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## SNSF-Project “ECCLESIAE – Early Christian Centers: Local Expressions, Social Identities, and Actor Engagement” (2021–2025)

“Christianity was a religion of towns and cities; the larger the town or city, the larger (even relatively, it is probable) was the number of the Christians. This gave it an extraordinary advantage.”<sup>1</sup> With this pithy statement, Adolf von Harnack characterized emergent Christianity as inherently tied to urban settings. In recent years, both research on Christianity as an urban phenomenon<sup>2</sup> (though not without severe criticism<sup>3</sup>) and on the concept of “urban religion”<sup>4</sup> have been burgeoning. The project “ECCLESIAE – Early Christian Centers: Local Expressions, Social Identities, and Actor Engagement” participates in this research focus and combines it with a

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1 A. von Harnack, *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums*, vol. 1: *Die Mission in Wort und Tat*, 4th ed. (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1924), 948.

2 See the book series *Civitatium Orbis Mediterranei Studia* (COMES; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013–), *The First Urban Churches* (9 vols.; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015–), and *New Documents Illustrating the History of Early Christianity* (5 vols.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, forthcoming). Other recent series focus on specific geographic regions: *Early Christianity in Asia Minor* (ECAM; Leiden: Brill, 2013–) and *Early Christianity in Greece* (ECG; Leiden: Brill, 2023–). Among essay collections, reference should be made to R. von Bendemann and M. Tiwald, eds., *Das frühe Christentum und die Stadt*, BWANT 198 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2012); S. Walton, P.R. Trebilco, and D.W.J. Gill, eds., *The Urban World and the First Christians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2017); M. Tiwald and J.K. Zangenberg, eds., *Early Christian Encounters with Town and Countryside: Essays on the Urban and Rural Worlds of Early Christianity*, NTOA/SUNT 126 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021).

3 Cf. T.A. Robinson, *Who Were the First Christians: Dismantling the Urban Thesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). See the helpful discussion in J. Rüpke and E.R. Urciuoli, “Urban Religion beyond the City: Theory and Practice of a Specific Constellation of Religious Geography-Making,” *Religion* 53 (2023), 289–313.

4 Cf. J. Rüpke, *Urban Religion: A Historical Approach to Urban Growth and Religious Change* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020); A. Lätzer-Lasar and E.R. Urciuoli, eds., *Urban Religion in Late Antiquity*, RVV 76 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021).

fresh examination of the ever so captivating question of why the Christian movement survived in antiquity. Employing established and innovative approaches, this project delves into the taxonomy and social dynamics of urban Christian groups during the formative phase of early Christianity. Moving beyond traditional methodologies that tended to portray social structures as static phenomena, *ECCLESIAE* explores dynamic narratives that encompass the emergence of these groups, their networking and interactions, the production and reception of texts, and the negotiation of identities. Employing a comparative approach that focuses on specific cities – Antioch, Ephesus, Colossae, Philippi, Corinth, and Rome – the project investigates the manner in which the early Jesus movement and its religious, intellectual, and social manifestations developed within the wider context of the ancient Mediterranean world.

The project is interdisciplinary in nature and extends beyond the conventional research areas of New Testament Studies. It encompasses fields such as numismatics, archaeology, iconography, epigraphy, and papyrology, and employs a diverse range of methods, including identity theories, Social Network Analysis, leadership theories, concepts of emergence, and narratological approaches. A descriptive task, utilizing model-based application of theories, is therefore combined with a historical task.

The project is funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (project no. 100015\_192387) from 2021 to 2025 and led by Benjamin Schliesser (University of Bern), with Jan Rüggeimeier (University of Bonn) serving as the associate leader. The core project consists of four individual PhD projects; one additional PhD project and two post-doc projects are part of the more comprehensive research scheme. The group facilitates workshops, conferences, and projects in collaboration with other research clusters such as the Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies at the University of Erfurt, the Research Group “Qahal and Ek-klesia” of the Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft für Theologie, and The Society for the Study of Early Christianity (SSEC) at Macquarie University. Several visits to historical sites of significance to the project’s objectives have been and will be conducted. In addition, the book series “Early Christian Centers” and the video essay series “UR:BAN – Urban Religion: Bridging Ancient and New” have been initiated.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See below. For further information, see the project’s website at <https://www.earlychristiancenters.com> and [https://www.instagram.com/early\\_christian\\_centers/](https://www.instagram.com/early_christian_centers/).

## 1 Corinth: The Influence of Religious Experience on the Development of Early Christianity in Roman Corinth in the First Two Centuries

The notion of "religious experience" within the study of the development of the early Christian movement has been and continues to be a contentious category for several reasons.<sup>6</sup> One of the foremost challenges lies in the inherent complexity of grasping human experiences within a rational and materialistic paradigm, which indisputably forms the foundational framework of contemporary historical methodologies. However, ignoring or even neglecting the category of "religious experience" means to ignore something that the New Testament and early Christian writings presuppose as a given dynamic and crucial factor for the development of this movement.

Therefore, the post-doc research project by Andreas-Christian Heidel is concerned with the question how religious experience can be described as a factor in historical scholarship in general and specifically in the study of the development of early Christian communities. Religious experience refers to an individual's encounter perceived as a distinct or extraordinary phenomenon, as described by Anne Taves in relation to Émile Durkheim's work.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the (supposed) source of this experience is interpreted as something that remains beyond human control but that can communicate ("reveal") itself to the human being and even take possession of them, in extreme cases even against their will.

One of the most important circumstances to consider is the fact that we cannot grasp experience itself. Rather, we are invariably confronted with experience that has already undergone interpretation. Furthermore, this interpretation is contingent upon the cultural and social background of the interpreter. At the same time, this culturally shaped reception of the experience can also be shaped by the experience, especially when there is dissonance with familiar and expected patterns. We can explore how individuals respond to such experiences, how they react and how these reactions leave traces within testimonies. Accordingly, we can pursue an

<sup>6</sup> Cf. M. Batluck, "Religious Experience in New Testament Research," *CurBR* 9 (2010), 339–363. See also C. Shantz, "Opening the Black Box: New Prospects for Analyzing Religious Experience," in *Experientia*, vol. 2, ed. C. Shantz and R.A. Werline, EJL 35 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2012), 1–15; I. Czachesz, "Filled with New Wine? Religious Experience and Social Dynamics in the Corinthian Church," *ibid.*, 71–90.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. A. Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 16–29.

investigation of these reactions in various dimensions, including the physical, emotional, rational, and behavioral aspects.

Thus, Heidel's research involves a religious-scientific and historical-phenomenological investigation of selected dimensions of the urban environment of the early Christians in Roman Corinth of the first and second centuries with a focus on their potential to facilitate religious experience(s). The context of Roman Corinth fits this goal in three ways: (1) We have early Christian sources, covering a period of about 100 to 150 years (1/2 Corinthians, 1 Clement, Dionysius). (2) Because of the intensive excavation activity of the American School of Classical Studies in Athens since 1896, the archaeological record for Roman Corinth and its environs is readily available. (3) As a newly established Roman colony with a significant Greek heritage, Roman Corinth brings together the customs of both cultures.

The current framework incorporates an examination of the cult of Asclepius, the cult of Isis, domestic religion (or more precisely "lived religion"<sup>8</sup>) and pilgrimage as well as local religious traditions. Heidel's aim is, firstly, to describe a "spectrum of expectations" for religious experience individuals may have within these phenomena, and secondly, to inquire whether the assemblies of Jesus followers align with these established patterns or whether they possess distinctive qualities. In other words, do they provide an alternative or a surplus to these potentials?

## 2 Ephesus: Early Christianity in Ephesus and the Portrayal of Female Christians

Ephesus functioned as a trading hub within the Mediterranean world and as a center for exchange of religious ideas and practices. As such, this metropolis offers a compelling case study for the analysis of early Christianity's urban dynamics and its negotiations of gender roles in a Greco-Roman context.

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<sup>8</sup> The "lived religion" approach focuses on individual religious actors, the signs they use, and the actions they take to engage in religious communication in different places and situations. Cf., e. g., V. Gasparini et al., "Pursuing Lived Ancient Religion," in *Lived Religion in the Ancient Mediterranean World: Approaching Religious Transformations from Archaeology, History and Classics*, ed. V. Gasparini et al. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020), 1–8; J. Rüpke, *Pantheon: Geschichte der antiken Religionen* (Munich: Beck, 2016), 262–269.

Roman Ephesus is known for the prominent roles carried out by women in various aspects of society.<sup>9</sup> Starting from the first century CE onwards, women have increasingly been attested as *prytaneis* of Asia's capital city. In the second century CE, "[m]ore than one in four [*prytaneis*] were women; in more than half of those cases the husbands, fathers, and sons of the women *prytaneis* are not mentioned."<sup>10</sup> It seems that the prestigious and public office at the city's *prytaneion* was accessible to individuals of both genders during Ephesus's most prosperous time, which began with the reign of Augustus and extended well into the third century CE. Guy M. Rogers thus calls for a "re-thinking of how women were represented publicly in the most important city in Asia"<sup>11</sup> – an endeavor that holds the potential to enhance our perception of early Christian gender roles as well.

The time period mentioned marks the emergence and early development of Christianities at Ephesus. Yet, despite our literary knowledge of a noticeable Jewish tradition and, later on, also of Christian communities at Ephesus, documentary sources and archaeological findings for both remain scarce. Paul Trebilco speaks of a "frustrating lack of explicit evidence."<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, early Christian literary sources refer to a fascinating plurality of Christian traditions in first- to second-century Ephesus, with prominent figures such as Paul, Prisca, or John closely linked to its remembered history.<sup>13</sup> Several early Christian texts can be associated with an

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9 This applies to Roman Asia Minor in general, see J. Nollé, "Frauen wie Omphale? Überlegungen zu 'politischen' Ämtern von Frauen im kaiserzeitlichen Kleinasien," in *Reine Männersache? Frauen in Männerdomänen der antiken Welt*, ed. M.H. Dettenhofer (Köln: Böhlau, 1994), 229–259; R. van Bremen, *The Limits of Participation: Women and Civic Life in the Greek East in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods* (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1996); R.A. Kearsley, "Women and Public Life in Imperial Asia Minor: Hellenistic Tradition and Augustan Ideology," *Ancient West and East* 4 (2005), 98–121. For Ephesus, see S.J. Friesen, "Ephesian Women and Men in Public Office during the Roman Imperial Period," in *100 Jahre Österreichische Forschungen in Ephesos: Akten des Symposiums Wien 1995*, ed. H. Friesinger and F. Krinzinger (Vienna: VOAW, 1999), 107–113; G.M. Rogers, "Some *Prytaneis* of Ephesos," in *Ephesos as a Religious Centre under the Principate*, ed. A. Black, C. Thomas, and T. Thompson, WUNT 488 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022), 95–114.

10 Rogers, "Some *Prytaneis*" (see n. 9), 97.

11 Rogers, "Some *Prytaneis*" (see n. 9), 97.

12 Trebilco refers to the second century CE (after Ignatius), yet, except for Christian literary sources, the same is true with regard to the first century CE. See P. Trebilco, "The Acts of John and Christian Communities in Ephesus in the Mid-Second Century AD," in *Authority and Identity in Emerging Christianities in Asia Minor and Greece*, ed. C. Breytenbach and J. Ogereau, *Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* 103 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 33–61, at 33.

13 See P. Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius*, WUNT 166 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004).

Ephesian/Asian setting, among them some Pauline letters, the *Corpus Johanneum*, the Pastoral Epistles, the *Epistula apostolorum*,<sup>14</sup> Ignatius's letter to the Ephesians, the Acts of John, or the Acts of Thecla and Paul. Amongst them, we find narrative descriptions of early Christian women, who navigated complex social affiliations within an urban Greco-Roman context.

The research project on Ephesus by Florence Gantenbein portrays several female Christian characters in relation to the city's specific connotations of social categories, such as a person's religious identity, their gender, class, status, etc. To achieve a more comprehensive representation of ancient women in an Ephesian context, the project considers a wide range of sources, such as early Christian texts (beyond canonical boundaries), Greco-Roman literature and literary sources as well as epigraphic material.<sup>15</sup> The widely debated question about the "role," "representation," and "agency" of women in early Christianity is thus examined from a local, socio-historical, and philological perspective.<sup>16</sup>

### 3 Colossae: Networks in the Early Jesus Movement – Mediating and Forming Theology in a New Religious Movement

The early Jesus movement was distinguished by a notable characteristic: the presence of a high level of connectivity among its members, setting it apart from most other Greco-Roman associations.<sup>17</sup> Individuals within the movement actively engaged in travel to visit or establish new Christ groups, they corresponded through written letters to distant cities, and collected

14 Cf. F. Gantenbein, "Guides to Those Who Believe" (EpAp 43:7): A Re-consideration of the Wise Virgins as Role Models of Ministry in the *Epistula Apostolorum*," *EC* 13 (2022), 145–162; ead., "Epistula Apostolorum," in *Early New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. C. Edwards, *Ancient Literature for New Testament Studies* 9 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2022), 395–415.

15 See also E.H. Karaman, *Ephesian Women in Greco-Roman and Early Christian Perspective*, WUNT 2/474 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).

16 See J.M. Lieu, "What Did Women Do for the Early Church? The Recent History of a Question," in *The Church on Its Past*, ed. P.D. Clarke and C. Methuen, *Studies in Church History* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013), 261–281; S. Huyen, *Women in the New Testament World*, *Essentials of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

17 Cf. B. Schliesser, "Vom Jordan an den Tiber: Wie die Jesusbewegung in den Städten des Römischen Reiches ankam," *ZTK* 116 (2019), 1–45, at 35.

funds to support fellow believers who were often personally unknown to them.

Hanna-Maria Hengel's project adopts a comprehensive approach by examining the relational dynamics between Pauline co-workers and (members of) local Christ groups, rather than focusing solely on Paul as an individual. The investigation draws upon the Letter to the Colossians as a primary source. Even though authorship of this letter is still disputed,<sup>18</sup> it can offer a glance into the network of emerging Christianity in Asia Minor. In mentioning at least three different local Christ groups and thirteen names of individuals, Colossians provides a good foundation for conducting a Social Network Analysis (SNA).<sup>19</sup>

As a set of methods, SNA originated in the Social Sciences. With the help of Graph Theory, actors and links between them can be plotted and analyzed. In this approach individuals, groups, organizations, or even states can be conceived as actors. Links can represent family ties, friendship, membership, and so on. Different tools are offered by SNA to investigate network structure as well as the centrality of individual actors.

This project utilizes SNA to examine the early Christian network presented in the Letter to the Colossians. The goal is to gain a deeper understanding of the roles of early Christian actors and their respective position and status within their groups. This allows to draw implications about the flow of information in this network. It is crucial to contextualize the results obtained from SNA within their socio-historical framework to ensure accurate interpretation. Also, the geographical network of the local Christ groups in Colossians needs to be taken into consideration for the interpretation. This way, the project aims to establish hypotheses regarding the role of individual actors and groups as well as the transmission of theological ideas during the early stages of the Jesus movement. Moreover, not only the dissemination of ideas is a topic of interest but also the formation of theological thoughts within the context of the early Christian network.

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<sup>18</sup> P. Foster, *Colossians*, BNTC (London: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 2016), 73–78, provides a thorough overview up to 2013. See also H.-M. Hengel, "Did Paul Know Colossians? Revisiting the Composition of Colossians" (currently peer-reviewed).

<sup>19</sup> For a brief introduction on SNA, cf. I. Czachesz, "Network Science in Biblical Studies: Introduction," *Annali di Storia dell'Esgesi* 39 (2022), 9–26.

## 4 Philippi: A Study of Acts 16 against the Background of the Roman Colony of Philippi

In recent social-historical studies of early Christianity in its urban setting, an “institutional” perspective has served as the guiding paradigm. In the examination of the early Christian movement and its interaction with ancient urban culture, there has been a notable interest in comparing Christ assemblies with Greco-Roman associations.<sup>20</sup> This also holds true to research on the Christ groups in the Roman colony of Philippi, where the comparison was prominently advanced by Richard Ascough.<sup>21</sup>

As with all such historical studies, the lack of sources presents a significant challenge in studying this subject. In the case of Philippi, the question arises as to how the source value of the local association inscriptions (such as those of the *cultores Silvani* from the second and third centuries)<sup>22</sup> should be assessed in terms of their potential to shed light on the organization of Christ assemblies in the first century.<sup>23</sup>

Niklas Walder’s project evaluates contemporary research and pertinent local evidence while also integrating a distinctly non-institutional perspective on early Christianity in Philippi. This approach takes Acts 16 as its starting point and aims to redirect attention towards individuals who are mentioned in Acts 16, examining them from a “subject-oriented” perspective within the context of a socio-historical reconstruction of ancient Philippi.<sup>24</sup>

As is customary in (ancient) narratives, Acts does not provide a meticulous record of historical events but instead deliberately omits and refines details to ensure narrative consistency, resulting in gaps and undisclosed information (such as the fate of Paul in Rome). However, knowledgeable readers, acquainted with the historical context they shared with

20 J. Kloppenborg, *Christ’s Associations: Connecting and Belonging in the Ancient City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

21 R. Ascough, *Paul’s Macedonian Associations: The Social Context of Philippians and 1 Thessalonians*, WUNT 2/161 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).

22 P. Pilhofer, ed., *Philippi*, vol. 2: *Katalog der Inschriften von Philippi*, 2nd rev. ed., WUNT 119 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), nos. 163–166.

23 B. Eckhardt, “Paulus und die Vereine: Korinth, Philippi, Thessalonike,” in *Juden, Christen und Vereine im Römischen Reich*, ed. B. Eckhardt and C. Leonhard, RVV 75 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018), 131–162.

24 Cf. J. Rügge-meier, “Ein Streifzug durch Roms Gassen und Viertel: Subjektorientierte Perspektiven auf die stadtrömischen Christinnen und Christen im ersten Jahrhundert,” in *Talking God in Society: Multidisciplinary (Re)constructions of Ancient (Con)texts*, vol. 1: *Theories and Applications*, ed. U. Eisen and H. Mader, NTOA/SUNT 120 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020), 307–338, at 307–312.

the author and thus well versed in the ancient setting described in Acts, could effectively interpret the text by drawing upon their cultural and historical knowledge: "Ancient readers used cultural knowledge to fill in the gaps left by the author."<sup>25</sup>

In Acts 16, the unfolding narratives are contextualized within a particular setting: the characters are situated on the stage of Philippi, a Roman colony in the first century within the province of Macedonia. Ancient recipients, in turn, interpreted this narrative and its characters through the lens of their knowledge of the circumstances in Philippi or analogous information about other Roman colonies.

While we may lack direct access to the implied background in the author's or the recipients' imagination, and our socio-historically reconstructed Philippi may not perfectly align with their envisioned Philippi, a comprehensive local-historical (*lokalgeschichtliche*) examination of Philippi in conjunction with the Acts narrative remains the most dependable approach for understanding Acts 16 and its characters within the specific historical and geographic context of Philippi.

This project adopts a multifaceted methodological approach, in line with recent scholarly developments,<sup>26</sup> and places particular emphasis on the numerous inscriptions from Philippi.<sup>27</sup> The primary goal is to reassess and gain a better understanding of characters like Lydia, the purple trader, the pythoness slave girl, and the prison guard within the socio-historical context of Philippi. It seeks to analyze how our contemporary understanding of the narrative sequences in Philippi evolves when viewed through this perspective.

## 5 Antioch: Early Christianity in Antioch and Forms of Leadership in the Early Church

Antioch on the Orontes held a distinct position as a commercial and administrative hub, rendering it a significant context for the Jesus move-

25 Hylen, *Women in the New Testament World* (see n. 16), 165.

26 E.g., L. Bormann, *Philippi: Stadt und Christengemeinde zur Zeit des Paulus*, NovTSup 78 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 1; C. Brélaz, "First-Century Philippi: Contextualizing Paul's Visit," in *The First Urban Churches*, vol. 4: *Roman Philippi*, ed. J.R. Harrison and L.L. Welborn (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018), 153–188, at 154f.

27 Pilhofer, *Inschriften von Philippi* (see n. 22), and C. Brélaz, ed., *Corpus des inscriptions grecques et latines de Philippiques*, vol. 2: *La colonie romaine*, pt. 1: *La vie publique de la colonie* (Athens: Ecole française d'Athènes, 2014).

ment.<sup>28</sup> The city was characterized by its remarkable diversity, continually shaped by the arrival of migrants, displaced individuals, and military personnel. The mixture of people from different national and religious backgrounds, all existing within the framework of the Roman Empire's pursuit of unity through shared traditions, engendered a unique environment in Antioch.<sup>29</sup> The coexistence of homogeneous groups within such a heterogeneous society, often residing together in distinct areas, contributed to the captivating urban fabric of the city. Simultaneously, a substantial level of blending was present, facilitated by the city's immense size and its ongoing expansion throughout the years. Jewish migrants settled in Antioch over several centuries, yet they did not establish a distinct neighborhood; instead, they dispersed throughout the city.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, Antioch adopted a unique cultural makeup, shaped by its distinctive demographic patterns.

In this time of plurality, the first Christian communities emerged in Antioch in the 40s of the first century CE, and within a few years grew into a center of early Christian mission.<sup>31</sup> In contrast to other cities of the time, this community exhibited a remarkable heterogeneity. The movement saw not only the inclusion of individuals with Jewish heritage but also, for the first time, a substantial influx of people with pagan backgrounds and beliefs.<sup>32</sup> This diverse composition posed distinct challenges regarding the leadership of the burgeoning Christian group. While conventional leadership structures, such as those found in synagogues, associations, or households, could have potentially been incorporated, the diverse composition of the group introduced new complexities in terms of leadership dynamics.<sup>33</sup>

28 G. Downey, *A History of Antioch in Syria* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 145.

29 G. Haddad, *Aspects of Social Life in Antioch in the Hellenistic-Roman Period* (Chicago: Department of Oriental Languages Literature, 1949), 117.

30 C. Kraeling, "The Jewish Community at Antioch," *JBL* 51 (1932), 130–160; P. Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor*, SNTSMS 69 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 256–259; J.M.G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE–117 CE)* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 242–258; M. Zetterholm, *The Formation of Christianity in Antioch* (London: Routledge, 2003), 31–41.

31 Vgl. M. Ebner, *Die Stadt als Lebensraum der ersten Christen*, GNT 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 18.

32 P. Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 69–72; M. Hengel, *Die Urgemeinde und das Judenchristentum* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 294–346.

33 P. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 187–210.

Modern leadership theory offers various models, such as the top-down or bottom-up approach, which address organizational leadership and its associated challenges.<sup>34</sup> To better understand how leadership worked in the early Jesus movement in Antioch, it is helpful to analyze the city's history, the various groups at play, their different beliefs, and the ways they influenced one another. In addition, a thorough examination and description of leadership models employed in leadership theory will provide a more comprehensive understanding and potentially yield novel insights.

The study of Antioch by Corona Langjahr seeks to address questions regarding the structural and organizational influences on the early Christ groups and the diachronic evolution they underwent. Additionally, it examines whether a cohesive concept of leadership can be identified, whether the Christian communities adopted existing models, whether new paradigms emerged, or if such developments occurred gradually over the course of several decades. Considering that the sources highlight the community's inclination towards charismatic expressions, this investigation will also explore the attribution of transcendent involvement to leadership matters and decision-making within this context.

## 6 Rome I: Constructions of Gender in Paintings of the Catacombs of Rome

Gender,<sup>35</sup> according to ancient conception, is not regarded as a fixed attribute unchangeably assigned to an individual but rather as a result of the individual's unique combination of bodily humors. The phenomenon is embedded in a strict hierarchical system in which the expression of perfect masculinity is located at the upper end of the scale, while absolute femininity is placed at the lower end. Early Christian texts also fit into this conceptual framework,<sup>36</sup> and they are already quite well explored. How-

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34 P. Northouse, *Leadership Theory and Practice*, 9th ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2021).

35 The modern differentiation between "sex" and "gender" should be understood with caution, since the ancient conception, which concerns the entire human being, cannot be adequately represented by the modern differentiation.

36 Based on constructivist or post-structuralist theories (Foucault and Butler), *gender* has no naturalistic, supra-temporal, or biologicistic basis. Cf. J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). On the ancient conception of *gender*, cf., e.g., T. Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); U. Hartmann, K. Pietzner, and

ever, the early Christian pictorial sources in relation to this topic remain under-explored. The research project by Lara Mührenberg addresses the question of how gender is constructed within early Christian pictorial representations.<sup>37</sup>

The project investigates the representations of deceased individuals in the paintings of the catacombs of the city of Rome.<sup>38</sup> Not only is this material among the earliest archaeologically tangible evidence that can be definitively attributed to Christian individuals, it also provides a unique opportunity to examine the (implicit) constructions of gender within specific segments of the Roman population. The corpus of the study includes 324 individual figures of 131 complexes with paintings from the late third to late fourth century in 19 underground burial sites. Within these images, different elements can be identified that, according to the late antique visual language, carry masculine or feminine connotations (e.g., clothing, activities, gestures, associated objects). These motifs are composed of an individual mixture of elements indicating masculinity or femininity, and through careful analysis, it becomes possible to draw conclusions regarding the individual compositions of gender of the depicted persons.<sup>39</sup>

The research project aims to uncover the construction of gender in the images – and *how* this has been created. However, the analysis of pictorial sources goes beyond this objective by complementing the information derived from written sources. This is particularly important because many written sources usually originate from other – more privileged – social classes. The study of pictorial sources thus offers the possibility to explore

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E. Hartmann, eds., *Geschlechterdefinitionen und Geschlechtergrenzen in der Antike* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2007).

37 Cf. L. Mührenberg, “Gender Trouble in Early Christian Art: Zur Bedeutung von modularer Produktion für die Transformation spätantiker Männlichkeitskonstruktionen,” in *Variatio in Kunst und Handwerk: Modulare Arbeitsweisen in spätantiker und frühbyzantinischer Zeit*, ed. S. Archut and S. Schrenk (Heidelberg: Popylaeum, 2022), 115–135; ead., “Ein Bild von einem Mann: Die Männlichkeit Jesu Christi in bildlichen Darstellungen der Spätantike,” in *Wahrer Gott und wahrer Mann: Das Geschlecht Jesu in der Theologiegeschichte*, ed. M. Winkler, M. Lersch, and H.-U. Weidemann (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2023), 171–208.

38 On the portraits of the deceased in the catacombs of Rome, cf. N. Zimmermann, “Verstorbene im Bild: Zur Intention römischer Katakombenmalerei,” *JAC* 50 (2007), 154–179.

39 Images, like texts, are able to produce “reality” and also appear as producers of constructs of *gender*. Cf. C. Renggli, “Komplexe Beziehungen beschreiben: Diskursanalytisches Arbeiten mit Bildern,” in *Bilder in historischen Diskursen: Interdisziplinäre Diskursforschung*, ed. F.X. Eder, O. Kühschelm, and C. Linsboth (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2014), 45–61, at 51.

power structures within the early Christian society in the city of Rome in late antiquity and to analyze which potential spaces and possibilities for agency were allocated to individual members of the Christian community within this specific urban context.

## 7 Rome II: Urban Encounters with Early Christ Followers in Rome – Approaching Social History by Fleshing out Individual Avatars

A glass merchant from Tyre in the late 40s of the first century CE, a successful businesswoman at the time of Nero, a Roman bookseller at the beginning of the second century CE, parents mourning the loss of their only son a few years before Marcion's appearance in Rome, etc. None of these individuals are attested to us by early Christian writings. None of them are known to us by any material evidence.

Yet it is precisely these and a few other fictional protagonists that form the basic framework of Jan Rüggeheimer's research project. In what he calls the "Avatar Approach,"<sup>40</sup> he brings imaginary, yet historically plausible individuals and their subjective perspective on the early Christ movement in Rome to the fore. In analogy to Paul, who imagines fictional interlocutors (e.g., Rom 2:1–29; 9:19–23) or sketches a possible scenario (1 Cor 14:23) in which ἰδιῶται, that is, ignorant outsiders, rush into a Christian assembly, these exemplary characters are fleshed out and placed in a local network with other contemporaries. Rüggeheimer adopts a local-history approach, as advocated by Peter Pilhofer,<sup>41</sup> while also acknowledging that there cannot be a singular social history of the early Christ movement in Rome. That is because the metropolis offered a quite different environment for individuals based on factors such as their ethnicity, gender, social status, or occupation. Accordingly, the early Christ movement was perceived differently as well.

At the same time, Rüggeheimer points out that research has consistently envisioned such actors, albeit without explicitly acknowledging and systematically reflecting about their methods, which inevitably leads to truncated theses. For example, when Peter Lampe, Udo Schnelle, and

<sup>40</sup> Rüggeheimer, "Streifzug" (see n. 24), 309–311.

<sup>41</sup> P. Pilhofer, "Zur lokalgeschichtlichen Methode," in *Die frühen Christen und ihre Welt: Greifswalder Aufsätze 1996–2001*, WUNT 145 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 1–57.

others claim that the “new” faith in Christ came to Rome via merchants,<sup>42</sup> it prompts the question of whether additional supporting evidence can be presented for this particular proposition. Could a merchant really have changed his religious beliefs so easily in view of the “trust networks”<sup>43</sup> necessary for his success? Likewise, one might inquire whether individuals like Phoebe and Prisca in the context of Rome’s Christ groups, or Lydia in Philippi, were involved in economic activities rather by chance or if these comparatively independent women sought the proximity of the Christian communities for a more specific purpose.

In a foray through the first hundred years of the early Christ movement in Rome, Rüggeheimer searches for decisive factors that facilitated the “complex contagion”<sup>44</sup> that was anything but a result of singular contacts with individual believers, but rather required sustained persuasion and involved social factors.

## 8 Distinction and Innovation in Early Christianity

Benjamin Schliesser’s project aims to shed light on the survival and expansion of early Christianity within the urban centers of the Roman Empire by drawing insights from the individual subprojects. His own research addresses the intriguing question of why the cult of Christ spread rapidly throughout the Roman Empire while other successful cults, such as those of Mithras, Isis, Sarapis, and Jupiter, faded away.<sup>45</sup> It moves away from metatheories that either attribute the rise of Christianity to the decline of the Roman Empire or glorify the superiority of Christianity.<sup>46</sup>

The project adopts theories of emergence, which propose that changes in complex systems, such as the emergence of a new religious movement

42 Cf. U. Schnelle, *The First One Hundred Years of Christianity: An Introduction to Its History, Literature, and Development*, trans. J.W. Thompson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2020), 474; P. Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 10; see already W.H.C. Frend, “A Note on the Influence of Greek Immigrants on the Spread of Christianity to the West,” in *Mullus*, ed. A. Stüiber (Münster: Aschendorff, 1964), 125–129.

43 A. Monson, “The Ethics and Economics of Ptolemaic Religious Associations,” *Ancient Society* 36 (2006), 221–238.

44 J. Kloppenborg, “Recruitment to Elective Cults: Network Structure and Ecology,” *NTS* 66 (2020), 323–350, at 323.

45 Cf. J.N. Bremmer, “How Do We Explain the Quiet Demise of Graeco-Roman Religion: An Essay,” *Numen* 68 (2021), 230–271.

46 See, for a preliminary sketch, B. Schliesser, “Innovation und Distinktion im frühen Christentum,” *EC* 13 (2022), 393–432.

within a society, cannot be fully explained by preceding conditions alone. Instead, new and distinct features emerge. As an emerging religious movement, early Christianity was deeply rooted in its Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts, yet it also developed unique characteristics.<sup>47</sup> These include distinct social forms that differ from other associations, specific opportunities for participation and structures of authority, a distinct group identity, a characteristic ethical stance, and novel religious-theological beliefs.

Schliesser identifies a number of aspects that exemplify the social, ethical, ideological, and communicative distinctiveness of early Christianity. By examining these aspects, he aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the distinct nature of early Christianity and the factors that contributed to its survival and spread in the urban centers of the Roman Empire.

## 9 Video Essay Project: UR:BAN

The Swiss National Science Foundation is funding a related project titled "UR:BAN – Urban Religion: Bridging Ancient and New." The digital video essay project serves as an illustrative exploration of the dynamics encompassing religious practices, experiences, and communities in both ancient and contemporary cities, with a specific emphasis on Christianity. The project draws inspiration from the commonly observed notion that the Greco-Roman cities of the first century CE and Western cities of the twenty-first century share common features in terms of the volatility, fluidity, and visibility of religion in the public sphere, despite their inherent disparities.

The primary objectives of this project are two-fold: (1) To raise awareness among a modern audience regarding the remarkable, yet relatively unfamiliar range of religious expressions and groups that existed in four prominent urban centers in the ancient Mediterranean: Ephesus, Philippi, Corinth, and Rome. (2) To establish a connection between cutting-edge historical research and critical examination of present-day religious phenomena and challenges. The project specifically focuses on the

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<sup>47</sup> E.A. Judge, *Social Distinctives of the Christians in the First Century: Pivotal Essays*, ed. D.M. Scholer (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2008); L.W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor, 2016).

formative phase of early Christianity and the role it plays in contemporary urban societies.

The envisioned comparison between the past and the present revolves around five transversal themes: (1) Urban Topographies of Religion, (2) “Faithing” Epidemics and Death, (3) Religion and Gender in the City, (4) Urban Education and Religion, and (5) Migration, Multiethnicity, and Religious Encounters. To accurately capture and convey the essence of these themes, video recordings have been conducted at archaeological excavation sites in Rome/Ostia, Ephesus, Philippi, Corinth, and other relevant locations.

All doctoral and postdoctoral researchers as well as renowned international academics are involved. The visual implementation is carried out by the Swiss company “Schwarzfalter” (<https://schwarzfalter.com>).

## 10 Book Series: Early Christian Centers

Within the framework of the project, the book series “Early Christian Centers” (ECC) was launched,<sup>48</sup> with the active involvement of doctoral and post-doctoral students. The first three volumes on Alexandria, Rome, and Corinth are already in the making; simultaneously, plans are being made for subsequent volumes to expand the coverage of other significant cities, such as Ephesus and Philippi.

The primary purpose of this multi-volume reference work is to identify, introduce, and assess significant aspects related to the emergence of Christianity within the context of urban centers. Rather than being a collection of individual essays, each volume implements a consistent structure, providing a definitive, handbook-style survey of a city and allowing for comparative analysis. Each volume will cover the early stages of Christianity up to the fourth century, which marks the period when Christianity became central to the respective city. This can be indicated by archaeological evidence of a Christian basilica, the presence of a prominent theological figure, or significant ecclesiastical events such as synods. The series aims to provide accessible information that is suitable for both students and serious researchers in the fields of New Testament studies, church history, archaeology, ancient history, and related disciplines. While the volumes are intended to be used as textbooks in upper-level university

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<sup>48</sup> Early Christian Centers, ed. B. Schliesser, J. Rügemeier, S. Feist, K. Heyden, S. Pfeiffer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck).

and seminary courses and as resources for library collections, authors are encouraged to incorporate the most recent insights and innovative approaches in their articles. The approach taken in this project is inherently interdisciplinary, weaving together historical perspectives (ancient history, archaeology, social history, history of religion, history of theology, etc.) and systematic perspectives (identity theory, conflict theory, network analysis, social science, religious studies, theology, etc.). The outlook of this project is international, encompassing contributors and research traditions from diverse backgrounds.

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