

1. INTRODUCTION

This book investigates a novel religious form that appeared in the Aegean world in Hellenistic and Roman times. The phenomenon was characterised by groups of people who met regularly and were primarily united by common rituals and the worship of a common deity. These groups differed from pre-existing forms in that they were neither based on pre-existing social entities such as families, nor on political and ethnic ones such as specific settlements or tribes, but primarily on shared ritual practice.

Scholars have approached this topic from several directions. The oldest approach investigates the groups' institutional novelty from a juridical-cum-legalistic perspective. In doing so, scholars encountered the difficulty of putting a name to the phenomenon, since ancient terms such as *collegium* and *koinon* were rather unspecific, and were applied to associations of various kinds: these terms were applied not only to groups of a primarily religious nature, but to others too, such as professional associations.¹ Members of groups of all kinds occasionally took part in shared cult activity, a fact which makes it even more complicated to distinguish between them. Yet groups who met for purposes other than religious ones are, although similar in appearance, not the subject of this book.

A series of modern terms have been devised by scholars with the intention of overcoming these terminological obstacles: new descriptions include 'voluntary associations' or 'elective cults', since membership in these groups appears to have been a matter of choice. Yet no agreed terminology exists. The term 'cult' to describe the groups as opposed to, say, 'religion' offers an unsatisfactory solution owing to its rather pejorative modern connotations and its lack of precision. A rough translation of the word *collegium* was introduced in the form of the German word *Verein*, which is used to describe the groups in a way that is just as vague as the ancient terminology.

A second approach deals with the topic from a different angle. Instead of merely analysing the institutional form and the accompanying problems of terminology, scholars taking this line have focussed instead on the new forms of rituals observed by the members of these groups, and the 'new' deities worshipped by some of them.² But there is no consensus over which of these various subjects should be regarded as the defining feature of the phenomenon. These subjects are firstly 'new' gods, such as Bendis, Isis and Mithras, secondly new ritual forms such as *mysteria*, and thirdly the emergence of apparently new institutions at the same time. These three aspects play a key role when it comes to religious associations. Yet they appear to be intertwined and inseparable and do not follow any fixed pattern, as is

1 The professional groups could be actors, craftsmen and traders; other groups which used the same terminology were groups of magistrates and priests.

2 Some of the groups worshipped 'traditional' deities in a new way, with new ritual practices.

sometimes suggested.³ Some groups were devoted to the worship of the supposedly more ancient deities, such as Dionysus, occasionally including *mysteria*. *Mysteria*, however, originated in Greek religion and were adopted by worshippers of Dionysus as well as worshippers of the ‘new deities’ such as Kybele and Isis only at a later stage, if at all. And while some ancient gods like Dionysus were treated as new arrivals, some new arrivals like Isis had their antiquity stressed. In the end, many of the ‘new gods’ quickly became part of local panthea. Permission to build temples or sanctuaries was sometimes granted by the governing institutions, and the ‘new’ gods even obtained a place in the festive calendar.

In this book I will attempt to build upon the work of both scholarly traditions, the institutional or juridical-cum-legalistic and the social-religious one. I will, however, contribute to the debate in three ways. First I aim to offer a new perspective on the subject based on the material remains that can be connected to the phenomenon. Second, the focus of this book is neither the introduction and worship of new deities, nor the appearance of new rituals and initiatory rites, but rather the emergence and nature of the communities of worshippers which shaped the phenomenon. In contrast to the juridical-cum-legalistic view, the subject of this investigation is to identify and analyse the groups as social entities which create a specific form of material cult that was shaped by both new ideas and older traditions from within the Mediterranean and beyond. The third innovative aspect of my approach is the synchronic comparative perspective of a group of cults, an aspect that to the best of my knowledge has been largely neglected by scholarship. The main focus of this study is on the social realities that lie behind the phenomenon rather than theological claims and rituals.

1.1 TERMINOLOGY

Religioeser Verein, Cult-association, Voluntary association, *Communauté religieuse* are all used to describe a broadly similar phenomenon: groups of people who voluntarily gathered regularly, at a specific place to worship a common choice of deity. The foundation of such groups was not initiated by any civic authority but mostly by individual people. To be part of such a group sometimes required certain criteria. Depending on each formation, those criteria could be fulfilled by kinship, some groups automatically included wives and children; by gender, as in the case of Mithraists who appear to have only consisted of male members; to social status, excluding those who could not match the financial contributions necessary to be part of some groups. The minimum requirement, however, that all groups have in common, is the mutual worship of a specific but not necessarily exclusive deity.

The variety of groups and their differing character is reflected in the large number of terms in use, both nowadays and in antiquity. Owing to its novelty in the ancient world, we cannot identify a clear terminology and categorisation, at least for the Hellenistic period, simply because it did not exist. For Hellenistic Greece no

3 See under 1.3 in this chapter, History of scholarship.

evidence suggests that people thought of the groups that worshipped Isis, Dionysus and Jahveh as examples of the same phenomenon at all. Only much later, namely in the second century CE, one finds the awareness of such a phenomenon reflected in literary sources, for example in texts such as Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* and Lucian's *Peregrinus*. However, in order to set the limits of this study, some criteria must be defined in accordance with the epigraphic and literary remains.

Like the Roman *collegia* that are referred to by about fifty different terms,⁴ members of religious associations in Greece and the East chose various names to represent themselves in inscriptions. Certain groups could appear in the epigraphic evidence for instance as *koinon*, *thiasos*, *speira* or *synodos* or, most ancient and almost exclusively in Attica,⁵ as *orgeones*. These names perhaps indicated different kinds of groups that were formed around a deity, although the actual differences represented by each term are not entirely clear to the modern observer.

For further specification the terms could be supplemented with the name of a deity. In later times the term *thiasos* was sometimes combined with other descriptions and then mostly used by professional associations.⁶ Other groups that centred around a deity created their names by simply forming an agent noun referring to the main deity worshipped, as for example in the case of the *dionysiastai*, but lacking a group term such as *thiasos*, *synodos* or *koinon*. Yet other names describe an activity linked to a main deity. For instance the term *deka*, ten, becomes *dekadistai* meaning those who met on the tenth day in order to honour a particular deity.⁷ In the case of the *dekadistai*, information about the identity of the deity in whose honour the group met is provided further down in the inscription.⁸ These names however, avoided any further specification of professional, local, or ethnic origin. Adding such information is a habit found most often among professional associations such as the Dionysiac *technitai* or the *poseidoniastai* of Berytos which use a theonym but add a link to their place of origin.⁹ The so called *eranistai* are traditionally de-

4 All collected in: Waltzing, Jean-Pierre 1895–1900. *Étude historique sur les corporations professionnelles chez les Romains*, Louvain, vol. I p. 339ff., vol. II p.139ff., p. 160ff., vol. IV pp. 236–242. Ausbüttel, Frank M. 1984. *Untersuchungen zu den Vereinen im Westen des Römischen Reiches* (Frankfurter Althistorische Studien 11) Regensburg, adds four further terms and explains: “Römische Juristen benutzten keine eindeutige Bezeichnung für Vereine, meist aber wurde der Begriff collegium oder corpus verwendet” p. 16 and specifically on the religious associations: “Religiöse Gruppen galten auch als collegia, entsprachen dem Vereinsverständnis der Römer” p. 17.

5 Arnaoutoglou, Ilias 2003. *Thusias heneka kai sunousias. Private Religious Associations in Hellenistic Athens*, Athens, p. 31.

6 However, these defining terms of mostly professional associations appear with the Roman rule over Greece, Van Nijf, Onno 1997. *The Civic World of Professional Associations in the Roman East*, Amsterdam, p. 8.

7 Other interpretations of the name include, according to Bricault, an association meeting every nine or every ten days, or an association whose members offered a ninth of their income to the deity in question. Bricault, Laurent 2013. *Les cultes isiaques dans le monde Gréco-Romain*, Paris, p. 293.

8 See also Chapters 3 and 4.

9 However, using a theonym as part of the nomenclature among the professional associations is a rare occurrence which can be found almost exclusively on Delos. See also Arnaoutoglou, Ilias

scribed as having both cultic and social reasons to get together. They might mark a point of intersection between all ‘private’ groups.¹⁰ Finally, some groups were known to others by simply using the name of the founder of each formation, such as the Zoroastrians, Christians, Manicheans and Buddhists. However, even these were not fixed names at the beginning but developed over the course of time. One must conclude that in most cases the names do not help much in understanding either the legal position of the groups¹¹ or their ritualistic content.¹²

Having looked at the ancient nomenclature and the modern approaches, it seems very difficult to agree upon only one term to describe a phenomenon as diverse as this. It appears as if no single term covers all aspects. If one speaks for example of *Vereine* one immediately implies a legal notion.¹³ Using other modern terms such as association or community again often implies modern legal and Christian connotations. Specifications such as cult-association or cult-community are perhaps more sensible but still do not do the phenomenon justice, but are rather uneasy compromises. No modern term is perfect therefore, but for practical purposes one needs a regular term, while acknowledging its limitations. The term ‘religious association’ appears to be the most appropriate one for this study and will be used throughout.

Another term also needs to be introduced at this point. This is a term which will be used to describe deities that were worshipped for a longer period of time at various places but that were brought to Greece and Asia Minor, mostly in the Classical and Hellenistic periods, by new settlers. In the course of time most of these gods were accepted and worshipped in Greece. Because these gods, compared to more traditional deities, were a creation novel to their environment and often novel in their appearance, as they had been modified and engineered into fit their new surroundings, they were often referred to as ‘foreign’ or ‘new’. In point of fact the gods themselves are neither foreign nor new. On the one hand it is the representation that changed and on the other hand, and more importantly, the rites and ritual practices which changed and made those deities appear to differ from more traditional gods. Nevertheless, I will refer to these newly-introduced deities as ‘new’ gods, in order to distinguish them from more ‘traditional’ Greek deities.

forthcoming. Cult and craft. Variations on a (neglected) theme, in: Annelies Cazemier/Stella Skaltsa (edd.) *Associations in context: rethinking associations and religion in the post-classical polis* (International symposium, Copenhagen Associations Project, 11–13 October 2012).

- 10 Arnaoutoglou 2003 analyses the history and terminology of *eranos/eranistai* for Athens in detail and shows that the diverse ways in which the terms are used is significant, but that a development of the term from a mostly economic meaning to associations connected to a religious pretext can be clearly observed from the 3rd c. BCE onwards, p. 75. He includes the *eranistai* in his study as cult-associations, p. 29 and pp. 70–87.
- 11 Arnaoutoglou 2003, concludes that “the naming pattern did not follow one pre-determined model but complied with different needs in different contexts.” p. 33.
- 12 In many cases and especially among the inscriptions from Athens the identity of the deity that is subject to worship is not provided, either by the inscription itself or by the location where it was found. This makes it impossible to decide what kind of group is represented.
- 13 The modern word *Verein* normally describes a club or association that is legally registered and functions as a legal person – a concept that was unknown in ancient Greece.

1.2 HISTORY OF SCHOLARSHIP

Much has been written about the institutional and legal side of religious associations, mostly focusing on the Roman *collegia*, starting with Theodor Mommsen,¹⁴ whose research interest was followed soon after by Jean-Pierre Waltzing and others.¹⁵ In addition to a general interest among both theologians¹⁶ and historians, the newly established systematic *corpora* of inscriptions¹⁷ enabled scholars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to deal more easily with the amount of material that was already available. The appropriateness of the word ‘Vereine’ for Roman *collegia* remains a much discussed topic above all among German scholars and most recently stimulated a doctoral thesis that traces the development of historical thinking about ‘Vereine’ in the scholarship of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁸ Until now, much of the scholarly work on the Roman *collegia* has been focussed upon questions concerning the legal¹⁹ or socio-economic situation of Roman *collegia*.²⁰

At the same time, only a few scholars have been interested in the Greek version of the *collegia*.²¹ More recent publications analyse the epigraphic remains of Greek

14 Mommsen, Theodor 1843. *De collegiis et sodaliciis Romanorum*, Kiel.

15 Waltzing 1895–1900 published a monumental corpus, collecting all the evidence he could find at the time. Mommsen’s dissertation about the Roman *collegia* in Latin was followed by the 1873 Habilitation of Max Cohn, another legal historian, with his dissertation *Zum römischen Vereinsrecht, Abhandlungen aus der Rechtsgeschichte* and a German book by Liebenam, Wilhelm 1890. *Zur Geschichte und Organisation des römischen Vereinswesens, drei Untersuchungen*, Leipzig, which focussed more on the historic-economic situation of the associations.

16 For the theological approach see Schmeller, Thomas 2006. Zum exegetischen Interesse an antiken Vereinen im 19. und 20. Jh., in: *Vereine Synagogen und Gemeinden im kaiserzeitlichen Kleinasien*, Andreas Gutsfeld/Dietrich-Alex Koch (edd.) Tübingen, pp. 1–19 and in the same publication: Dietrich-Alex Koch and Dirk Schinkel, Die Frage nach den Vereinen in der Geistes- und Theologiegeschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts, pp. 129–148.

17 Namely Mommsen’s *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* and Böckh’s *Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum* soon followed by the *Inscriptiones Graecae*.

18 Dissen, Margret 2009. *Römische Kollegien und deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft im 19. und 20. Jh.*, Stuttgart.

19 “Für die europäische Religionsgeschichte spielt seit der Antike das Vereinsrecht eine besondere Rolle. Das Konzept des *collegium* (...) hat für die Formierung religiöser Organisation im Einflussbereich römischen Rechts eine kaum zu unterschätzende Bedeutung gehabt” Rüpke, Jörg 2007. *Historische Religionswissenschaft. Eine Einführung*, Stuttgart, p. 121. See also: Cotter, Wendy 1996. The Collegia and Roman law: State restrictions on voluntary associations, 64 BCE–200 CE, in: John S. Kloppenborg/Stephen G. Wilson (edd.) *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman world*, pp. 74–89; Boudewijn Sirks, Adriaan. J. 2006. Die Vereine in der kaiserlichen Gesetzgebung, in: Andreas Gutsfeld/Dietrich-Alex Koch (edd.) *Vereine, Synagogen und Gemeinden im kaiserzeitlichen Kleinasien* (STAC 25) Tübingen, pp. 21–40, and most recently Bendlin, Andreas 2011. Associations, Funerals, Sociality, and Roman law: The Collegium of Diana and Antinous in Lanuvium (CIL 14.2112) reconsidered, in: Markus Öhler (ed.) *Aposteldekret und das antike Vereinswesen* (WUNT I 280) Tübingen, pp. 207–296.

20 Patterson, John R. 1994. The collegia and the transformation of the towns of Italy in the 2nd c. AD, in: *L’Italie d’Auguste à Dioclétien, Actes du colloque international organisé par l’École française de Rome (Rome, 25–28 mars 1992)* Rome 1994, pp. 227–238 and Van Nijf 1997.

21 The most important work on Greek ‘*collegia*’ has been published by Poland, Franz 1909.

associations in more detail but focus exclusively on one specific *polis* and mostly on Athens. Most recently two scholars presented doctoral dissertations on religious associations in Athens. One thesis focussed on the legal status of religious associations in Athens: this was the main motivation for Ilias Arnaoutoglou who dealt exclusively with “private religious associations in Hellenistic Athens”. By contrast Paulin Ismard adopted a historical approach to understanding and analysing the social system of the various groups in Athens from the fourth until the first centuries BCE.²² Both scholars provide a very thorough but rather specific study of associations in Athens, but do not take their results beyond the border of the *polis*.²³

At the beginning of the twentieth century Franz Cumont began an important trend in the study of the religious history of the ancient world, and of religious associations as a part of it, with his lectures on *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*. Even though Cumont was not the first to introduce the concept of the ‘Oriental religions’, he surely was responsible for much of our basic understanding and misunderstanding of the cults he collected under this term. His main claim was, to put it briefly, that the ‘Oriental religions’ were imported to Greece and Rome as a set of ‘religions’ which offered a new kind of spirituality and mysticism.²⁴ However, in order to create the category of ‘Oriental religions’, he claimed that one common feature of all cults gathered under this label was the performance of mysteries. Although Cumont achieved a breakthrough in the way scholars approached the history of religions in his time,²⁵ he also inspired some research over the course

Geschichte des griechischen Vereinswesens, Leipzig. Poland, however, was the first one to try to investigate the Greek religious associations. His approach is an overarching one in terms of time, place, and kind in which he collects various socio-historical phenomena under the rather modern term ‘Vereine’ that had been established from the Latin word *collegia*. It was recognised in the 1980s, however, that “die griechischen Vereine auf eine längere und andersartige Entwicklung zurückblicken” and that one could have worked with the “umfangreiche und teilweise ungenügend edierte Quellenmaterial über die Vereine der östlichen Reichshälfte” that was apparently available, but decided not to, Ausbüttel 1984, p. 14.

- 22 Arnaoutoglou 2003, Ismard, Paulin 2010, *La cité des réaux: Athènes et ses associations, VIe-IIIe siècle av. J.-C.*, Paris.
- 23 The most frequently discussed aspects of ancient associations are their legal status and their internal regulations. Most recently, a conference with the title ‘A world of well-ordered societies? The Rules and Regulations of Ancient Associations’ was held this year (2014) as part of the Copenhagen Associations Project.
- 24 Cumont, Franz 2006. *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*, Corinne Bonnet/Françoise Van Haepelen (edd.) Turin. Against the predominant attitude of his contemporaries, who merely saw the destructive power of these new cults, he described them as positive imports. His positive attitude and his attempt to draw the religious history of the ancient world from a pagan point of view led to the early ending of his career, Bonnet, Corinne 2008. *Les ‘religions orientales’ au laboratoire de l’Hellénisme*: Franz Cumont, in: *ARG* 8, pp. 181–205 esp. 184. The most recent discussion about his achievements and legacy celebrating a centenary of his publication is presented in a collection: *Les religions orientales dans le monde grec et romain : cent ans après Cumont (1906–2006): bilan historique et historiographique*, Colloque de Rome, 16–18 Novembre 2006, Brussels/Rome.
- 25 From now on the cults belonging to his definition of ‘Oriental gods’ were thoroughly analysed in terms of their literary, archaeological and epigraphic evidence. This becomes most apparent when looking at Vermaseren’s enormous EPRO-series.

of the last century which raised doubts about his initial conclusions. Already by the 1930s scholars such as Schneider and Wilamowitz had formulated their doubts about his concept. They argued that the combination of the terms ‘Oriental religions’ and ‘mysteries’ was not a sensible one.²⁶ Indeed, they were able to show that a concept such as mysteries did not exist in the ‘new’ introduced cults before they arrived in Greece. If anything, they argued, mysteries became an additional feature of these cults after they had contact with Greek mysteries – a statement that later represented the main claim of Walter Burkert’s research.²⁷

A rather different idea about ‘Oriental religions’ and specifically the accompanying mysteries was formulated by Ugo Bianchi. Bianchi’s ideas have been perpetuated and developed further by Giulia Sfameni Gasparro.²⁸

An important contribution to the discussion of ‘Oriental gods’, ‘sects’ and other appearances outside the frame of ‘civic religion’ in the Roman Empire has been presented by John North’s research into religious pluralism in the Roman world.²⁹ This led to a wholly new understanding of the main developments in the history of religions. Since then, scholars from various fields have been building on these new approaches. John Kloppenborg investigated the phenomenon from a theologian’s or religious studies perspective, whereas Jörg Rüpke inspired classicists of all areas to contribute to the discussion.³⁰

Other new publications that analysed similar phenomena from a different perspective, such as Onno van Nijf’s work on the professional *collegia* in the Roman East, utilised socio-economic approaches. Van Nijf focuses on the activities and participation of the private associations of a (more or less overtly) professional character in order to trace individuals at lower levels beneath the elite that otherwise would have remained invisible.³¹

The most recent summary of the *status quaestionis* is provided in the form of a collection of essays edited by John North and Simon Price.³² The aim of this publi-

26 Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, Ulrich von 1931. *Der Glaube der Hellenen* (2. Bde.) Berlin, p. 852
Schneider, Carl 1939. Die griechischen Grundlagen der hellenistischen Religionsgeschichte, in: *ARW* 36, pp. 300–347 esp. 300–301. However, Schneider’s political motivation to show ‘unvermischten Hellenismus’ (p. 346) is very obvious and probably led to his stark criticism of Cumont’s positive attitude towards the Oriental countries.

27 Burkert, Walter 1987. *Antike Mysterien: Funktionen und Gehalt*, München, p. 16.

28 Sfameni Gasparro, Giulia 2011. Mysteries and Oriental Cults: A problem in the History of religions, in: John A. North/Simon R. F. Price (edd.) *The Religious History of the Roman Empire. Pagans, Jews and Christians*, Oxford pp. 276–324, published earlier as: Sfameni-Gasparro, Giulia 2006. Misteri e culti orientali: un problema storico-religioso, in: Corinne Bonnet/Jörg Rüpke/Paolo Scarpi (edd.) *Religions orientales – culti misterici. Neue Perspektiven – nouvelles perspectives – prospettive nuove* (PawB 16) Stuttgart pp. 181–210.

29 North, John A. 1992. The development of religious pluralism, in: Tessa Rajak/John A. North (edd.) *The Jews among the Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire*, pp. 174–193.

30 Kloppenborg, John S./Wilson, Stephen G. (edd.) *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman world*, London/New York 1996; Rüpke, Jörg (ed.) *Gruppenreligionen im römischen Reich* (STAC 43) Tübingen 2007.

31 Van Nijf 1997, p. 5.

32 North, John A./Price, Simon R. F. (edd.) *The Religious History of the Roman Empire. Pagans, Jews and Christians*, Oxford 2011.

cation is to gather together the latest ideas about the changes in religious history that occurred, according to the editors, in the Graeco-Roman world from the second century BCE onwards.³³ Most of the articles in the collection were first published only a decade earlier. The editors' approach to the topic is novel and this is perhaps the point of most importance for this study: Instead of seeing the eastern origin of the former 'Oriental cults' as a common criterion, they emphasise the voluntary nature of these cults. This criterion led to the creation of a new term for the phenomenon, namely 'elective cults' as opposed to civic cults which lacked the voluntary character. According to the editors 'elective cults' include 'new' cults many of which were formerly called 'Oriental religions'. Among these elective cults they count alongside the 'Oriental religions' other groups such as Jewish and Christian ones.³⁴ Among the most striking new trends for my research is Jörg Rüpke's introductory article on Roman Religion and the Religion of Empire, in which he points out that the development of religious structures is not as dependent on political developments as usually characterised. Indeed, he claims that religion "might itself be an area for experiment and a medium for the creation of new structures" in the Roman empire, an observation that can be adapted to the development of religious associations in cities such as Athens, as I will show in Chapter 2.³⁵

With regard to my book this brief survey can perhaps be summarised as follows: on the one hand, scholars with an interest in legal and institutional history argue that religious associations were formations of people which based their models on older concepts of institutions, since they were forced to find categories into which to fit these groups.³⁶ Furthermore, the formation of such groups was often driven by the intention to seek legality or to appear as legally acknowledged. On the other hand, scholars interested in the religious side of the ancient world have acknowledged significant changes in the history of religion at least from the second century BCE onwards. These changes were caused by a series of events, a historical process, which produced movements of population and new co-existences. These co-existences were created by the cosmopolitan atmosphere of some areas in big Hellenistic cities – typically ports – which had higher than average concentrations of newcomers. Here I have in mind not only the new neighbourhoods created by merchants and other travellers, but also the new military bases that were established in the course of the struggles among the Hellenistic kingdoms and which brought soldiers from all over the Mediterranean to Greece and Asia Minor. They again re-

33 North/Price 2011, Introduction, p. 2.

34 North/Price 2011, Introduction, p. 3.

35 Rüpke, Jörg 2011. Roman Religion and the Religion of Empire. Some Reflections on Method, in: John A. North/Simon R. F. Price (edd.) *The Religious History of the Roman Empire. Pagans, Jews and Christians*, pp. 9–36 esp. 30. In addition, the editors describe the perception that, contrary to the claims of Cumont and his contemporaries that religious tradition and ritual practices of the first three centuries CE were declining, they were instead "persistent" and even "creative". Furthermore, they add the observation that if one can speak of a single pagan religion at all that would be the result of a long-standing process which can be found in antiquity exclusively in Christian writings, North/Price 2011, Introduction, p. 3.

36 The authorities of the cities in which they mostly lived and worshipped were forced to find categories for them at the same time.