

Paul's Favourite Ekklesia: The Christ Group in Philippi in its Urban Setting

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1 Introduction: Matters of Method

In 1995, Peter Pilhofer published his pioneering work on Philippi as the first Christian congregation in Europe.¹ The task he gave himself was as ambitious as it was optimistic: He claims to offer, for the first time, a reading of Paul's letter to the Philippians drawing on the whole of the preserved material evidence of the city.² A few years later, Pilhofer fleshed out what he means by his "local-historical method", arguing quite energetically that the New Testament should no longer be regarded as an archeology-free zone, but that the abundant material findings be taken into account in exegetical work.³ Others followed suit. Analyzing inscriptional evidence on associations – though not limited to Philippi –, Richard Ascough concluded that the Philippian community can be best compared to a "religious association," while for the Thessalonian community the "professional association" makes the best analogue.⁴ In his monograph with the programmatic title *Philippians: From People to Letter*, Peter Oakes approaches Paul's letter to the Philippians through the reconstructed lens of its initial recipients. Right at the outset of his work he declares, "As I have sat reading archaeological reports, and stood looking at the ruined town in its wide,

1 P. Pilhofer, *Philippi*, vol. 1: *Die erste christliche Gemeinde Europas* (WUNT 87; Tübingen, 1995). Five years later, Pilhofer published his catalogue of inscriptions: P. Pilhofer, *Philippi*, vol. 2: *Katalog der Inschriften von Philippi* (WUNT 119; Tübingen, 2000; 2nd ed., 2009) (= *I.Philippi*²). – I am very grateful to Niklas Walder for his valuable comments on an earlier draft of this article, as well as to the participants of the conference for the engaging discussions.

2 Vgl. Pilhofer, *Philippi*, 1:5. The approach was criticized, for instance, by Ulrich B. Müller (*TLZ* 122 [1997], 331–333). He commended the analysis of inscriptions and other archaeological findings but holds that Pilhofer, especially in his exegetical parts, extends the interpretation of local historical results beyond reasonable bounds.

3 P. Pilhofer and T. Witulski, *Archäologie und Neues Testament: Von der Palästinawissenschaft zur lokalgeschichtlichen Methode*, in *Exegese und Methodendiskussion* (TANZ 23; Tübingen/Basel 1998), 237–255, expanded in P. Pilhofer, *Zur lokalgeschichtlichen Methode*, in *Die frühen Christen und ihre Welt. Greifswalder Aufsätze 1996–2001. Mit Beiträgen von Jens Börstinghaus und Eva Ebel* (WUNT 145; Tübingen 2002), 1–57, 6f.

4 R.S. Ascough, *Paul's Macedonian Associations: The Social Context of Philippians and 1 Thessalonians* (WUNT 2/161; Tübingen, 2003), 161.

fertile plain, I have been surprised by how complete a framework the context seemed to provide for understanding Paul's letter to Philippi."⁵ Exploring the evolution of the Roman colony of Philippi is a key to our knowledge of the social makeup of a church that would likely emerge in such a setting. Pilhofer, Ascough, and Oakes could be said to represent a maximalist type of the local-historical approach on the Jesus movement Philippi and Macedonia.

At the opposing pole we find, for instance, Angela Standhartinger's recent commentary on Paul's letter to the Philippians. Following a concise overview of the historical and material evidence, Standhartinger asserts that the Greek-speaking part of the population is hardly documented in the otherwise rich archaeological sources of Philippi and therefore remains largely invisible. Consequently, her commentary deliberately abstains from directly correlating the situations and individuals addressed in the letter with the archaeological sources from Philippi.⁶ To be sure, despite this restraint, Standhartinger still draws extensively on the local documentary sources in her commentary.

So, there is quite some disagreement in New Testament studies about the value of the material culture for exegesis and how to navigate between an (overly) ambitious and an (overly) reserved view. Notwithstanding methodological quibbles, the "material turn" has hugely impacted the study of the early Jesus-movement, and with it a trend to focus on the living conditions of the people with whom Paul engaged, i.e., their "social, political, economic, and religious lives."⁷ It is now widely accepted that archaeological finds can tell us about the people who walked the streets, shopped for their daily needs, participated in the social life of the city, and worshiped their gods. Cédric Brélaz, editor of inscriptions of Philippi, writes quite unapologetically that

any insights gained from the material evidence of these non-Roman groups within the colony can certainly contribute to a better understanding of the Philippian church in the first two centuries CE, since they would provide useful context for interpreting Paul's letter to the Philippians.⁸

5 P.S. Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter* (SNTS.MS 110; Cambridge, 2001), xiii.

6 A. Standhartinger, *Der Philipperbrief* (HNT 11/1; Tübingen, 2021), 13f.: "Jedoch ist ausgerechnet der griechischsprachige Bevölkerungsteil in den ansonsten reichen archäologischen Quellen Philipppis kaum dokumentiert und bleibt daher weitgehend unsichtbar. Der folgende Kommentar verzichtet auf eine direkte Verortung der im Brief angesprochenen Situationen und Personen in den archäologischen Quellen aus Philippi."

7 L.S. Nasrallah, *Archaeology and the Letters of Paul* (Oxford/New York, 2019), 1.

8 C. Brélaz, Thracian, Greek, or Roman? Ethnic and Social Identities of Worshipers (and Gods) in Roman Philippi, in S.J. Friesen, M. Lychounas and D.N. Schowalter (eds.), *Philippi, From Colonia Augusta to Communitas Christiana: Religion and Society in Transition* (NovTSup 186; Leiden, 2022), 68–89, 91–92. The explanatory value is reciprocal. Cf. C. Brélaz, First-Century

In what follows I want to take up the task of reconstructing the early Jesus movement in a particular setting, using the ἐκκλησία in Philippi as a test case. I will not confine my examination solely to the material aspects but will also explore the wider social and cultural milieu in which the first group(s) of Christ followers emerged. Moreover, I will investigate what factors might have attracted a resident of Philippi to join a Christ group, or – differently put – what were the survival factors of the early Christian assembly in Philippi?⁹ Prior to delving into these questions I will at first recall the scholarly discourse about the social constitution of the early Christ groups, as this provides the necessary, concrete framework to explore the potentials for attraction and distinction.

2 Voluntary Association: The Closest Analogy?

We all stand on the shoulders of giants. One such giant is Edwin Judge. More than 60 years ago he published his influential essay *The Social Pattern of the Christian Groups in the First Century* (1960). Ever since, scholars have been intrigued by the questions surrounding early Christian community formation. Judge's essay represents, in his own words, "an attempt to clarify early Christian ideas about society by defining the particular social institutions that are presupposed, and showing how the behaviour of the Christians was related to them."¹⁰ Judge focused on (1) the republican institutions of the Hellenistic cities, (2) the household and its inner organization, and (3) religious associations.

On Judge's shoulders we encounter Wayne Meeks with his equally groundbreaking work *The First Urban Churches* (1983). In this social history of the nascent Jesus movement, he compared the Pauline Christ groups "with groups and organizations in the Greco-Roman city to which they bear at least a family resemblance."¹¹ For his comparison Meeks pointed to (1) the household, (2) the voluntary association, (3) the synagogue, and (4) the Philosophical

Philippi: Contextualizing Paul's Visit, in J.R. Harrison and L.L. Welborn (eds.), *The First Urban Churches 4. Roman Philippi* (Atlanta, 2018), 153–188, 155: "[S]ociety in first-century Philippi can only be fully understood through the combined investigation of the archaeological/epigraphic and New Testament evidence." See further C. Brélaz, *Le contexte archéologique et historique de la mission de l'apôtre Paul à Philippi*, RHPPhR 99 (2019), 255–291.

9 Cf. R. Last and P.A. Harland, *Group Survival in the Ancient Mediterranean: Rethinking Material Conditions in the Landscape of Jews and Christians* (London, 2020).

10 E.A. Judge, *The Social Pattern of Christian Groups in the First Century* (London, 1960), reprinted in D.M. Scholer (ed.), *Social Distinctives of the Christians in the First Century: Pivotal Essays* (Peabody, 2008), 1–56.

11 W.A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (Yale, 1983), 74.

or Rhetorical School. Meeks, of course, was wise enough to add that “none of these categories quite fits,” but that “this procedure has the advantage of approximating the way in which a curious contemporary observer might have tried to identify and understand the Christians.”¹² In a later reflection of his earlier book he seems to be inclined to consider the “associations” to be the most adequate analogy – more precisely: associations of artificial immigrants.¹³

This leads us to John Kloppenborg’s magisterial book *Christ’s Associations* (2019), which could be said to “do for the second quarter of the twenty-first century what Meeks’ *First Urban Christians* did for the last quarter the twentieth century.”¹⁴ Kloppenborg builds on decades long research, his own and that of others, which widened significantly our knowledge about the “associative practices of other small, face-to-face groups in Greek and Roman antiquity.”¹⁵ He, too, steps into the role of an interested contemporary, claiming that “There is little doubt that to the outside observer Christ assemblies would have resembled other associations.”¹⁶ From the perspective of cultural hermeneutics Kloppenborg insists that Christ-groups did not emerge in isolation from culture and that considering the widespread presence of associations across the Mediterranean, “it is inevitable that Christ-groups came into contact with numerous associations and formed their polity and practices by imitating and adapting the practices they observed.”¹⁷

In his already mentioned monograph *Paul’s Macedonian Associations* (2003), Ascough seeks to provide evidence that an interested observer would have noted close analogies to a cult association: “Overall if the Philippian

12 Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 74. Cf. *ibid.* 84: “The fact is that none of the four models we have now surveyed captures the whole of the Pauline *ekklesia*, although all offer significant analogies. At the least, the household remains the basic context within which most if not all the local Pauline groups established themselves, and the manifold life of voluntary associations, the special adaptation of the synagogue to urban life, and the organization of instruction and exhortation in philosophical schools all provide examples of groups solving certain problems that the Christians, too, had to face.”

13 W.A. Meeks, Corinthian Christians as Artificial Aliens, in T. Engberg-Pedersen (ed.), *Paul Beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide* (Louisville, 2001), 129–138.

14 B. Longenecker, Greco-Roman Associations and the Origins of Christianity: Taking Stock of Where We Are, in B. Longenecker (ed.), *Greco-Roman Associations, Deities, and Early Christianity* (Waco, 2022), 1–16, 10.

15 J.S. Kloppenborg, *Christ’s Associations. Connecting and Belonging in the Ancient City* (New Haven, 2019), ix. Cf. *ibid.*: “These associations organized around the workplace, the cult of a deity, a diasporic identity, an extended family, or a neighborhood and could be found in practically every city and town of the Mediterranean.”

16 Kloppenborg, *Christ’s Associations*, 54.

17 J.S. Kloppenborg and R.S. Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations: Texts, Translations, and Commentary*, vol. 1: *Attica, Central Greece, Macedonia, Thrace* (BZNW 181; Berlin, 2011), 13.

community is to be classified as analogous to a voluntary association, it is the religious associations rather than the professional associations that makes the best analogue.¹⁸ What are his main arguments? The commercial language in Philippians suggests that the community was primarily composed of artisans and merchants of lower ranks.¹⁹ The terminology used to describe the leadership structure is reminiscent of functionaries in associations, “supervisors” (ἐπίσκοποι) and “assistants” (διάκονοι).²⁰ And since women regularly held leading positions in associations,²¹ it is also not surprising that they had prominent roles in the Christian group at Philippi as well (cf. Phil 4:2–3).²² We will get back to this. Friendship language is also part of the idiom in associations. The idea of κοινωνία, central to the letter to the Philippians, resonates with the term τὸ κοινόν, one of the common descriptions for an association.²³ The custom of making monetary contributions to the founder echoes association practice,²⁴ except that Paul deviates from the rule by using the money for the benefit of other communities as well. Ascough explains Paul’s peculiarly reserved reaction to the Philippians’ support (Phil 4:10–20) with the mechanics of patronage: Paul, as founder of the community and as its patron, could not allow himself to be pushed into the role of client, for that would put him in the strange position of having to pay tribute to the community. This would reverse their roles, and to avoid this, he uses the word “gift” (δῶμα) (Phil 4:17) without laying bare its financial character.²⁵

Above, I categorized Ascough’s study as an example of local history. However, is this accurate at all? Apart from the more general fact that the category “religious association” increasingly loses plausibility,²⁶ the texts used for comparison – by Ascough and others – “are rather distant, both temporally and

18 Ascough, *Paul’s Macedonian Associations*, 161.

19 Ascough, *Paul’s Macedonian Associations*, 128f.

20 Ascough, *Paul’s Macedonian Associations*, 131. Cf. Kloppenborg, *Christ’s Associations*, 83.

21 Ascough, *Paul’s Macedonian Associations*, 31, 34f.

22 Ascough, *Paul’s Macedonian Associations*, 134.

23 Cf. Kloppenborg, *Christ’s Associations*, 19, who provides of list of terms for “associations”: “collegium, corpus, coetus, factio, and familia in Latin, and thiasos, koinon, synagōgē, synodos, and dozens more in Greek. We use ‘association’ in English and French and Verein in German, but these are our terms.”

24 Ascough, *Paul’s Macedonian Associations*, 150–153.

25 Ascough, *Paul’s Macedonian Associations*, 154–156. For an extensive review of recent proposals on the relationship of Paul to the Philippians, see B. Schliesser, Paulus und ‘seine’ Philipper. Geschäftspartner, Wohltäter, Vereinsgründer? Sozialgeschichtliche Perspektiven auf den Philipperbrief?, in J. Frey and B. Schliesser (eds.), *Der Philipperbrief des Paulus in der hellenistisch-römischen Welt* (WUNT 353; Tübingen, 2015), 33–120.

26 É. Rebillard, Retiring Religious Associations, in B.W. Longenecker (ed.), *Greco-Roman Associations, Deities, and Early Christianity* (Waco, 2022), 203–224.

geographically, from the addressees of the Pauline letters.”²⁷ Benedikt Eckhardt, an outspoken critic of the association paradigm, pointed out that scholars so far were not able to produce a comparison of a concrete Pauline community with associations that deserves the label “local history.”²⁸ The reason for this is apparent: there is a scarcity of comprehensive and informative inscriptions from the first century in the respective cities. Therefore, the inscriptional material used to compare the Christ assembly in Philippi with associations is from a different time and usually composed in a different language – and testifies to rather different group identities.²⁹ Having thoroughly sifted the evidence for Philippi, Eckhardt concludes that Christ adherents simply do not fit into the picture reconstructed from the preserved association inscriptions.³⁰

3 Not an “Average” Association: Distinctives of the Philippian Christ Group

This leads me to the main part of the paper, in which I would like to reframe the task. Building on previous scholarship on the comparative significance of inscription material from Philippi and taking recent studies on associations as a starting point, I will not so much focus on adaption, imitation, mimicry, analogy, and resemblance, but rather on the rough edges that cannot be fitted in so easily, on innovative and distinctive features of the early Jesus movement. Notably, as Tom Holland reminds us, “Distinctiveness, in the age of an empire that proclaimed itself universal, might well rank as defiance.”³¹ On the other hand, distinctiveness might also function as a decisive survival factor in a multi-cultural and multi-religious city like Philippi. If Christ groups were

27 B. Eckhardt, *Paulus und die Vereine: Korinth, Philippi, Thessalonike*, in B. Eckhardt and C. Leonhard (eds.), *Juden, Christen und Vereine im Römischen Reich* (RVV 75; Berlin, 2018), 131–162, 132.

28 Eckhardt, *Paulus und die Vereine*, 132. He argues that no attempt has been made to precisely describe the relationship between association and urban culture in the respective cities based on available material. His essay aims to fill this gap by contextualizing Pauline communities in Corinth, Philippi, and Thessalonike within their city’s association culture.

29 Eckhardt, *Paulus und die Vereine*, 151. Despite his *caveat*, Eckhardt still holds that the Pauline assembly of Philippi can be defined as a “religious voluntary association,” as proposed by R. Ascough.

30 Eckhardt, *Paulus und die Vereine*, 151.

31 T. Holland, *Dominion. The Making of the Western Mind* (London, 2019), 58.

simply another form of religious association, the question of why they survived would remain unanswered – unless one were to attribute it to pure chance.³²

3.1 *Politics of Religious Identity: Alternative Ἐκκλησία and Heavenly Πολίτευμα*

Christ groups just did not give themselves association names like κοινόν, θίασος or σύνοδος, but called themselves ἐκκλησία (cf. Phil 4:15),³³ combining this with other – religiously quite pretentious – self-designations like “God’s beloved” (ἀγαπητοὶ θεοῦ, Phil 2:12, 4:1) or “the saints” (οἱ ἅγιοι, Phil 1:1).³⁴ Probably already before Paul, the term ἐκκλησία established itself as a self-designation of Greek-speaking Jewish Christ groups. Paul’s letter to the Philippians actually underlines that ἐκκλησία had become the obvious self-designation in his identity construction project. Though he does not use it in the prescript as in other correspondences, he rather casually notes “no ἐκκλησία shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you [Philippians] alone” (Phil 4:15; cf. 3:6).³⁵ The assembly in Philippi is clearly implied to be addressed as ἐκκλησία, even if Paul does not explicitly do so. To be sure, during Paul’s time the political ἐκκλησία of Philippi had ceased to exist after Philippi’s new foundation as *colonia Iulia Augusta Philippensis* but its former status would surely have been ingrained in the collective memory of the city.

32 This essay gives me the opportunity to concretize my more programmatic comments in B. Schliesser, *Innovation und Distinktion im frühen Christentum*, *EC* 13 (2022), 393–432.

33 See the discussion in R.J. Korner, *The Origin and Meaning of Ekklesia in the Early Jesus Movement* (*AJEC* 98; Leiden, 2017), 52–68; also R. Last, *Ekklesia Outside the Septuagint and the Demos: The Titles of Greco-Roman Associations and Christ-Followers’ Groups*, *JBL* 137 (2018), 959–980.

34 Cf. P.R. Trebilco, *Self-designations and Group Identity in the New Testament* (Cambridge, 2012).

35 I am skeptical that Paul’s omission of the term ἐκκλησία in the prescript “may have something to do with this hidden transcript the letter represents,” considering Paul’s imprisonment and its consequences for the Philippians (K. Ehrensperger, *Rooted in Heaven and Resident in Philippi*, but no ἐκκλησία? in J.R. Harrison and L.L. Welborn (eds.), *The First Urban Churches 4. Roman Philippi* [Atlanta, 2018], 63–78, 66–67). Paul quite naturally uses the term in Phil 3:6 and 4:15. The argument would be more persuasive if Phil 4:10–20 were regarded as a separate letter, a stance which Ehrensperger correctly does not adopt. Also, the thesis that Paul intended a contradictory *double entendre* with the use of the term πολίτευμα (see below) – one for potential readers in prison, one for the Philippians – seems hard to prove. According to Hans Förster and Patrick Sängler, the readers in prison should be led to think of an inner-Jewish discourse about legal concepts and the community life based on them, while in the case of the Philippians, Paul instead emphasizes that Christian existence does not rest on Jewish law (H. Förster and P. Sängler, *Ist unsere Heimat im Himmel? Überlegungen zur Semantik von πολίτευμα in Phil 3,20*, *EC* 5 [2014], 149–177, 174–175).

When Paul addresses the Christian communities as ἐκκλησία, he makes two stark claims: In the midst of the political civic assemblies, i.e., the assembly of free male citizens, who deliberate and decide on the issues of the city, an “honorable body of citizens”³⁶ comes together – in fact, an “alternative ἐκκλησία”³⁷: not only men, but also women and children; not only freeborn and citizens, but also slaves, unfree, and “second-class” inhabitants. No association has dared to use this designation, as this terminology clearly involves a challenge to secular institutions.³⁸ At the same time Paul deliberately picks up ἐκκλησία-language from Hellenistic Judaism, most prominently the Septuagint and Philo: The people of God is called ἐκκλησία κυρίου. I fail to see the necessity, still advocated by many, of committing to one derivation over another, either civic ἐκκλησία of a Greco-Roman πόλις or religious ἐκκλησία in terms of the Jewish idea of the people of God.³⁹

Quite remarkably, therefore, Paul combines a political and a religious claim. He reinforces the stability of this new kind of assembly by underlining the theme of community (Phil 1:5, 7) and by creating a special bond to him as a socially unifying founder figure: Paul expresses a longing to be in their midst (1:7–8; 4:1; cf. 2:26), acknowledges their unwavering dedication to the gospel he conveyed to them, even in challenging circumstances (1:7; 2:17–18; 4:14), and wishes for a spirit of unity among them (1:27; 2:2; 4:2).⁴⁰ While the term ἐκκλησία certainly occurs throughout Paul’s writings, the unique combination with the call for unity in the letter to the Philippians might have found special significance in Philippi: Paul’s addressees – predominantly Greek foreign residents – had to come to terms with a lack of upward mobility in the colony, as the Roman elite largely consisted of descendants of Italian colonists. This led to a form of social stratification, wherein the call for unity (κοινωνία) and the vision of heavenly citizenship (πολίτευμα) could resonate deeply.⁴¹

36 Y.-H. Park, *Paul’s Ekklesia as Civic Assembly: Understanding the People of God in their Politico-Social World* (WUNT 2/393; Tübingen, 2015), 218.

37 M. Ebner, *Der Brief an Philemon* (EKK 189; Ostfildern/Göttingen, 2017), 48.

38 Brélaz, *First-Century Philippi*, 179: “In borrowing this word from the lexicon of the civic and political institutions, Paul’s intention was probably to emphasize the uniqueness of the Christian message. The Christian groups were not intended to be associations like any other cultic club.”

39 See for a thorough discussion Angela Standhartinger’s essay in this volume.

40 On the aspect of social cohesion in associations, see Kloppenborg, *Christ’s Associations*, 287: “The sociality of associations ... [created] a form of connectivity that bridged social barriers of ancient society that were particularly sturdy and enduring, between citizen and foreigner, between elite and commoner, and even between free, freedman/freed-woman, and slave.”

41 I owe this point to Niklas Walder.

Paul extends his idea of “political religion” or “religious politics” even further when he combines the construction of an alternative *ἐκκλησία* with that of an alternative *πολίτευμα*⁴²: The *πολίτευμα ἐν οὐρανοῖς* (Phil 3:20) is a programmatic alternative to existing earthly institutions such as the *civitas Romana*. The “citizenship in the heavens” holds out the prospect of full membership to all believers, not just to a few privileged inhabitants of Philippi, who were Roman citizens, i.e., citizens of the *colonia Iulia Augusta Philippensis* and members of the *tribus Voltinia*.⁴³ Paul continues to argue that it is from the citizenship in heaven “that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” and that he is equipped with power “that also enables him to make all things subject to himself” (Phil 3:20–21). He clearly alludes to imperial ideology in his correspondence to the small flock of Christ followers in the Roman colony. The rhetorical effect is twofold: First, Paul would have been aware that associations functioned as a kind of substitute *polis* for those who lacked citizenship, and that the gathering of the association imitated or mimicked the assembly (*ἐκκλησία*) of the *πόλις*. But the substitute model is not his vision for the Philippian Christ group: He imagines not just another earthly assembly with fictive citizenship, but a new, superior, heavenly kind of citizenship. Second, Paul conspicuously retains the imperial imagery of subjection when he talks about Christ’s universal rule but transposes it into a “new register”: “The ‘mind of Christ Jesus’ expresses an opposite logic of the strong emptying themselves for the sake of others and the common good.”⁴⁴

While the promise of a new kind of citizenship could have been appealing to those excluded from the benefits of citizenship, one should not neglect the social costs of becoming part of this new kind of *ἐκκλησία*. Associations, such as the Silvanus cult, were thoroughly embedded in the religious landscape of the

42 Cf. J.H. Hellerman, *Reconstructing Honor in Roman Philippi: Carmen Christi as Cursus Pudorum* (SNTSMS 132; Cambridge, 2005), 115; H.O. Maier, *Picturing Paul in Empire: Imperial Image, Text and Persuasion in Colossians, Ephesians and the Pastoral Epistles* (London, 2013), 50; Ehrensperger, *Rooted in Heaven*, 70.

43 Cf. E. Ebel, “Unser *πολίτευμα* aber ist in den Himmeln” (Phil 3,20): Ein attraktives Angebot für viele Bewohnerinnen und Bewohner der römischen Kolonie Philippi, in J. Frey and B. Schliesser (eds.), *Der Philipperbrief des Paulus in der hellenistisch-römischen Welt* (WUNT 353; Tübingen, 2015), 153–168, 157: “Juristisch ist bedeutsam, dass jede Person, die das städtische Bürgerrecht der Kolonie Philippi besitzt, auch das römische Bürgerrecht, die *civitas Romana*, erhält. Jeder römische Bürger gehört gewissermaßen als Stimmbezirk einer Abteilung der römischen Bürgerschaft, einer *tribus*, an. Für die Bewohner der Kolonie Philippi ist dieses die *tribus Voltinia*.”

44 Maier, *Picturing Paul in Empire*, 50.

city, whereas the Christ groups were not.⁴⁵ Affiliation with the Christ group was a step into the margins of society and could imply existential endangerment.⁴⁶ In Paul's letter to the Philippians, probably sent from a prison in Ephesus, the prospect of death looms large (Phil 1:12–26). His readiness to die for the gospel is part of his appeal “join in imitating me” (Phil 3:17). The implied situation of Jesus followers in Philippi already points ahead to the later legal status of Christ adherents. They did not belong to the tolerated associations but were considered dangerous to the state; their designation *Χριστιανοί* – used first for Christ followers in Antioch – refers to the political adherents of a criminal sentenced to death; “being a Christian – unlike membership in associations – was punishable by death.”⁴⁷

3.2 *Cursus Pudorum: A Re-Evaluation of Values*

The *Via Egnatia*, on which Paul traveled after arriving in Neapolis, entered Philippi through the Neapolis Gate. Two kilometers before reaching the gate a monumental four-meter-tall monolith stands out from the fields. Dating back to the first century CE, it commemorates Caius Vibius Quartus – a military veteran's career immortalized in stone. There is but a slight chance that Paul might have passed this monument.⁴⁸

Caius Vibius Quartus, son of Caius,
from the tribe Cornelia,
soldier of the Fifth Legion Macedonia,
decurion of the ala Scubulorum,
prefect of the Third Cohort Cyrenaica,

45 Cf. P. Oakes, *The Economic Situation of the Philippian Christians*, in J.A. Marchal (ed.), *The People Beside Paul: The Philippian Assembly and History from below* (ECL 17; Atlanta, 2015), 63–82, 69.

46 Eckhardt, *Paulus und die Vereine*, 151.

47 B. Eckhardt, *Romanisierung und Verbrüderung: Das Vereinswesen im römischen Reich* (Klio.B 34; Berlin, 2021), 268–269. Cf. *ibid.* 268: “*Χριστιανοί* ist eben nicht eine theophore Vereinsbezeichnung nach üblichem Muster, sondern eine lateinische Bildung auf *-ianus*, die man zurecht mit gut bezeugten Begriffen wie *Pisoniani*, *Miloniani* oder *Ἡρωδιανοί* verglichen hat ... Der Unterschied zwischen theophorer Vereinsbezeichnung und politischer Loyalitätserklärung verläuft entlang der Unterscheidung zwischen griechischer Bildung auf *-σται* und lateinischer auf *-ianus*. Der Christus-Bestandteil des Namens kann sich deshalb nicht auf einen Gott beziehen, sondern meint einen Menschen. Als zunächst lateinische Fremdbezeichnung kann *Χριστιανοί* dann tatsächlich nur die politischen Anhänger eines zum Tode verurteilten Verbrechers meinen.”

48 According to C. Brélaz, *Corpus des inscriptions grecques et latines de Philippes*, vol. 2: *La colonie romaine*, part 1: *La vie publique de la colonie* (Études épigraphiques, 6; Athens, 2014) (= *I.Philippes* 2.1), 183–188, the monument dates to the time of Nero or Vespasian, which would be later than Paul's visit.

military tribune of the Second Legion Augusta,
prefect ...⁴⁹

Even though, of course, “[t]he elites’ concern for glory was not deeper in Philippi than in the other Roman colonies or Greek cities visited by Paul,”⁵⁰ it is not a stretch to compare and contrast this “course of honors” with the “course of shame” of the Christ hymn in Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Whether Paul had in mind such honorific inscriptions in Philippi, or perhaps in Ephesus where he likely wrote his letter,⁵¹ and where he would have been exposed to symbols of aristocratic mentality from even higher-ranking elite families – we do not know. However, his recipients, Greek residents who were certain that their names would never be engraved in stone, would not have passed this monument without contemplating the contrasting paths of the son of Gaius and the son of God in whom they had come to believe.⁵² The fact that Paul refrains from using the title of apostle in Philippians – in contrast to the Corinthian correspondence and the letter to the Romans – could be interpreted as his personal implementation of his christological argumentation.⁵³ An even more impactful example is Paul’s devaluation of his own honorable biography, his own *cursus honorum*, as it were, sketched in Phil 3:5–6 and ditched in Phil 3:7–8. It is not implausible to interpret his own reference to his “tribe,” the φυλή Βενιαμίν in Phil 3:5 in analogy to the tribe of the colony of Philippi, the *tribus Voltinia*: Just as Paul redefines membership in the tribe of Voltinia and its concomitant honors and privileges in light of the Christ event, he redefines his own membership in the tribe of Benjamin in the most radical terms.⁵⁴

Overall, Christ groups programmatically aspired to treat individuals without regard to personal attributes, transcending distinctions of status, gender, and ethnicity (cf. Gal 3:28; Rom 2:11; Eph 6:9; Jas 2:1). As recently highlighted by Jim Harrison, adherents of Christ incorporated prevailing conventions of

49 *I.Philippes* 2.1 63 = *I.Philippi*² 058 (Dikili Tash; 1st century), trans. Hellerman, *Reconstructing Honor*, 79 (with added “prefect” in the last line).

50 Brélaz, *First-Century Philippi*, 161; cf. Brélaz, *Le contexte archéologique*, 280–281.

51 Cf. M.E. Boring, *Philippians and Philemon: Date and Provenance*, *CBQ* 81 (2019), 470–494; M. Flexsenhar, *The Provenance of Philippians and Why It Matters: Old Questions, New Approaches*, *JSNT* 42 (2019), 18–45.

52 Hellerman, *Reconstructing Honor*, 78–80, points to several other inscriptions from Philippi that detail the military careers of veterans.

53 Cf. Hellerman, *Reconstructing Honor*, 121.

54 Cf. Pilhofer, *Philippi*, 1:122–134. See also J.R. Harrison, *From Rome to the Colony of Philippi: Roman Boasting in Philippians 3:4–6 in Its Latin West and Philippian Epigraphic Context*, in J.R. Harrison and L.L. Welborn (eds.), *The First Urban Churches 4. Roman Philippi* (Atlanta, 2018), 307–370.

honor and prestige, employing them to affirm, reshape, or critique societal and theological norms as dictated by specific contexts.

[T]he ultimate focus of honor in the Body of Christ is upon the least honored as opposed to the most influential (1 Cor 12:22–25), reflecting not only God’s choice of the ‘nothings of this world’ (1:26–29) but also the depths of Christ’s cruciform *cursus pudorum* (‘course of shame’) culminating in the cross (1 Cor 1:23; 2 Cor 13:4a; Gal 3:13; 5:11; Phil 2:5–11; Heb 12:2). The career of the crucified and risen Christ, dishonored and honored, redefines the experience of shame and honor in the lives of his apostles (1 Cor 4:9–13; 2 Cor 6:8–9).⁵⁵

Undoubtedly, Paul’s reevaluation of honor and shame entailed social costs and stigmatizing effects, which influenced the recruitment of members for the Christ assembly – perhaps not in the manner one would intuitively anticipate. As Rodney Stark argued in his classic study on the rise of Christianity, high cost of participation raised the threshold for joining the group.

To take part at all, you must qualify by accepting the stigmas and sacrifices demanded from everyone. Thus high costs tend to screen out free riders—those potential members whose commitment and participation would otherwise be low. The costs act as nonrefundable registration fees that, as in secular markets, measure seriousness of interest in the product. Only those willing to pay the price qualify.⁵⁶

High costs are thus potentially both push- and pull-factors for entry to a Christ group.⁵⁷

3.3 *Membership Recruitment: Missionary and Translocal*

For the question of membership recruitment, we commence our discussions in another Macedonian city, equally pertinent to the Jesus movement: Thessalonike. In the ruins of the Serapis temple in Thessalonike, excavators

55 J.R. Harrison, *The Prestige of the Gods, the Urban Elites, and the Local Associations. Assessing Honorific Rituals among the Early Christians*, in B. Longenecker (ed.), *Greco-Roman Associations, Deities, and Early Christianity* (Waco 2022), 101–119, 115.

56 R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (New York, 1997), 177, referring to L.R. Iannaccone, *Sacrifice and Stigma. Reducing Free-riding in Cults, Communes, and Other Collectives*, *Journal of Political Economy* 100 (1992), 271–291.

57 On potential “occupational stigma” associated with Paul’s missionary activity, which could be placed next to the ideological and social stigma provoked by his message, see L.J. Lawrence, *Stinking Leatherworkers and Noisy Street Criers Paul, Occupational Stigma, and the Sensory Politics of Associations*, in B. Longenecker (ed.), *Greco-Roman Associations, Deities, and Early Christianity* (Waco, 2022), 65–84.

unearthed a marble inscription which has occasionally been used as an illustration for the propagation of cults.⁵⁸ The inscription (IG X/2.1 255) from the 1st/2nd century CE reports that Serapis appeared twice in a dream to a certain Xenainetos (cf. Acts 16:9–10), urging him to send word to his rival Eurynomos to establish a Serapeion at Opos, a city in eastern Lokris (north coast of the Corinthian Gulf). When Xenainetos awoke after his second dream, he found a (sealed) letter under his pillow. He handed it to Eurynomos after his return to Opos and informed him about his vision. Eurynomos agreed and submitted to the will of the gods. The inscription informs us that he “received” (ὑπεδέξατο) Serapis and Isis in the “house” (οἶκος) of Sosinike, who in turn introduced the gods into the pantheon of her household gods and offered sacrifices to them as the first priestess.⁵⁹ The text has been described as a “fully pagan ‘missionary’ text”.⁶⁰ According to Helmut Koester, “The story is a typical example for the missionary style of the Egyptian religion, where the god himself initiates the movement of his cult to new areas.”⁶¹ Moreover, the inscription attests to “translocational links” between two geographically distant associations.⁶² The legend has the founding of the cult association begin in the Serapeion in Thessalonika (dream experience) and culminates at the end in the memory of the event in Thessalonika.

The energetic membership recruitment of the early Jesus movement would surely have caught the eye of a curious observer. Popular imagination that Paul was preaching and debating on the marketplaces in cities like Philippi is doubtful. Rather, Paul and other Jesus followers used their existing social networks to recruit potential new members, as recently highlighted by John Kloppenborg with the example of Thessalonike: “The connections among

58 New Docs 1, 29–32 (“A ‘letter from heaven’”); J.S. Kloppenborg and R.S. Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations: Texts, Translations, and Commentary*, vol. 1: *Attica, Central Greece, Macedonia, Thrace* (BZNV 181; Berlin, 2011), 357–362; J.C. Hanges, *Paul, Founder of Churches: A Study in Light of the Evidence for the Role of “Founder-Figures” in the Hellenistic-Roman Period* (WUNT 292; Tübingen, 2012), 248–259.

59 After the establishment of the cult at Opos, the incident was probably documented in an inscription in the 3rd or 2nd century BC and a copy of the inscription was taken to Thessalonike, where the incident was incorporated into the local cult tradition. The existing inscription represents a duplicate from the 1st/2nd century CE and was placed in the Serapeion in Thessalonike. Cf. Kloppenborg/Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations*, 360.

60 J.G. Cook, P⁵⁰ (*P.Yale I 3*) and the Question of Its Function, in T. Kraus and T. Nicklas, *Early Christian Manuscripts. Examples of Applied Method and Approach* (TENTS 5; Leiden, 2010), 115–128, 124 note 64.

61 H. Koester, *Archaeology and Paul in Thessalonikē*, in *Paul and His World: Interpreting the New Testament in Its Context* (Minneapolis, 2007), 38–54, 51. Cf. Ascough, *Paul’s Macedonian Associations*, 34; Hanges, *Paul, Founder of Churches*, 25.

62 Ascough, *Paul’s Macedonian Associations*, 97.

the leatherworker guilds in Thessaloniki created by patronage and by physical proximity of workshops probably facilitated recruitment to the Christ cult. Thus, the Christ cult spread along the street through network connections.”⁶³ Associations, both professional and cultic, had comparable recruitment strategies, which depended on the tight web of local professional and family networks, especially prevalent in densely populated cities.⁶⁴

However, characterizing associations as “missionary” and “translocal” clearly pursues the goal to tie Christ groups and (other) cult communities closer together.⁶⁵ This is a questionable move as it correlates circumstantial evidence about “missionary” associations with programmatic statements of early Christian documents. All the examples of supposedly missionary active cults mentioned in secondary literature ultimately confirm Ramsay MacMullen’s contention: “Of any organized or conscious evangelizing in paganism there are very few signs indeed, though it is often alleged; of any god whose cult required or had anything ordinarily to say about evangelizing there is no sign at all.”⁶⁶ Likewise, as Jewish studies scholars repeatedly pointed out since the 1990s, Jewish mission is no analogue early Christian mission.⁶⁷ If we comprehend “mission” in the sense of a programmatic and proactive endeavor by members of a cult community aimed at recruiting new followers, then early Christian mission is indeed unprecedented.

63 Cf. J.S. Kloppenborg, Recruitment to Elective Cults: Network Structure and Ecology, *NTS* 66 (2020), 323–350, 337.

64 See the solemn statement in A. v. Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (trans. J. Moffatt; London, 1908), 1:366–367: “The most numerous and successful missionaries of the Christian religion were not the regular teachers but Christians themselves, in virtue of their loyalty and courage. How little we hear of the former and their results! How much we hear of the effects produced by the latter! Above all, every confessor and martyr was a missionary ... Nevertheless, it was not merely the confessors and martyrs who were missionaries. It was characteristic of this religion that everyone who seriously confessed the faith proved of service to its propaganda.”

65 Cf. R.S. Ascough, Local and Translocal Relationships among Voluntary Associations and Early Christianity, *J ECS* 5 (1997), 223–241, 224: “A close analysis of relevant material suggests that some voluntary associations in antiquity had translocal links, and that Christianity was more locally based than is often assumed. Thus both Christian congregations and voluntary associations were locally based groups with limited translocal connections. In establishing this, the way is opened for more fruitful use of the analogy of voluntary associations for understanding the formation and organization of early Christ groups.” P.A. Harland, *Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians: Associations, Judeans, and Cultural Minorities* (London, 2009), 2, expressing the goal to disprove a “supposed uniqueness and incomparability of early Christianity.”

66 R. Macmullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (New Haven, 1981), 98–99.

67 M. Goodman, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford, 1994), 105.

Certain features of Paul's missionary program can be identified: He dismantled physical or material barriers and entry conditions. Albeit not unchallenged, he advocated full membership without circumcision. In contrast to associations, no membership fees were levied. At the same time, the bar was set high: those who became part of a Christ group questioned their previous religious affiliations and distanced themselves from their accustomed life to forge the new kind of ἐκκλησία. Converts, at least in theory, attained an equivalent status upon joining, akin to all other members. Unlike Judaism, there were no "sympathizers" on the periphery of the community; the demarcation between inside and outside was sharply drawn. Moreover, the international and translocal networking of the Christian assemblies including mutual visits (hospitality), intensive exchange by letter and material support stands in contrast to most associations.⁶⁸ Those functioned primarily on a local basis and were only "very loosely affiliated with other groups."⁶⁹ A case in point are the *cultores Silvani*, who are widely represented in Philippi's inscriptions, but who – based on the documentary sources – had no connection whatsoever to Silvanus worshippers in other places. This is true for all of the cults represented in Philippi, whether they are devoted to Thracian, Greek, or Roman deities. The interregional network of Christ groups is "a singular phenomenon within the framework of the cults otherwise present in the *Colonia Julia Augusta Philippensis*."⁷⁰

68 On the costs and practicalities of such connectivity with a focus on Philippi, see C. Concannon, "Let Us Know Anything Further Which You Have Heard": Mapping Philippian Connectivity, in S.J. Friesen, M. Lychounas and D.N. Schowalter (eds.), *Philippi, From Colonia Augusta to Communitas Christiana: Religion and Society in Transition* (NovTSup 186; Leiden, 2022), 185–207.

69 Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations*, 5; on exceptions, see *ibid.*, 202. Cf. Eckhardt, *Romanisierung*, 278: "[T]ranslokale Organisationsbildungen [sind] im römischen Reich als Abweichung von der Regel zu verstehen" (cf. *ibid.*, 243–280).

70 Pilhofer, *Philippi* 1:138. Pilhofer refers to the Thracian Horseman, Dionysos, Isis, Kybele, Venus, Nemesis, Bendis/Diana, Minerva, Livia Augusta, Iuppiter Optimus Maximus, Mercurius, Neptunus, and others. There is a somewhat obscure connection between the Isis priest Lucius Titonius Suavis (*I.Philippi*² 175 and 581; 2nd/3rd century) and a priest by the name Lucius Titonius Primus. The latter's name appears on a mid-second-century inscription from Thessalonike, reading *L(ucio) Titonio Primo sacerdoti*. The *nomen gentile* Titonius is referenced only in these three inscriptions, two from Philippi and one from Thessalonike. Likely, (parts of) the family relocated from Thessalonike to Philippi, and it is not impossible that both Titonius Primus and Titonius Suavis served as priests of Isis (cf. Pilhofer, *Philippi* 2:227–228). Even if this were the case, such incidental forms of familial cult migration cannot be equated to the cult propaganda and networking strategies employed by early Christians. See, e.g., U. Schnelle, *Die getrennten Wege von Römern, Juden und Christen: Religionspolitik im 1. Jahrhundert n. Chr.* (Tübingen, 2019), 190: "Insgesamt waren die Vernetzungen ein entscheidender Schritt zur Konsolidierung des

In fact, without a global strategy, epitomized by Paul, the nascent movement could have quietly faded away like other cults.⁷¹

3.4 *Female Participation: The Role of Women*

In his widely read book *Hellenistic Civilization*, first published in 1927, William Woodthorpe Tarn made a statement about the role of women in Macedonia that has been quoted countless times by interpreters of Paul's letter to the Philippians.

The great Macedonian princesses of the two generations after Alexander exercised much influence of the position of Greek women. If Macedonia produced perhaps the most competent group of men the world has yet seen, the women were in all respects the men's counterparts. They played a large part in affairs, received envoys and obtained concessions for them from their husbands, built temples, founded cities, engaged mercenaries, commanded armies, held fortresses, and acted on occasion as regents or even co-rulers ... From the Macedonian courts, (relative) freedom broadened down to the Greek home; and those women who desired emancipation – probably a minority – were able to obtain it in considerable measure.⁷²

Biblical scholars frequently deduce from these (and similar) observations that women held significant roles not only in public life but also in the sphere of religious devotion within the colony. As Isaac Blois recently confirmed: “Women were uncommonly prominent in leadership roles within this Roman colony during the Imperial era.”⁷³ This, in turn, is believed to have had a substantial influence on the leadership structure of the Christian assembly in Philippi.

How was material culture of Philippi used to bolster this thesis? Since the 1980s, Valerie Abrahamsen has been studying the role of women in Philippi, with a particular focus on the rock reliefs of the Acropolis, as well as inscriptions portraying women leaders of the Diana cult, priestesses in the Imperial cult dedicated to the divinized Empress Livia, Augustus' wife, and the

frühen Christentums. Sie erklären zu einem erheblichen Teil, warum diese ungewöhnliche Bewegung nicht im Dunkel der Geschichte unterging.”

71 Cf. C. Gousopoulos, Christianization and the Decline of Elective Cults Revisited: Competitors or Cohabitants?, in B. Longenecker (ed.), *Graeco-Roman Associations, Deities, and Early Christianity* (Waco, 2022), 246–267; J.N. Bremmer, How Do We Explain the Quiet Demise of Graeco-Roman Religion: An Essay, *Numen* 68 (2021), 230–271.

72 W.W. Tarn and G.T. Griffith, *Hellenistic Civilisation* (3rd ed.; London, 1952), 98f. Cf. E. Carney, Macedonian Women, in J. Roisman et al. (eds.), *Brill's Companion to Ancient Macedonia* (Oxford, 2010), 409–427, 424–425.

73 I.D. Blois, Brave Priestesses of Philippi: The Cultic Role of Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2), *Religions* 15,127 (2024), 1–12, 1. Cf. J.T. Lamoreaux, *Ritual Women, and Philippi: Reimagining the Early Philippian Community* (Eugene, 2013), 43–100.

co-existence of female and male leaders in the increasingly popular cult of Isis.⁷⁴ Abrahamsen argues that the presence and prominence of women leaders in these contexts is reflected and continued in women in leadership roles in the early Christian assemblies. The material evidence suggests, according to Abrahamsen, that “the overall socio-political atmosphere of the city had to have been somewhat egalitarian and supportive of women, girls, goddesses and divinized females,” and emergent Christianity aligned to the cultural expectations and attributed leadership roles to women early on.⁷⁵ This line of argument – that the religious and cultural setting of the colony impacted and in fact predetermined the appointment of women in leadership roles – has been widely accepted among scholars of early Christian history.⁷⁶

Scholarship taking a bird’s-eye-view on the Roman Empire as a whole reveals a similar line of argument concerning the role of women in Greco-Roman culture compared to early Christian associations. Women in civic offices, as priestesses, as benefactors, as patrons, as entrepreneurs⁷⁷ are said to provide evidence that “Christianity ... simply rode the wave of social development and followed these tendencies to a certain extent. In this scenario, not much of the credit goes to the early church. Christianity was not the only game in town contributing to a transformation of patriarchy, but it was *one* of the games.”⁷⁸ Recent comparison of voluntary associations with Christian groups, especially, tend to downplay the differences between the two concerning the role of women.

We work our way back from the more general observations to the situation in Philippi, and then draw some tentative conclusions on female participation

74 V.A. Abrahamsen, *Women at Philippi: The Pagan and Christian Evidence*, *JFSR* 3.2 (1987), 17–30; V. Abrahamsen, *Women and Worship at Philippi: Diana/Artemis and Other Cults in the Early Christian Era* (Portland, 1995). See, for a more recent assessment, V. Abrahamsen, *Priestesses and Other Female Cult Leaders at Philippi in the Early Christian Era*, in J.A. Marchal (ed.), *The People Beside Paul: The Philippian Assembly and History from below* (ECL 17; Atlanta, 2015), 25–62.

75 Abrahamsen, *Women and Worship*, 81; cf. Abrahamsen, *Women at Philippi*, 30: “It is hardly likely that the growing Christian religion could have ignored women accustomed to being in leadership roles, unless it eliminated their roles by coercion.”

76 Cf., e.g., Ascough, *Paul's Macedonian Associations*, 134–136; J.A. Marchal, *Hierarchy, Unity, and Imitation: A Feminist Rhetorical Analysis of Power Dynamics in Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Atlanta, 2006), 90; J.R. Harrison, *Excavating the Urban and Country Life of Roman Philippi*, in J.R. Harrison and L.L. Welborn (eds.), *The First Urban Churches 4. Roman Philippi* (Atlanta, 2018), 1–61, 14.

77 See, e.g., E.A. Hemelrijk, *Hidden Lives, Public Personae: Women and Civic Life in the Roman West* (New York, 2015); S. Huyen, *Women in the New Testament World* (Oxford, 2019).

78 Introduction, in C. Osiek and M.Y. MacDonald (with J. Tulloch) (eds.), *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis, 2006), 1–6, 2–3.

and leadership in the Christ assembly. The recent study by Richard Last and Philip Harland on group survival analyzes the membership lists of 60 associations. Their sample indicates that, on average, just over a tenth of the members were female, although this distribution was uneven; 38 associations were exclusively open to men, and only two were exclusively for women. If women were active, they often played a role in financing the activities of the associations, “as external contributors, as leaders or as members.”⁷⁹ Not only is the figure of 10 percent of female members much higher than the estimate of others,⁸⁰ the authors also designate association participants as “members” or “contributors” – this seems “admirably gender-neutral,” as one reviewer observed, and “obscures the actual gender compositions of these associations.”⁸¹ This aligns to their main goal, which is to “demonstrate how to thoroughly diffuse into a larger world – rather than merely ‘contextualize’ – groups devoted to the Israelite god, including Jesus adherents.”⁸²

What can we say about the role of women in cult groups in Philippi? A few remarks will have to suffice. (1) As already mentioned, priestesses are documented for the cult of the divinized Livia in two inscriptions from the last third of the first century, giving the names of the priestess (*sacerdos*) Cornelia Asprilla⁸³ and – prominently placed in the forum – of the priestesses Iulia Auruncina, Iulia Modia, and Maecia Auruncina Calaviana, with the latter having sponsored the monument.⁸⁴ (2) Diana has a high priestess (*antistes*), Valeria Severa, as well as a priestess (*sacerdos*), Manta.⁸⁵ Priestesses had leadership roles: Their accumulated prestige, “in leading public processions, overseeing polis festivals, sitting in reserved seats at the theater, and having their

79 Last/Harland, *Group Survival*, 26.

80 Last/Harland, *Group Survival*, 24–25, refer to Hemelrijk, *Hidden Lives*, 181, who acknowledges that “some women actually were members or even officials of *collegia*, thus participating in the community life of their towns,” but concludes that overall this “tiny group ... seems negligible when compared to the numbers of male members and officials of these associations.” Her estimate is less than 3.5 percent female members.

81 R. Kraemer, Review of R. Last and Philip Harland, *Group Survival in the Ancient Mediterranean: Rethinking Material Conditions in the Landscape of Jews and Christians*. London/New York 2020, bmc.brynmawr.edu/2022/2022.09.04/ (accessed 2024-02-07).

82 Last and Harland, *Group Survival*, 2.

83 *I.Philippes* 2.1 118 = *I.Philippi*² 2 (on a sarcophagus; Kavala; ca. 80–90 CE).

84 *I.Philippes* 2.1 126 = *I.Philippi*² 226 (forum, 1st century). The fourth woman mentioned in the inscriptions, Octavia Polla, does not seem to have been a priestess. The sponsor, Maecia Auruncina Calaviana, has most probably also sponsored the honorary inscription for a certain Crispus (*I.Philippi*² 226 [forum, 1st century]).

85 *I.Philippes* 2.1 135 = *I.Philippi*² 451 (Doxato; 2nd/3rd century), *I.Philippi*² 519 (Kobaliste). The latter inscription contains two lists of names, which only include men apart from the priestess Manta.

images erected in sanctuaries, guaranteed them a symbolic capital that must not be underestimated in a world in which status carried long-lasting power indeed.⁸⁶ Overall, however, they “generally remained fixed within legal and social limits.”⁸⁷ (3) Isis was very popular in the colony and often thought of as attracting women but the inscriptional evidence is quite meagre. Inscriptions mention male priests,⁸⁸ (probably) a high priest (ἀρχιερεύς) and a gymnasiarch (γυμνασάρχος)⁸⁹ and only one female adherent, Prisca Fonteia, who was probably not honored as a priestess but as a benefactor of the cult.⁹⁰ (4) The impact of Dionysos on the city and its surrounding region even in Roman times will be explored in the subsequent section concerning the idea of afterlife. However, when it comes to the question of female participation, the inscriptions once again remain rather reserved.⁹¹ One of the dedication inscriptions is from a *thiasus* of maenads, i.e., devotees of Dionysos,⁹² and four others are dedicated by women.⁹³ Possibly freedwomen, the dedicators had some financial means and were able to conduct themselves like members of elite families. (5) To conclude our fleeting visit at a number of groups, the association of the *cultores Silvani* was certainly composed exclusively of males,⁹⁴ as seems to be the case of an Apollo association⁹⁵ and another association with an unknown purpose.⁹⁶ Whether or not there were mixed-gender associations in first century Philippi, we simply do not know. As a result, the evidence for the participation of women in the religious assemblies and cults of Philippi is less striking than oftentimes claimed.

86 J.B. Connelly, *Portrait of a Priestess: Women and Ritual in Ancient Greece* (Princeton, 2007), 24, quoted in Abrahamsen, *Priestesses*, 38.

87 Thus even Abrahamsen, *Priestesses*, 29.

88 *I.Philippi*² 175 and 581 (Angista; 2nd/3rd century): Lucius Titonius Suavis; *I.Philippi*² 190 (Akropolis; 3rd century) and 191 (Akropolis; 3rd century): Kallinikos; *I.Philippi*² 193 (Akropolis; 2nd/3rd century): Kastor.

89 *I.Philippi*² 311 (Basilika B'; 3rd century).

90 *I.Philippi*² 190. The priest Kallinikos is said to have dedicated the statue of Prisca Fonteia.

91 Pilhofer, *Philippi*, 1:42: “Was sich aus den epigraphischen Zeugnissen aber nicht ergibt, ist eine besondere Rolle von Frauen.” Differently Abrahamson, *Priestesses*, 42–46, and L. Portefaix, *Sisters Rejoice: Paul's Letter to the Philippians and Luke-Acts as seen by First Century Philippian Women* (CNT 20; Stockholm, 1988), 98–114, who analyzes 17 relevant inscriptions, seven of which mention women.

92 *I.Philippi*² 340 (Basilika B').

93 *I.Philippi*² 338 (Basilika B'): Marronia Eutychia, mentioned together with her husband; *I.Philippi*² 339 (Basilika B'): Pomponia Hilara; *I.Philippi*² 341 (Basilika B'): Salvia Pisidia; *I.Philippi*² 342 (Basilika B'): Pisidia Helpis.

94 See the lists in *I.Philippi*² 163, 164, 165, and 166 (Acropolis; 2nd century).

95 *I.Philippi*² 509b (Drama; 2nd/3rd century).

96 *I.Philippi*² 091 (Raktcha; 2nd century).

How about the Christ group in Philippi? Carolyn Osiek argued: “Whether it is Lydia according to Acts or Euodia and Syntyche according to Philippians, women are key players in the development of the church there.”⁹⁷ It is not at all unlikely that women were counted among the ἐπίσκοποι and διάκονοι mentioned in Phil 1:1; maybe Euodia and Syntyche were part of this group of ecclesial leaders and sponsored by Paul.⁹⁸ Possibly, Paul deliberately reflects “the elevated social, religious, and political status accorded more widely to Macedonian women.”⁹⁹ Yet more importantly, Paul in his missionary endeavor programmatically envisions Christ assemblies to be mixed-gender, not only in terms of female leadership positions. In fact, he “assumes social hierarchies that are embedded in urban structures in order to destabilize them and deploy them for new ends.”¹⁰⁰ Not only does he deconstruct social boundaries like status, ethnicity, and gender, his idea of an alternative ἐκκλησία offers women opportunities for participation, which are unattainable for them in the political structure of the colony, and in his “redefinition of cult” he commends women for their priestly role, even if they are from non-elite families.¹⁰¹ The peculiarity of female activity within the predominant cultural ecosystem becomes evident in both its being critiqued from within the early Christian movement (e.g., the Pastorals; 1 Clem 21,7) and its being mocked from outside.¹⁰² Overall, it seems safe to say that the programmatic inclusion of women contributed

97 C. Osiek, *Philippians, Philemon* (ANTC; Nashville, 2000), 27.

98 Some identify Euodia and Syntyche with the διάκονοι (e.g., D. Peterlin, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians in the Light of Disunity in the Church* [NovTSup 79; Leiden, 1995], 106–111), some with the ἐπίσκοποι (e.g., J. Reumann, *Philippians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 33B; New Haven, 2008], 632; Osiek, *Philippians*, 111–112), some more generally with both (L.L. Belleville, *Philippians: A New Covenant Commentary* [Eugene, 2021], 87).

99 Harrison, *Excavating the Urban and Country Life*, 14.

100 H.O. Maier, *New Testament Urbanities*, in S. Rau and J. Rüpke (eds.), *Religion and Urbanity Online* (Berlin, 2024).

101 Blois, *Brave Priestesses*, 6. Blois places Philippians in a metaphorical-cultic framework: “Euodia and Syntyche are members of this union of co-laborers, fellow liturgists alongside Epaphroditus, Clement, and even Paul himself, all of whom expend themselves for the sake of the community’s progress in the gospel.”

102 See the chapter “Pagan Reaction to Early Christian Women in the Second Century CE” in M.Y. MacDonald, *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion: The Power of the Hysterical Woman* (Cambridge, 1996, 49–126), on Pliny, Marcus Cornelius Fronto, Lucius Apuleius, Lucian of Samosata, Galen of Pergamum, Celsus. One should add voices by early Christian authors who take up mocking and critical sentiments, such as Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 8.4–5, about the “gullible women” in Christ groups.

to the popularity of Christ groups in a city like Philippi.¹⁰³ More specific pull factors, reconstructed from the local evidence, remain speculative – whether female devotees of Diana, Dionysos, and Isis were attracted to the Christ group by the expectation of bodily transformation (Phil 3:20–21),¹⁰⁴ or appreciated Paul's critique of the obligation of childbirth associated with the Artemis and other cults and his redefinition of death in the face of still born children and women dying in childbirth (Phil 3:19).¹⁰⁵

3.5 *Life after Death: Being with Christ*

This leads us to a final issue. Widespread funeral practices in associations can be considered “forms of real and imagined sociability”, according to John Kloppenborg. “For the member's part, he or she could imagine being accompanied to the grave, feted at the banquet, and buried along with his or her mates. The connectivity that had been part of association life was imagined to continue after death.”¹⁰⁶ Tomb inscriptions, depictions of meal scenes in tombs, or grave offerings illustrate the afterlife hopes of contemporaries of the first generations of Christ followers. It would be misguided to assert, in the words of Paul, that all non-believers have “no hope” (1 Thess 4:13).¹⁰⁷

Three examples of material culture from Philippi and its territory might be able to illustrate existing hopes and expectations for an afterlife, with which early Christian eschatological beliefs were competing. While certainly this-worldly benefits play a major role in an individual's decision to join a certain cult or religious group, the question of what to expect after death cannot be sidelined. Death, after all, “is a mighty source of religion and religious belief. Man fears death instinctively and wonders what will befall him after death.”¹⁰⁸ The omnipresence of Artemis/Diana in the rock reliefs of the Acropolis has

103 C. Leonhard, Die griechisch-römischen Vereine und die Mahlfeiern der christlichen Gruppen, in B. Eckhardt and C. Leonhard (eds.), *Juden, Christen und Vereine im Römischen Reich* (RVV 75; Berlin, 2018), 255–291, 286.

104 Portefaix, *Sisters Rejoice*, 152: “To women in particular it might have seemed attractive to be able to retain youth and beauty in combination with earthly personality and to be equated with the male sex ...”.

105 Lamoreaux, *Ritual Women*, “Paul's rhetoric recontextualized already active rituals for women.” In this interpretation, the enigmatic term κοιλία is translated with “womb.”

106 Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations*, 274.

107 Cf. R.S. Ascough, Paul's “Apocalypticism” and the Jesus-Associations at Thessalonica and Corinth, in R. Cameron and M.P. Miller (eds.), *Redescribing Paul and the Corinthians* (ECL 5; Atlanta, 2011), 151–186, 160.

108 M.P. Nilsson, *The Dionysiac Mysteries of the Hellenistic and Roman Age* (Lund, 1957), 130.

intrigued scholars of Philippi for a long time.¹⁰⁹ Lilian Portefaix claimed “that Philippian women identified themselves with the divine huntress in the hope of their being identified with her after death.” Some reliefs which represent women next to Artemis may have been created to express the expectation for women to “become sharers of her independent life – a way of living unattainable to them in this mortal life.”¹¹⁰ This interpretation certainly is as innovative as it is speculative, and it seems to me that subsequent scholarship has not embraced it.¹¹¹

The other two examples are two epitaphs which explicitly express the idea of postmortem existence:¹¹² the epitaph of Allouporis from Drama (1st century BCE) and the epitaph for a child from Doxato (3rd century CE).

Allouporis, son of Ketrezeis.
 Hero, greetings!
 A son of Ketrezeis, I lie
 in this grave. At the age
 of twenty I died.
 I, who died early,
 poor Allouporis, depart to Hades (εἶμι καθ’ Ἀδην).
 Ever I mourn my untimely fate (αἰεὶ δὲ κλαίω πότμον ἄωρον ἐμόν).¹¹³

The tone of this Greek inscription in two distiches is fraught with tension, as on the one hand, the young man is greeted as a hero and on the other hand his early death with twenty years and his eternal destiny in Hades are deplored.

Lastly, the exceptional third century Latin epitaph from Doxato – a village 20km from Philippi – graphically illustrates that adherents of the Dionysian mysteries believed “that they would lead a life of eternal bliss” in the Elysian fields.¹¹⁴ In the first stanza of the elaborate poetic text the parents mourn the

109 See, recently, A. Rizakis, Reconstructing the Religious Landscape of the Roman Colony of Philippi, in S.J. Friesen, M. Lychounas and D.N. Schowalter (eds.), *Philippi, From Colonia Augusta to Communitas Christiana: Religion and Society in Transition* (NovTSup 186; Leiden, 2022), 36–67, 47–50. Artemis/Diana appears on 91 rock reliefs.

110 Portefaix, *Sisters Rejoice*, 96.

111 Pilhofer, *Philippi* 1:42, deems it interesting for theological inquiry but does not follow his own lead.

112 See, for a recent discussion, P. Oakes, Popular Heroization in Philippian Funerary Epigraphy, in S.J. Friesen, M. Lychounas and D.N. Schowalter (eds.), *Philippi, From Colonia Augusta to Communitas Christiana: Religion and Society in Transition* (NovTSup 186; Leiden, 2022), 252–277, 269–271.

113 *I.Philippi*² 509, trans. Oakes, Popular Heroization, 269, who follows Pilhofer’s translation.

114 Nilsson, *Dionysiac Mysteries*, 130.

death of their child, while in the second stanza they express their hope of restoration in vivid terms:

¹ [...] We are tormented, defeated by the wound
² and restored again you live in Elysian fields (*reparatus item vivis in Elysiis*).
 Thus it is pleasing to the gods [for you] to
 live in eternal/different form (*a[e]terna/a[]terna vivere forma*),¹¹⁵
 who are well worthy of the upper light.
 The godhead had promised gifts to you for your chaste life
 once easy simplicity had been ordered by the god.
 Either the tattooed women initiated into the mysteries of Bromios [= Dionysos]
 call you into the flower-bearing meadows of the Satyrs
 or the basket-bearing Naiads demand equally
 that you lead festive bands with flaming torches [...].¹¹⁶

It is surprising that despite the significance of the Dionysos cult it did not leave a strong imprint on epitaphs from Philippi and its surrounding territory. However, a notable aspect of this particular epitaph is that it “places the child into the divine entourage” and expects the “hope of post-mortem existence with a deity.”¹¹⁷

Paul's view of the afterlife was not incompatible with views expressed in the material culture of Philippi. Peter Oakes recently contended that Paul's audience would likely have viewed afterlife imagery in the letter (cf. 1:23; 2:9; 3:11, 14, 21) through the lens of postmortem heroization.¹¹⁸ Regardless of the validity of his intriguing thesis, my interest lies once more in aspects that may not neatly align with the cultural repertoire of Paul's audience. Overall, the evidence for the expectation of life after death is scarce, circumstantial, and non-programmatic. Oakes discusses a total of 228 Roman period funerary monuments from Philippi and its territory and concludes that (only) the mentioned two explicitly talk about afterlife. Furthermore, the reference to postmortem life in the presence of a deity is limited to the untimely death of a child and therefore shaped by the grieving parents' hope that the unfulfilled earthly life potential of the child will be somehow redeemed in another realm. All this might be explained by the contingencies of the findings, yet it is

115 On the different readings – *alterna forma* or *aeterna forma* –, which is not a negligible issue but cannot be discussed here, see Pilhofer, *Philippi* 2:518–520.

116 *I.Philippi*² 439, trans. Oakes, *Popular Heroization*, 270, who follows T.M. Watson (adapted).

117 Oakes, *Popular Heroization*, 270.

118 Cf. Oakes, *Popular Heroization*, 275: “[T]he comparability between Paul's language and Philippian heroization suggests that the Philippian Christians would probably initially have heard most of Paul's afterlife texts in terms of Greek (or Thracian or Roman) ideas, rather than Jewish ones.”

nevertheless remarkable. Most importantly, however, while most references to afterlife in Philippians can be meaningfully contextualized – possibly in terms of heroization –, “there is nothing in the Philippian epigraphy akin to ‘the resurrection from the dead.’”¹¹⁹ Now, the hermeneutical key for Paul’s statements on resurrection is his conviction that the resurrection of one individual, Christ, anticipates eschatological resurrection (Phil 3:10) and grants ongoing existence “with Christ” (Phil 1:23). This is a novel, programmatic idea that not only lacks analogies in the memorial culture of Philippi and its Greco-Roman ecosystem but also in Jewish apocalyptic writings.¹²⁰ To put it more contrastively, Paul’s hope of resurrection is “affirmed ... over against the Dionysian construct of the afterlife.”¹²¹ The scenario of a continuous communion with the divine could in fact have been perceived by some listeners as an “an astonishing, even life-changing vision,” as recently argued by Teresa Morgan.¹²² Christ’s proclaimed exultation over all heavenly and subterranean powers (Phil 2:10: ἐπουρανίων καὶ ἐπιγείων καὶ καταχθονίων) could have been another relevant clue as to why someone would have decided to become part of this emerging small group – “despite the considerable social shame of being attached to the early Christian movement.”¹²³

4 Conclusion: Imagination and Comparison

Obviously, much more could be said, on Paul, Philippi, and the Philippians. And much more could be said on the question of early Christian embeddedness and distinctiveness in a city like Philippi. Our exemplary study brings us back to the initial questions: Can the material evidence of Philippi bear the burden of robust comparison? Is it at all possible to take a local-historical approach to write about the earliest history of the Philippian Christ assembly? The answer is yes and no. The ruins of Philippi, the priestesses’ names etched in stone, the rock carvings on the Acropolis, the grand honorific monuments, the

119 Oakes, *Popular Heroization*, 273.

120 C. Jacobi, *Auferstehung, Erscheinungen, Weisungen des Auferstandenen*, in J. Schröter and C. Jacobi (eds.), *Jesus Handbuch* (Tübingen, 2017), 490–504, 500–501.

121 Harrison, *Excavating the Urban and Country Life*, 23: “[...] Succinctly put, the cruciformity of believers in the present precedes their eschatological glorification (Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 15:42–44, 49; 2 Cor 3:18; 5:17, 21; Phil 3:10–11, 21).”

122 T. Morgan, *Being “in Christ” in the Letters of Paul: Saved Through Christ and in His Hands* (WUNT 449; Tübingen, 2020), 44. She goes on: “one with the power, in itself, to attract new enquirers to the gospel, and to raise the hopes of community members beyond anything most cults could offer.”

123 Harrison, *Excavating the Urban and Country Life*, 24.

streets and shops: though they remain eerily silent, they hold tales of the joys, worries, and daily lives of the colony's residents – including the first adherents of Christ. They stir our imagination, while urging us to use it thoughtfully and with balance.

Imagination is extremely dangerous, of course, for without sufficient self-restraint, one can imagine anything (especially in matters of religion). But without imagination, our dry and dusty empirical data – the texts carefully culled to render a florilegium of religion-specific excerpts, the objects dug up, the topography, terrain, and remains of particular sites – are impossible to turn into a compelling picture.¹²⁴

Likewise, the task of comparison requires balance and methodological sensitivity. Comparisons between Christ assemblies and associations have once again become a hotbed of research. The leaders of the current discussion now tend to classify the Christ group in a city like Philippi as just one association among many. They argue that there are gradual, not categorical differences. John Kloppenborg emphatically underscores that gatherings of Christ were not at all uncommon. He seeks to “emphasize the ways in which Christ assemblies were comparable with other small face-to-face groups,” insisting that “[t]he habit of much scholarship has been to dramatize the extent to which Christ assemblies (and Judean assemblies) were unique.” Tongue-in-cheek, he addresses the concerns of researchers who worry about early Christian identity when compared with pagan communities.¹²⁵ Kloppenborg's work represents the trend of embedding early Christianity into its contemporary religious and cultural milieus – without disruptions and disjoints. However, this approach risks falling off the other side of the horse, reducing novel and unusual aspects of the Jesus movement to what already existed in ancient culture. The individual is subsumed under the general; splashes of color disappear into the gray of distant analysis.

The task will be to strike a balance between overemphasizing distinctive features and flattening them out, avoiding both an ahistorical, apologetic stress on the uniqueness of Christianity and the equally ahistorical tendency to paint everything with the same brush. We need to identify “certain forms of distinctiveness coalescing among Christ groups amid a smorgasbord of attractions offered by the variety of associations of the Greco-Roman world.”¹²⁶ Concepts

124 J. Elsner and I. Rutherford, Introduction, in *idem* (eds.), *Pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Antiquity: Seeing the Gods* (Oxford, 2005), 1–38, 6 (I am indebted to Dr. Andreas Heidel for this reference).

125 Cf., e.g., Harland, *Dynamics of Identity*; Last/Harland, *Group Survival*.

126 Longenecker, *Taking Stock of Where We Are*, 3.

of emergence, which have long been employed in natural sciences and sociology, could provide promising avenues. They account for changes in complex systems, which includes the emergence and establishment of a new religious movement. They focus as much on what is analogous and similar as they focus on what is distinctive and dissimilar.¹²⁷ Without postulating or even dramatizing the uniqueness of the Jesus movement, it is worthwhile to pay close and careful attention to the rough edges that cannot be fitted in, the chips and cracks that open up, its innovative potential and distinctiveness.

As the essay tried to show, to this belong (1) the keen project of forming a new social imaginary – an alternative ἐκκλησία, (2) a redefinition of the categories of shame and honor, (3) a unique missionary energy and global recruitment strategy, (4) a programmatic openness to female participation, and (5) the idea of postmortem existence as a continuous communion with God.

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¹²⁷ G. Woolf, Empires, Diasporas and the Emergence of Religions, in J. Carleton-Paget and J. Lieu (eds.), *Christianity in the Second Century* (Cambridge, 2017), 25–38, 30, suggests centering on the following aspects when thinking about the emergence of religions: "a distinctive world view, an exclusive membership, some unique rituals and beliefs, a group of distinctive symbols and perhaps texts of special significance for co-religionists, a characteristic ethical stance and usually also some structures of authority not congruent with those of wider society."

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