' cult, something that has been confirmed by archeological finds: see C. P. Jones, *Culture and Society in Lucian* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 41–42.

20. M. Rostovtzeff, "Vexillum and Victory," *Journal of Roman Studies* 32 (1942): 100 and plates V–VI. Cf. Pleket, "Nine Greek Inscriptions," 67–72. Studies by Rostovtzeff and H. Seyrig ("Antiquités Syriennes," *Syria* 37 [1960]: 233–52) have

of “sign-bearers” (*sēmeiaphoroi*) are attested in connection with associations and mysteries in Asia and elsewhere (see below).

Lucian points out that the deities of the sanctuary could be quite vocal about when and where the holy things were to be carried. When an oracular response was forthcoming from Baal (“Apollo”) at Syrian Hierapolis, once again bearers of holy things came to play a role at the god’s initiative: “Whenever he wishes to deliver an oracle, he first moves on his throne, and the priests immediately lift him up. If they do not lift him, he begins to sweat and moves still more. When they put him on their shoulders and carry him, he leads them in every direction as he spins around and leaps from one place to another” (36).<sup>21</sup> If the god moves his carriers forward, the answer to the oracle is affirmative, if backward, negative. During festivals called “descents to the lake” (apparently distinguished from the former flood-related festival), both Atargatis and El made the journey in procession, being carried down to the lake, but “Hera [Atargatis] goes first, for the sake of the fish, for fear Zeus [El] see them first. For if this happens, they say that all the fish perish. He does come to have a look, but she stands in front of him, holds him off, and with many entreaties sends him away” (47).

Ignatius’ characterization of Christians at Ephesus as fellow-processionists bearing sacred objects alludes to aspects of cultural life that would be familiar not only in Syria but also in the cities of western Asia Minor. Processions involving statues and other sacred objects were an important component in the civic festivals that honored Ephesus’ official patron deity, Artemis Ephesia.<sup>22</sup> There were several boards of functionaries connected with the Artemis sanctuary that were responsible for carrying sacred objects of various kinds in processions, including “ornament-bearers” (*kosmophoroi*; cf. *IEph* 14.23) and “gold-bearers” (*chrysophoroi*; see below).<sup>23</sup> In his second-century novel, *An Ephesian Tale*, Xenophon

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shown the older view—that “Semea” was actually a Syrian deity—to be incorrect, and that we are seeing here a reference to a standard upon which symbols of gods were attached for processions.

21. Translation from Harold W. Attridge and Robert A. Oden, *The Syrian Goddess (De Dea Syria)*, Society of Biblical Literature Texts and Translations 9 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976). Greek text cited from A. M. Harmon, ed., *Lucian*, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961).

22. Cf. Strabo, *Geography* 14.1.20. Also see *IMagnMai* 100.33 for a procession at Magnesia involving transport of the statue of Artemis Leukophryene.

23. See C. Picard, *Éphèse et Claros: Recherches sur les sanctuaires et les cultes de l’Ionie du nord*, Bibliothèque des Écoles Françaises d’Athènes et de Rome 123 (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1922), 240–46.

of Ephesus begins his story with a description of just such a procession in honor of Artemis, speaking of the “great crowd of Ephesians and visitors alike” who witnessed the procession file past led by well-adorned young girls and youths (*ephēboi*), “first the sacred objects, the torches, the baskets, and the incense”; the procession culminated in a sacrificial ceremony in the sanctuary of the goddess (1.2–3).<sup>24</sup>

Particularly noteworthy in connection with Ignatius’ epistle to the Ephesians, however, is that a wealthy Ephesian benefactor, C. Vibius Salutaris, upon his death in 104 C.E., pumped a substantial amount of new funds into multiple processions in honor of Artemis, Ephesian mythological and historical figures, and (not surprisingly) Salutaris himself (*IEph* 27).<sup>25</sup> Few inhabitants of Ephesus at the time would have been ignorant of this important foundation, as Salutaris no doubt intended; it established frequent processions, perhaps on average about once every two weeks.<sup>26</sup> Guy MacLean Rogers notes that the throng of 260 participants, “bearing conspicuous silver and gold statues through the narrow streets of Ephesus, must have impeded, if not altogether halted, traffic within the city at procession time.”<sup>27</sup> The most prominent participants were the youths (*ephēboi*) who carried gold and silver images or statues of Artemis, of the Ionian and Hellenistic founders, and of the Roman imperial family in the processions through the city. Statues of the emperors, alongside other gods, were an important component in a similar foundation (by C. Julius Demosthenes) for processions at Oenoanda (in Lycia), a function carried out by the “*Sebastoi*-bearers” (*sebastophoroi*; the bearers of the revered emperors).<sup>28</sup>

24. Translation by G. Anderson, “Xenophon of Ephesus: An Ephesian Tale,” in *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, ed. B. P. Reardon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 125–69. Compare the description of an Ephesian procession, involving carriers of “images of idols,” in the *Martyrdom of Saint Timothy*. See Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, 2:55; cf. J. Keil, “Zum Martyrium des heiligen Timotheus in Ephesus,” *Jahresheft des Österreichischen Archäologischen Instituts* 29 (1935): 82–92.

25. For an excellent study of this inscription see Rogers, *Sacred Identity*. Lightfoot discussed this same inscription in relation to Ignatius’ use of analogies from local religious life (*Apostolic Fathers*, 2:17–18).

26. See Rogers, *Sacred Identity*, 83, for the procession schedule.

27. Rogers, *Sacred Identity*, 86.

28. M. Wörrle, *Stadt und Fest in kaiserzeitlichen Kleinasien. Studien zu einer agonistischen Stiftung aus Oenoanda*, Beiträge zur alte Geschichte 39 (Munich: Beck, 1988), 10–11, 216–19 = SEG 38.1462, C (time of Hadrian). Cf. Louis Robert, “Hellenica,” in *Opera minora selecta: Épigraphe et antiquités grecques* (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1969), 2:1275–78. It is worth mentioning here Allen Brent’s recent study of “Ignatius of Antioch and the Imperial Cult” (VC 52 [1998]: 30–58). Brent rightly identifies the importance of processions in Ignatius’ thought-world, perhaps

Also among the beneficiaries and participants of the Ephesian foundation were the hymn-singers of Artemis as well as the elders' association and boards connected with the Artemis sanctuary, including the "gold-bearers (*chrysophoroi*) of Artemis."<sup>29</sup> The gold-bearers of Artemis formed a "board" (*synedrion*) which consisted of members drawn from both the priests of the temple and the athletic guild of sacred-victors (*hieroneikai*).<sup>30</sup> Such guilds of "sacred-victors from the world" toured Asia, competing in international contests and leaving behind monumental evidence of their victories.<sup>31</sup> Although the appellation "gold-bearer" is attested elsewhere as merely a civic honorary title (cf. *ITrall* 73, 90, 134, 145), it is clear that, in the case of this Ephesian group, literally carrying sacred golden objects in processions was among the key services this group provided for its patron deity and for the civic community; in the time of Hadrian, for instance, they are described as "the priests and sacred-victors who carry the golden ornament (*ton [chry]seon kosmon basta[zon]tes*) of the great goddess Artemis" (*IEph* 276).<sup>32</sup> These gold-bearers were, quite literally, *god-bearers*.

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even in relation to his own procession towards martyrdom. But the study is methodologically flawed in its tendency to suggest allusions to imperial cults in Ignatius' language throughout the letters where no explicit identification is possible. Brent is not alone in his attempt to find anti-Roman hostility and the supposed widespread confrontation between the "cult of Caesar" and the "cult of Christ" in early Christianity (outside of John's Apocalypse). Compare Richard A. Horsley's characterization of Paul's Christianity as an "anti-imperial movement" in *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 1997). For a full discussion of how some scholars of early Christianity have misused or misunderstood imperial cults also see Harland, "Claiming a Place," 273–74, 280–83, or Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations*, chs. 4 and 9.

29. In another inscription we hear of a meeting place for an association at Ephesus called the "gold-bearing icon-bearers (*topos eikonophorōn chrysophorōn*)" (*IEph* 546). The priests in Magnesia's civic cult may also have been known as "gold-bearing priests of Artemis Leukophryene," as O. Kern suggests (see *IMagnMai* 119).

30. Cf. Rogers, *Sacred Identity*, 56–57; *IEph* 27.451–526, 28, 276, 943, 951, 991 (II c.E.) 3263, 4330 (231–34 c.E.). It is worth mentioning that one member of the gold-bearers, M. Antonius Artemidoros, was apparently also a member in the association of Dionysiac initiates discussed earlier (*IEph* 276 and *IEph* 1601 [c. 117–38 c.E.]).

31. Cf. *I AphrodSpect* 66–68, 89–90 (= *IEph* 11), 93; *IDidyma* 107, 201, 272; *TAM* 5.977 (Thyatira). On athletic associations see H. W. Pleket, "Some Aspects of the History of Athletic Guilds," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 10 (1973): 197–227.

32. On *bastazein* and processions see Louis Robert, "Une nouvelle inscription grecque de Sardes: Règlement de l'autorité perse relatif à un culte de Zeus," *Comptes rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (1975): 324.

Another informative inscription from the village of Almoura, in the territory of Ephesos (just inland in the Cayster valley), involves the dedication of sacred objects to be carried in processions for the mysteries of the goddess Demeter and the god Men respectively.<sup>33</sup> In it, P. Aelius Menekrates dedicates income from the shops he owns to purchase a “basket set in silver” (*kalathon periargyron*) for use during the procession (*pompē*) as part of Demeter’s mysteries. Other inscriptions from Ephesos mention a female functionary called a “basket-bearer” (*kalathēphoros*) whose responsibility it would be to lead in carrying the basket containing the sacred objects (*hiera*) in processions like this one at Almoura (see *IEph* 1060, 1070, 1071).<sup>34</sup> In Almoura men were also participants in the procession alongside the priestesses and other women.

The same benefactor, Menekrates, also donated a silver “sign” or “standard” (*sēmēa* [sic])—a term we have already encountered in Lucian—to be carried in processions preceding the mysteries and sacred banquet for the god Men, who “presided over the village” as patron. We hear of corresponding functionaries, called “symbol-bearers” (*symbolaphoroi*), in a cult devoted to Men and Artemis Anaetis in a village near Philadelphia (in Lydia).<sup>35</sup> There was also an association called the “sign-bearers [*sēmeiaphoroi*] of Apollo Archegetes” at Phrygian Hierapolis which, like many other local associations, was responsible for the upkeep of benefactors’ graves; their name suggests that they carried a standard with symbols of Hierapolis’ patron deity in their own rituals and, perhaps, also in a yearly civic celebration (*IHierap*] 153 [II C.E.]).<sup>36</sup> There was also a “sign-bearer” (*simiophoros* [sic]) alongside narthex-bearers, a lamp-bearer and basket-bearers in an association of Dionysiac initiates at Cillae in Thracia (*IGBulg* 1517 [III C.E.]).

Other inscriptions from Roman Asia attest to bearers of sacred things, some of them in connection with unofficial associations and groups that celebrated mysteries. These provide an important context for Ignatius’

33. Pleket, “Nine Greek Inscriptions,” 61–74, no. 4 = E. N. Lane, *Corpus monumentorum religionis dei Menis (CMRDM)*, EPRO 19 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971–76), 1:49–50, no. 75 (mid-second century).

34. Pleket, “Nine Greek Inscriptions,” 63. Cf. Richard Oster, “Ephesus as a Religious Center Under the Principate, I. Paganism Before Constantine,” *ANRW* II.18.3 (1990): 1671–73.

35. Peter Herrmann, “Mystenvereine in Sardeis,” *Chiron* 26 (1996): 315–41, no. 27; for discussion see Lane, *Corpus*, 3:36–37. Cf. *TAM* 4.76 for the same title for functionaries in a cult of Prietos at Nikomedia in Bithynia.

36. See Pleket, “Nine Greek Inscriptions,” 64–72.

description of the unofficial Christian assembly of Christ-bearing fellow-initiates. I turn first to associations devoted to Isis, then to those linked with Dionysos and the Great Mother.

Plutarch's reference (*Moralia* 352B) to the "sacred-object-bearers" (*hieraphoroi*) among initiates in the mysteries of Isis—a favorite literary citation among scholars who deal with Ignatius' analogy<sup>37</sup>—has less-noted counterparts in inscriptions from various locales. Among these are the two "sacred-object-bearers" who set up statues at Pergamon in honor of Sarapis, Isis, Anubis and other deities in the first century (*IPergamon* 336 = *SIRIS* 313).<sup>38</sup> It is in a similar context of Isis-worship at Athens that we encounter the synonymous (but less common) "holy-object-bearer" (*hagiophoros*), the precise term that Ignatius uses of the Christians (*IG* 3. 162 = *SIRIS* 16 [c. 120 C.E.]).

Apuleius of Madaura's famous description of Isis' mysteries (*Metamorphoses* 11) in Cenchreae in Greece describes in detail the sacred procession involving women, musicians, boys, initiates and priests bearing sacred objects of various kinds (among them a lamp, sacrificial pot, golden palm-tree, golden vessel in the shape of a woman's breast, winnowing-basket, and wine-jar). He also mentions the order of *pastophoroi*, which are epigraphically attested in Greek and Latin inscriptions as well (*SIRIS* 433 [Rome, II–III C.E.], 709 [Tomi, Moesia Inferior, III C.E.]). These were, most likely, "shrine-bearers" who carried miniature temples in processions,<sup>39</sup> which provides a close analogy for Ignatius' "temple-bearers" (*naophoroi*). The bearing of miniature sacred shrines or temples was not limited to the worship of Isis, as evidence in Herodotus and Didorus Siculus referring to Egyptian cults suggests.<sup>40</sup> It seems reasonable to imagine the

37. E.g. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 67.

38. Cf. *SIRIS* 52 (Thebes), 62 (Chaeronea, III C.E.), 109 (Thessalonica, II C.E.), 254 (Samos). There is also an "altar-bearer" (*bōmophoros*) attested in connection with Isis at Pergamon (*SIRIS* 315). For a "fire-bearer" (*pyrphoros*) in Isis' mysteries see *SIRIS* 38 (Epidaurus). For discussion of such functionaries see F. Dunand, *Le culte d'Isis dans le bassin oriental de la Méditerranée* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), 3:63–65. For a survey of Isis-worship in Asia Minor generally see H. Koester, "The Cult of the Egyptian Deities in Asia Minor," in *Pergamon. Citadel of the Gods: Archaeological Record, Literary Description, and Religious Development*, ed. H. Koester, HTS, vol. 46 (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998), 111–33.

39. Cf. Ladislav Vidman, *Isis und Sarapis bei den Griechen und Römern: Epigraphische Studien zur Verbreitung und zu den Trägern des ägyptischen Kultes, Religionsgeschichtliche Versuch und Vorarbeiten* 29 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1970), 211–12.

40. Cf. Didorus Siculus 1.97. Herodotus, for instance, describes a procession in Papremis, Egypt: "The image of the god, in a little wooden gold-plated shrine (*to de*

presence of similar “bearers” of sacred objects among groups of worshippers of Isis and Sarapis in Roman Asia, such as the initiates who are attested at Tralles in the early second century (*ITrall* 86 = *SIRIS* 295 [during or just after the reign of Hadrian]) and, perhaps, the guild of workers in the fishery toll-office at Ephesos which possessed an altar and statue of Isis, probably their patron deity (*IEph* 1503 [time of Antoninus Pius]). Earlier “cistophoric” coins (II–I B.C.E.) from Tralles, Ephesos and other locales in Asia Minor depict the basket that was carried in such mystic processions in honor of Isis.<sup>41</sup>

Evidence for such “bearers” in processions and mysteries is forthcoming from Dionysiac groups, which were widespread in Asia Minor.<sup>42</sup> Several inscriptions from Ephesos mention the title and role of “wand-bearer” (*thyrsophoros*) in celebrations for Dionysos (*IEph* 1268, 1601–1602). The Asian-influenced association of initiates at Torre Nova, Italy (c. 160 C.E.), under the direction of their priestess (Pompeia Agrippinilla), included various such functionaries among its members including “winnowing-basket-bearers” (*liknaphoroi*), “basket-bearers” (*kistaphoroi*), “fire-bearers” (*pyrphoroi*), “phallus-bearer” (*phallophoros*), and “god-bearers” (*theophoroi*) (*IGUR* I 160).<sup>43</sup> These were titles and functions of fundamental importance to the mythology and mysteries of the god in question; as M. P. Nilsson notes, the “liknon filled with fruit among

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*agalma eon en nēō mikrō xylinō katakechrysōmenō*), is conveyed to another sacred building on the day before the ceremony. The few priests who are left to attend to it, put it, together with the shrine which contains it, in a four-wheeled cart which they drag along towards the temple” (2.63; tr. A. de Sélincourt, *Herodotus: The Histories* [London: Penguin Books, 1972], 154; for the Greek text see A. D. Godley, *Herodotus*, vol. 1, LCL [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1946], 348). If V. Chapot is indeed correct that there was a board of “temple-bearers” (*naophoroi*) at Ephesos, then there is a clear local parallel for Ignatius’ use of the term. See *La province romaine proconsulaire d’Asie depuis ses origines jusqu’à la fin du haut-empire*, *Studia Historica* 35 (Rome: Bretschneider, 1967 [1904]), 516–17; cf. Picard, *Éphèse et Claros*, 242. However, neither Chapot or Picard give references to inscriptions that I could track down to confirm this.

41. See Dunand, *Le culte d’Isis*, 78–79; G. Hölbl, *Zeugnisse ägyptischer Religionsvorstellungen für Ephesus* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), esp. plate XII, no. 1b; David Magie, “Egyptian Deities in Asia Minor in Inscriptions and on Coins,” *American Journal of Archeology* 57 (1953): 163–87.

42. See M. P. Nilsson, *The Dionysiac Mysteries of the Hellenistic and Roman Age* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1957).

43. Cf. Achille Vogliano, “La grande iscrizione bacchica del Metropolitan Museum,” *American Journal of Archeology* 37 (1933): 215–31; Nilsson *Dionysiac Mysteries*, 21–57. Also see *IGBulg* 401, 1517 (Asian-influenced initiates in Thracia).

which a phallus rises, often covered with a cloth, is the characteristic symbol of the Bacchic mysteries of the Roman age.”<sup>44</sup> Elsewhere in Asia, near Thyatira, we hear of an association that called itself the “narthex-bearing company” (*hē speira ton narthēkophoron*); the narthex plant was among the favorite choices for wands (*thyrsoi*) in Dionysiac mysteries (TAM 5.817, 822).

Sacred associations devoted to the Great Mother of Anatolia, Cybele, existed throughout Lydia, Phrygia and the Roman world generally, including regions such as Moesia and Thracia. In Romanized versions of such groups, “reed-bearers” (*cannophoroi*) and “tree-bearers” (*dendrophoroi*) played a key role, the latter carrying the decorated pine trees in processions that commemorated the death of Attis during the March festival.<sup>45</sup>

Visual depictions on monuments from northwestern Asia Minor help to bring such processions by associations to life. A monument from Kyzikos pictures a procession in honor of the Great Mother (CCCA 1.289 [I B.C.E.]). The relief depicts Cybele in a quite typical manner, seated on a throne with lions on either side.<sup>46</sup> Below her is shown a procession of eight devotees approaching an altar with upraised hands in adoration of the goddess. The procession would culminate in a sacrificial scene similar to that depicted in another relief from Triglia (near Apamea on the Propontis) set up by the members of the “synagogue of Zeus” in honor of Stratonike, the priestess of Mother Cybele and Apollo (*IApamBith* 35 [with photo] = CCCA 1.252 [pl. 51], 119 B.C.E. or, more likely, 85 C.E.). The relief pictures Stratonike, along with a boy guiding the sacrificial victim (a sheep) and a girl playing the Phrygian double-flute. They proceed towards the altar with upraised hands in adoration of Cybele and Apollo. Beneath this processional-sacrificial scene are pictured the members of the association reclining for a banquet as they eat souvlaki and

44. In fact, as Nilsson points out, most of what we know concerning the actual content of the mysteries is derived from such titles of functionaries (*Dionysiac Mysteries*, 55; for the quotation see his p. 21).

45. On tree-bearers within associations in the Danubian provinces see M. Tacheva-Hitova, *Eastern Cults in Moesia Inferior and Thracia* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1983), 73–74 (no. 4 from Novae), 93–95 (no. 48 from Tomi), 116–18 (no. 101 from Serdica), 148–50.

46. For a general survey of similar evidence see Elpis Mitropoulou, “The Goddess Cybele in Funerary Banquets and with an Equestrian Hero,” in *Cybele, Attis and Related Cults: Essays in Memory of M. J. Vermaseren*, ed. E. N. Lane, RGRW 131 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 135–65.



listen to flute-players.<sup>47</sup> Evidently, processions, along with related functionaries and rituals, were an important and integral part of activities in many unofficial associations, which brings us back to the unofficial Christian assemblies addressed by Ignatius.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Ignatius' identification of Christian groups in terms from local cultural life and the world of associations is by no means unique in the ancient world.<sup>48</sup> Ancient observers and Christians alike used Greco-Roman social and cultural categories, particularly from the world of associations, to describe Christians, as scholars are increasingly recognizing.<sup>49</sup> In one of the earliest Roman descriptions of Christians, for instance, Pliny the Younger (governor of Bithynia-Pontus) writes to the emperor Trajan concerning the Christ-devotees that had been brought before him; he

47. For photos and a discussion of several other reliefs which portray the festal gatherings of associations (including *GIBM* 4.2:1007, also from Kyzikos) see Harland, "Claiming a Place," 61–63; or Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations*, ch. 2; and Elpis Mitropoulou, "Feasting at Festivals," in *Akten des XIII. internationalen Kongresses für klassische Archäologie, Berlin 1988* (Mainz am Rhein: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1990), 472–74.

48. Earlier I discussed several other ancient authors who, like Ignatius, use the analogy of processions (see n. 16).

49. Turn-of-the-century studies by Edwin Hatch and Georg Heinrici, which drew attention to the value in comparing Christian groups and associations, went largely unheeded. (Hatch, *The Organization of the Early Christian Churches: Eight Lectures Delivered Before the University of Oxford, in the Year 1880* [London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1909]; Heinrici, "Zum genossenschaftlichen Character der paulinischen Christengemeinden," *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 54 [1881]: 505–24). So too did the insightful attempt by E. A. Judge to place Christian groups, socially speaking, within the structures of the ancient city, including the association (*koinōnia*) (see *The Social Pattern of the Christian Groups in the First Century* [London: Tyndale Press, 1960]). Recently, however, there have been several valuable comparative studies which tap into the evidence for associations to shed light on either Christian or Jewish groups. See, for example, John S. Kloppenborg, "Edwin Hatch, Churches, and Collegia," in *Origins and Method: Towards a New Understanding of Judaism and Christianity*, ed. B. H. Maclean (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 212–38; Moshe Weinfeld, *The Organizational Pattern and the Penal Code of the Qumran Sect: A Comparison with Guilds and Religious Associations of the Hellenistic-Roman Period* (Freiburg: Editions Universitaires, 1986); Thomas Schmeller, *Hierarchie und Egalität: Eine sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchung paulinischer Gemeinden und griechisch-römischer Vereine*, SBS 162 (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1995); Wilson and Kloppenborg, *Voluntary Associations*; Richard S. Ascough, "Translocal Relationships among Voluntary Associations and Early Christianity," *J ECS* 5 (1997): 223–41.

describes their gatherings in terms familiar from religious activities of associations and confirms that they had obeyed his edict against (nocturnal?) meetings of associations (*betaeriae*, sometimes a synonym for *collegia*; *Letters* 10.96.7–8). In the midst of his ridiculing satire on the (once) Christian Peregrinus, Lucian of Samosata characterizes him as a *thiasiarcho*, a leader of the “cult-society” (*thiasos*; *The Passing of Peregrinus* 11). Similarly, the critic Celsus characterizes the followers of Jesus as “members of a cult-society” (*thiasōtai*), though he specifically complains about the Christians’ strange avoidance of “setting up altars, images and temples,” which he interprets as a “sure token of an obscure and secret association [*koinōnias*]”—but an “association” nonetheless (in Origen, *Against Celsus* 3.23; 8.17; cf. 1.1). Both Jews and Christians, too, identified their groups using common terminology for associations,<sup>50</sup> and several authors, including Philo and Tertullian, explicitly compare the activities of Jewish or Christian associations with their “inferior,” “pagan” counterparts.<sup>51</sup>

The shared language of identity and the comparison between associations and Christian congregations is not surprising since, after all, Christian (as well as Jewish) groups were, like the local devotees of Zeus or Dionysos or the guild of purple-dyers, relatively small groups that assembled regularly in an informal manner or setting<sup>52</sup> to socialize, share

50. The following designations of Jewish groups of Asia Minor and elsewhere are also well attested among other associations: “synod” (*synodos*), “cult-society” (*thiasos*), “associates” (*betairoi*), “settlement” (*katoikountes*), “corporate-body” (*politeuma*), “household” (*oikos*), “synagogue” (*synagogē*) (see Josephus, *Antiquities* 14.215–16, 235 [cf. Philo, *Embassy to Gaius* 312, 316]; OGIS 573 = LSAM 80; Harland, “Claiming a Place,” 23–60, 201). Associations could also use a favorite self-designation of some Christian groups: “assembly” (*ekklēsia*) (see IGLAM 1381–82 [Aspendos, Pamphylia]; CIG 2271); in both cases, the groups were, of course, drawing on a well-known term for a gathering in the civic context.

51. Much of Philo’s discourse on *The Contemplative Life* is spent comparing and contrasting the superior beliefs, ascetic practices and “mysteries” of the Jewish association of *therapeutai* to the supposed drunken confusion of other Greek or Roman associations and banquets (cf. *Special Laws* 2.145–46; *Embassy to Gaius* 312–13). Also see Torrey Seland, “Philo and the Clubs and Associations of Alexandria,” in Wilson and Kloppenborg, *Voluntary Associations*, 110–27. Elsewhere Philo refers to Moses as the “hierophant” who initiated the Jews into the mysteries (*On Virtues* 33.178). Tertullian devotes considerable attention to establishing the superiority of the Christian association (*factio, corpus*) in relation to other “pagan” groups (*Apology* 38–39). Eusebius speaks of the Christian churches as “our *thiasos*” (*HE* 10.1.8).

52. Often such groups met within the informal setting of a household, architecturally modified or not. See the extensive study of architectural adaptation among Jewish, Christian and other religious groups by L. Michael White, *The Social Origins of Christian Architecture*, HTS 42 (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1997).

communal meals and honor both their earthly and their divine benefactors. From an outsider's perspective, this general similarity might help to make sense of what was in other respects quite strange: a group of "atheists" that insisted that only their god and no one else's was deserving of recognition or honor (a sentiment evident in Celsus' comments).<sup>53</sup> From an (ancient) Christian perspective, describing oneself in terms drawn from the world of associations might simultaneously establish a sense of place within local culture or society while also forming a basis from which to assert distinctiveness and even preeminence (for the group or its God).

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53. Both Jews and Christians could be labeled as "atheists" on account of their monotheism. See Harland "Claiming a Place," 287–95 or *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations*, ch. 9, where I discuss this in connection with imperial cults and the nature of persecution in Asia Minor. The account of Polycarp's martyrdom provides a local example of the accusation (see *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 3.2; 9.2).