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Projects, performance and charisma: Managing small religious groups in the Roman Empire

This contribution concerns small-group religion, which has been a major focus of research on religious developments in the Roman Empire over the past two decades. It thus relates directly to one important concern of the Lived Ancient Religion project, to explore themes that in one way or another relativise the dominance of the paradigm of polis/civic religion. However, instead of assuming that the task is to focus on the ‘demand’ side, I am more interested in the ‘supply’ side, in the petty religious entrepreneurs whose enthusiasm and resources created and sustained these projects. The focus is thus on religious imagination, the creation of authority, and the performativie (and pecuniary) resources required for the maintenance of small-group religion in the Graeco-Roman tradition. The basic claim is that ideas developed on the margins of the traditional religious framework of the Greek and Roman worlds offered greater scope to such petty religious entrepreneurs, which I have elsewhere termed (Weberian) mystagogues, than indigenous ones, exemplified here by the Dionysiac associations of the Greek-speaking world.

Some time ago, borrowing from Weber’s notion of der Mystagoge as a ‘failed prophet’, I outlined an ideal-type of the mystagogue (lower-case) in the Roman Empire as a petty entrepreneur or administrator of the holy.¹ I saw these men (and a few women) as interested in exploiting a niche between the vast range of minor religious mastery on the one hand, fascinating but troublesome, as exemplified in the Greek-speaking world by the ἄγυρτης, the θαυματο-

¹ Gordon (2013).

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ποιός, the ἀπομάκρυνσις, or the many kinds of specialist μάντεις, and the high-profile religious offices largely monopolised by the politico-social élites of cities and metropoleis, on the other.² The mystagogue in this sense can legitimately be studied under the rubric of the institutionalisation of relatively enduring, relatively bounded associations whose primary aim was the intensified worship of specific deities. In the context of this section of the volume, on the resources available for minor religious innovation, I want to explore some possible contrasts between the mystagogic rôles available to, or constructable by, such petty entrepreneurs of the holy. Although the innumerable early Christian founders of small groups and ‘heresies’ might have furnished excellent examples,³ I have chosen to compare three rather different kinds of non-Christian groups in the Roman Empire, those that worshipped Dionysus, close to local élites and clustered very largely in western Asia Minor; Mithraic groups, attested archaeologically and epigraphically throughout the western Empire but hardly at all in the entire Greek-speaking Mediterranean; and the enigmatic, even conjectural, groups that honoured the so-called ‘Danubian Riders’ in the central Balkans, mainly attested by small, almost entirely anepigraphic, plaques mass-produced in lead.

Small-group religion has become a major focus of research over the past two decades, whether as such, or under the guise of work on mystery-cults other than Eleusis and Samothrace, or under the heading of the contested topic of ‘oriental cults’.⁴ It can thus be subsumed, at any rate to some extent, under the larger enterprise of outflanking the dominance of the paradigm of polis/civic religion.⁵ Despite this, various scholars have attempted to deny that such a classification is useful, on the grounds that all associations performed religious rites to

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² On ‘minor religious masters’, see e.g. the very selective lists compiled by the second-century CE grammarian and rhetor Iulius Pollux of Naukratis, Onom. 7.188 (2 p. 103 f. Bethe) and Artemidorus, Oneir. 2.69 (p.259 McCoy); see further (in various directions) Sfameni Gasparro (2001, 23–60); Dillery (2005); Flower (2008, 58–71, 211–215); Rüpke (2016, 303–333; and the contribution by Esther Eidinow in this volume (Chapter 10).

³ Cf. e.g. Markschies (2002, 114–119) (on Justin and Origen); Barclay (2006); Marjanen and Luomanen (2008); Wendt (2016, 146–216) (mainly on Paul) and the contribution of Denzey Lewis to this volume (Chapter 3). Note also Urciuoli’s remarks in this volume (Chapter 12) on the construction of the category ‘pseudo-prophets’ in the process of consolidating episcopal primacy in the early Church.

⁴ See e.g. Kloppenborg (1996); Egelhaaf-Gaiser and Schäfer (2002); Seesengood (2002); Gutsfeld and Koch (2005); Bonnet, Rüpke and Scarpi (2006); Buchmann (2006); Rüpke (2007); Öhler (2011); Kloppenborg and Ascough (2011); Gordon (2014) (my review of Bonnet, Pirenne-Delforge and Praet 2009, with further literature); Steinhauer (2014); Bremmer (2014, 81–141).

some degree. In my view, however, that is no reason for claiming that Kloppenborg’s notion of ‘cultic associations’ is of no heuristic value at all. Here, if anywhere, we need to work with the notion of continua, of which we ought to be working with several rather than focusing exclusively on, say, eating together or civic membership. We should be allowing for sliding scales between at least the following possible differentia:

– associations or groups primarily professional at one pole, and groups primarily religious at the other;
– associations or groups primarily concerned with socio-political presence and those for whom this was not a significant goal;
– associations or groups whose leaders were primarily interested in converting real capital into social and/or religious capital (and vice versa) and those whose concern was solely or mainly with religious capital;
– associations or groups that sought to intensify existing civic cults and those that strove to establish and develop religious forms not recognised by the civic calendar;
– associations or groups that sought some form of perpetuity and those that simply assembled in informal groups around a figure in some sense charismatic and interested only in the short term.

Any or all of these criteria can be applied, at any rate heuristically, to the phases and styles of individual associations. Many small religious groups, however – perhaps even (as I suspect) the great majority – left no epigraphy and are thus lost to history; but, as is abundantly clear from the history of early Christianity, this does not mean they never existed or that we can ignore them theoretically. That Roman lawyers were perfectly familiar with the notion of small groups specifically founded for religious purposes, and, at latest from the reign of Septimius Severus, if not of Hadrian, approved of their existence provided that they made no trouble, is clear from Dig. 47.22.1.1 (Marcianus, Inst. Bk. III): Sed religionis coire non prohibentur, dum tamen per hoc non fiat contra SC, quo illicita collegia arcervent. To be sure, such unregistered groups enjoyed no protection under the lex Iulia, could not inherit under wills or lay out money at interest, and were liable to summary police-action at the whim of local magistrates or the

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6 E.g. Scheid (2011 [2003]), who even wants us to believe that Mithraic groups were semi-professional associations, citing the dedications by members of the Publicum portorium Illyrici in Pannonia; cf. also Verboven (2012, 19–20).
7 See e.g. Kloppenborg 1996; Kloppenborg and Ascough (2011, 1: 2–4).
8 Cf. Belayche (2003); also Nigdelis (2010), who evinces no difficulty in accepting the existence of a range of small groups in Thessalonike.
Roman authorities; but, for small-time religious entrepreneurs, none of this mattered very much.

That said, my provisional claim here is that ideas developed on the margins of the traditional religious framework of the Greek and Roman worlds, as exemplified by what is misleadingly known as ‘Mithraism’ and the regionally-based worship of the ‘Danubian Riders’, offered greater imaginative scope to my small religious entrepreneurs (‘mystagogues’) than indigenous ones, as exemplified by that small-group form of the worship of Dionysus known, since Martin Nilsson’s monograph of 1957, as ‘the Dionysiac mysteries’. This choice is partly motivated by serendipity, in that Anne-Françoise Jaccottet has provided us with an excellent corpus of epigraphic material relevant to late Hellenistic and Roman Dionysiac associations (ignoring the Dionysiac technitai), and partly by the fact that all are ‘banal’, in the sense that none attracted much, if any, interest among the literary élite – indeed there is not a single literary reference to the ‘Danubian Riders’ in any literary source. Except in the special case of the Roman Senate’s attempt in the early second century BCE to control developments in small-group religion in Italy, which cast a long shadow over Bacchism there, all were utterly quotidian, all dwelled ‘in the shadows’ of history. Yet in each case, the model of the small group offered my mystagogues the challenge of making interesting and meaningful religious experiences available to those they could persuade to become long- or short-term adherents of their group. Such mystagogues may have been attracted by the rôle of ‘priest’ they could thereby assume (whatever they took it to mean), but my interest lies in what they could make of this rôle in

10 That is, the seventh of the eight phases of Dionysos-worship over 2000 years outlined by Burkert (2011). See Nilsson (1957), based on his earlier accounts in Nilsson (1934; 1950, 94–98, 341–47; and 1953); also Burkert (1993). It was no doubt the discovery in 1909 of the triclinium of the Villa Item at Pompeii, much more than Nietzsche’s Geburt der Tragödie (1872), that set the ball rolling.
11 Jaccottet (2003); see also eadem (2005, 2006 and 2011). She chose to ignore the Technitai not merely because of the then very recent studies by Le Guen (2001) and Aneziri (2003, to be read with Le Guen’s rather critical review [Le Guen 2004]) but because they were not primarily religious groups.
12 “Par leur nature autant que religieuse, par la plasticité dont elles font preuve, par leur diffusion aussi large géographiquement que temporellement, les associations dionysiaques que nous évoquerons ici sont, en fin de compte, l’expression banale du dionysisme, celle qui, loin des violences et les scandales, loin des crises sociales et religieuses, échappe à l’histoire et à la littérature et vit dans l’ombre […]”; Jaccottet (2003, 1: 12). The cult of Mithras came to literate notice almost entirely through the interest of Middle and Neo-Platonism in ‘Persian’ mysteries, whence it was picked up by Apologists such as Justin and Tertullian: Gordon (2012, 988–1004).

Unauthenticated
contexts relatively – and I emphasise relatively, for reasons that will shortly become clear – free from existing models of what such a rôle required and how it should be understood.

1. Organising small groups

Jaccottet entitled her major study *Choisir Dionysos*. Her aim, as almost invariably in this area, was to lay stress on the motivations of the ordinary group-members. Why did they join? My interest, by contrast, was and is in the organisers of such groups, who are usually, in a thoroughly un-Weberian spirit, taken entirely for granted, as though their motivations and rôles were obvious and not worth investigating. Indeed, in subsequent discussions, I have been struck by colleagues’ unwillingness to concede that the topic of *Mystagogentum* might be fruitful, so deeply engrained are three assumptions, that a) people in antiquity were ‘naturally religious’; b) that ‘le phénomène associatif’ is essentially a matter of looking for links with the public realm, and c) that the word ‘elective’ in the expression ‘elective cults’ applies only to those termed ‘adherents’, ‘believers’, or (more neutrally) ‘members’.¹³ We don’t want to think mystagogues’ motives might have been complex, do we? And anyway, where does such an interest lead? Isn’t the implicit model the ancient Elmer Gantry, Lucian’s Alexander the ‘False Prophet’?¹⁴ The emphasis of the Lived Ancient Religion project upon personal appropriation and synthesis of religious motifs invites us rather to focus precisely upon the organising figures whose energies and enthusiasm led them to found, or to lead, small religious groups.

Jaccottet’s main argument was that ‘Dionysiac cult’ as practised in small groups or associations of the (mainly) Hellenic world was a completely heterogeneous affair, in which individual religious entrepreneurs organised their ‘religious supply’ as they wished, drawing selectively upon civic cult, local traditions and personal invention.¹⁵ It was in no sense the quasi-religion imagined by Mar-

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¹³ For ‘elective cults’ see e.g. Price (2011). John North’s ‘supermarket model’ seems to imply a focus on customers choosing rather than managers managing (North 1992).

¹⁴ The answer here might well be positive, if we assume not Lucian as our starting-point but a sympathetic account of the kind offered by Sfamni Gasparro (2001, 149 – 202), emphasising creative bricolage of existing themes. ‘Elmer Gantry’ is the eponymous preacher in Sinclair Lewis’ novel of 1927, based on the activities of successful small-time preachers in Kansas City.

¹⁵ “Chaque association dionysiaque représente une réponse personnalisée, une solution toujours nouvelle au paradoxe de l’union du dieu ubiquitaire, incoercible et indéfinissable, avec
tin Nilsson under the influence of the then time-honoured term ‘mystery religions’. This conclusion seems to me convincing. I also agree with her that far too much attention has been paid to the ‘mysteries’ supposedly developed within the context of Dionysiac worship in the Hellenistic period.\(^\text{16}\) As she points out, many such associations apparently offered no ‘initiation’; and it was perfectly possible to be initiated without belonging to a small group.\(^\text{17}\) Moreover, although he was aware of what he called the “loose use of the words ‘mysteries’ and ‘mystic’”,\(^\text{18}\) Nilsson based his case largely on the occurrence of the term μῦσται in the epigraphy; yet it is now clear that this term only occurs from the first century CE, and indeed mainly in the second and third centuries, so that one would have to posit some striking religious shift at this point rather than in the Hellenistic period, which Nilsson selected as his focus on the basis of the idée fixe that the Hellenistic period saw a crisis of traditional civic religion. Yet it is precisely at the same time, i.e. the middle Principate, that μῦσται appear in other cults, at the expense of the older terms θιασῶται/θιασίται, so that it is more appropriate to imagine that the emergence of ‘mystery’ is a matter of terminological fashion, or possibly to emphasise the mainly religious nature of a group, rather than denoting the sudden spread of a new type of religious experience.

Jaccottet indeed argues that Dionysiac cult continued to consist of the same basic features from the Classical period, public procession, song and dance, celebration of natural fecundity and wild nature, sacrifice, the ceremonial consumption of wine, the revelation of the ὀργία, in other words, material sufficient for mystagogues (a term she does not use) to appropriate as they saw fit as the basis for group religious life. The diversity of this raw material led directly to the heterogeneity of Dionysiac cult as practised in small groups.\(^\text{19}\) Although a synthetic or integrative model of ‘the’ cult of Mithras has for decades been dominant, it is increasingly clear that this apparent coherence is the result of incautious conclusions ostensibly drawn from a) the relative uniformity of the biclinium as an architectural form and b) the standardisation of the central image, the scene in which Mithras kills the bull, but is in reality based on an im-

\(^{16}\) Bremmer (2014, 101): “Despite the attention they have received, not many Dionysiac Mysteries are epigraphically attested”, citing Jaccottet (2003, 1: 130). The same is true of the cult of Isis: see Steinhauer (2017).

\(^{17}\) Jaccottet (2003, 1: 123 – 46, esp. 123 n.4; 145f.); eadem (2006, 221f.).

\(^{18}\) Nilsson (1957, 4).

\(^{19}\) Cf. also Sfameni Gasparro (2013); Schäfer (2006) stresses the urban character of Dionysiac groups, a point that can be linked to the communicative advantages of such environments.
plicit assimilation to a(n idealised, unhistorical) version of ‘Christianity’.²⁰ Under the communicative conditions of antiquity can anyone truly believe that all ‘Mithraists’ (a characteristically modern term suggesting a personal religious identification quite impossible in pagan antiquity) can have had the same beliefs or sought the same ends? Since there has been very little synthetic work on the Danubian Riders, there are few such pre-suppositions to criticise; but the sheer variety of designs on the major source of evidence, the leaden plaques (see fig. 4), seems sufficient to suggest a loosely integrated set of ideas open to local interpretation, which means interpretations by locally dominant figures, in my terms mystagogues.

The basic drive of the mystagogue in my sense is to manage uncertainty by controlling or influencing the actions of others.²¹ Such an approach foregrounds the issues of power and authority, which are implicit in any attempt to organise and channel the religious experiences of others, even if only in a single context, namely the group in question. To do this he (or sometimes she)²² necessarily constructs a series of narratives regarding sources of authority, choices, meanings and promises. Such an endeavour says nothing about other parallel endeavours (‘identities’, rôles) in which such an individual may be engaged. The mystagogue needs to impress upon his adherents/clients the value of the ritual practices he prescribes in attaining the promised Heilsgüter.²³ There are several ‘identities’ he may thus assume. One is the local recognition of his merits, i.e. an appeal, combined in many cases with charismatic charge, to a pre-existent, relatively complex, discourse regarding religious qualification. Another is the possession of sufficient resources

²⁰ The very coinage ‘Mithraism’, capital M and all, which first emerges in the late nineteenth century, is sufficient evidence of this long-standing desire to turn the cult into a Religion. On the true intention of Renan’s celebrated claim that “le monde eût été mithraiste” (i.e. irremediably irrationalist and credulous) if Christianity had died the death, see Praet (2013, 288 f.).
²¹ Cf. the general arguments of Eidinow (2011) on the dichotomy ‘public-individual’ in the context of religious action. Eidinow makes some use of the work of the US network theorist Harrison White (White 2008). For White, actors constantly strive for control over the contingency (i.e. unpredictability) of experience by seeking to create safe(r) situations through action. Every social situation is fundamentally agonistic; action is perceived as an effort to control situations. Social life is thus a negotiation about the control of identities and agency, which are constantly exchanged as individual and collective narratives. Social meanings and order are generated by collective participation in such narratives, which interpret the lived reality of the interaction network.
²² It is often difficult to tell whether women who donate buildings, or additional buildings, such as Kritarista, daughter of Diodoros, on Thera (IG XII, 3. 420) are themselves mystagogues, i.e. organisers of small groups, or simply wealthy supporters; cf. Cole (2011, 278 f.).
²³ Heilsgüter is the convenient Weberian term for all the possible benefits offered by religious praxis, in our case, as mediated by the mystagogue.
to set up an institutionalised cult: even where the group depended largely upon individual contributions, the mystagogue, aligning him-/herself with local standards of generosity and socially-approved uses of financial resources, relied heavily upon the highly unequal distribution of resources characteristic of the Empire, combined with the generalised commitment to the *Theodizee des Glückes*. A third ‘identity’ is the establishment of a regular institution, centred upon a common meal, that in the ideal case will outlive the founder. Appeal to epigraphic culture, the very condition of our knowing anything at all about these institutions (and there must have been very many that never even attempted to record their existence in such a way), was an additional resource here. Such stelae were often set up in prominent places in front of, or near, the *antron, megaron* or *thiasôn*, sometimes even acting as a sort of advertisement, as at Halicarnassus, where the passer-by is enjoined in verse to keep silence but listen to the words it is lawful to listen to (δοσα θέμις). It was this desire to avoid the ephemerality attending most mystagogic projects that explains the adoption of the much older, and therefore relatively familiar and unexceptionable, form of the ἔρανος for these individual religious projects. But even then, as the epigraphy makes clear, such groups often foundered on character differences, internal disputes, embezzlement, bankruptcy, and finally indifference.

The mystagogue attempted to assert control over his worshipper’s access to the god he ‘serves’ – he might be an enabler but he was also a manager, claiming rights and authority. The obvious model in the Graeco-Roman world for such claims is that of priests appointed in the public realm, and their executive form, the *lex sacra*. Proximity to the public realm might also seem an advantage regarding the issue of ephemerality. At the same time, it seems to me, the mystagogue needed, irrespective of merits, money, models and suasive force, his or her own imaginative resources, ideas, practices, in order to construct a distinctive offer sufficiently attractive to hold his group together. In short, he or she needed a degree of specifically religious capital. Here perhaps lay the attraction of an appeal to ‘mystery’, to an offer of special knowledge, insight, privilege, however formulated, whose correlate might well be the hierarchisation of information, rights and duties, a process that reaches baroque proportions in the multiple divisions, not least by gender, of the album of Pompeia Agrippinilla’s *thia-

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24 Another characteristic Weberian concept, which can only clumsily be put into English as the ‘theodicy of good fortune’, referring to the claim by the prosperous and healthy that they enjoy these blessings thanks to their own merits, recognised in turn by the gods.

25 Merkelbach and Stauber (1998 no. 01/12/09 = J. 152 [II–Ia]).

26 In grand households of course (see e.g. the next n.), direct social power, i.e. compulsion, might be exercised.
sos from Torre Nova of c.160–70 CE, now in the Metropolitan Museum, where a key gesture is that of ‘binding’ (the head or perhaps the waist) – ἀπὸ καταξάωσεως – which marked a decisive point of incorporation into the group.27

A triangular comparison between the leaders of Dionysiac associations, Mithraic Fathers and initiators into the cult of the Danubian Rider is obviously problematic. All but a handful of Jaccottet’s θίασοι are located in the eastern Mediterranean, mainly in western Asia Minor and the western seaboard of the Euxine; virtually all Mithraic finds lie much to the west of these areas; the cult of the Danubian Riders is effectively confined to the central Balkans. Dionysiac epigraphy is virtually all in Greek (even in Rome); Mithraic epigraphy is virtually all in Latin; in the case of the Danubian Riders there is only a vestigial interest in communicating with third persons through the written word. This cult thus represents the degree zero of epigraphic culture. The contrasts between the other two are likewise extreme: there are several Dionysiac leges sacrae, but no Mithraic examples; honorific resolutions both by public institutions and by Dionysiac groups abound, but are completely absent from the Mithraic evidence; because they can draw on this public language, the Dionysiac groups have access to a meta-level of self-description – they dispose of numerous local variations of the basic terms βακχείον, βάρχος, βάρχη, βάρχεια – which is again completely lacking in the Mithraic case, so much so that we have no idea what general terms, if any, these worshippers used to describe themselves and their specifically Mithraic activities.

That said, it is quite striking how closely, in the surviving evidence, Dionysiac associations are linked to civic élites and sub-élites, how many presidents and officials of such groups were also civic priests, how foundations and funding derive from practices familiar to these sub-élites, how these groups used their prestige and status to their own advantage in the local political and social arena, for example by including the reigning emperor as an honorary member, or even writing to him directly. 28 The immemorial continuity of Dionysiac cult, the range of imagery and themes derived from the carefully nurtured tension be-

27 IGUR 1: no.160 = J. 188, transl. Ascough et al. (2012, 216 no. 330); cf. Nilsson (1934); Scheid (1986); Jaccottet (2003, 1: 30–53). Face 3 of the altar is badly damaged; 335 names survive, but the total number of members was originally over 400.

28 For this last, see e.g. I Ephesos 3329 = J. 135 (Trajan as honorary member); 275 = AE 1975: 800 = J. 136 (Hadrian as σύνθερονος of Dionysos); I Smyrna 622 = J. 119 (erection of a statue of Hadrian); 600 = J. 122 (correspondence between the syndos of Dionysos Breiseus and Antonius Pius and Marcus Aurelius). The hereditary priest of Dionysos at Pergamon succeeded in obtaining the city’s second neocorate from Trajan: Kantiréa (2011, 526); cf. Isler-Kerényi (2011) on Dionysos as an identification-figure at Pergamon for Hellenistic rulers and Roman emperors.
between the natural and the artificial, ²⁹ together with the combinatorial possibilities so offered, made Bacchism an obvious choice for mystagogic projects. On the other hand, those very advantages made it all too easy to subordinate personal mystagogic activity to the attractions offered by admission to socio-political influence, open competition with other similar groups, celebration of the group’s value to the public weal. To put it somewhat differently, the religious capital available within the framework of Dionysiac ideas was usually not dense or atypical enough to constitute a set of goals easily distinguishable from those subsumed by civic cult.

One contrast is offered by the worship of Mithras, which was an early beneficiary of the explicit legal recognition of the effective right of small groups of ordinary individuals to meet regularly for religious purposes without the obligation to register in any way, a recognition that, as we have seen, was made explicit by Modestinus around 200 CE but probably granted de facto much earlier. ‘Mithras’ offered mystagogues ideal materials for increasing their religious capital: this was a loose tradition that laid out a heroic myth of some dramatic force, integrated the ‘new’ cosmology fully into its concept of the world order, and offered a space for the construction of new, relatively focused experiences within the familiar general context of the dining-group. Two aspects were of especial importance here: the possibility of developing interesting claims in relation to ‘astronomical’ knowledge, ³⁰ and the development, at least in some places, of functional grades that offered the idea of a continuing religious life within the group under a leader whose qualification was to a significant degree itself religious. The idea of ‘Persia’, hitherto unoccupied by civic religion but sufficiently analogous to Phrygia and Egypt to appear safely exotic, freed entrepreneurial imaginations to draw upon the Graeco-Roman reception of Persia as raw material for developing new types of ethico-religious capital centred on the body.

My notion of ‘mystagogue’ is not however limited to leaders of small religious groups of some duration. This possibility seems to be raised by the case of the ‘Danubian Riders’, a purely conventional modern term for a set of religious leaders. ²⁹

²⁹ See e.g. Horn (1972); more recently Dunbabin (2008), on an important IInd mosaic at Zeugma on the Euphrates with the word Τελετή; cf. too Jaccottet (2010 [2011], 257–262), discussing the image of Thebes on a late-antique mosaic at Sauron in the Apamène. Henrichs (2013, 563 f.), evoking the several hundred ancient epithets of Dionysos, offers a masterly survey of the “complexity and elusiveness of this multiple figure” – for which almost simultaneous appearance of two vast Sammelbände (Schlesier 2011; Bernabé Pajares et al. 2013) from the same publisher, de Gruyter, provides a suitable metaphor.

³⁰ ‘Astronomical’ refers to the absence in antiquity of a clear distinction between what we term astronomical knowledge and astrological lore.
ideas and practices emerging in the second century CE that may have had much earlier Balkan roots but which evidently drew upon newer themes made available by the Roman occupation of central Pannonia and the conquest of Dacia. Frankly, there is no established knowledge about the organisation of the cult, for which the evidence is exclusively archaeological. Some facts are however quite striking: the relatively few reliefs in stone or bronze are far too small to have served as cult-images in a temple, and no such building has ever been found, at least by legitimate archaeology, that might have served as a shrine. That in turn implies that the cult was not considered suitable by the local élites for monumentalisation and adoption into local civic panthea. Virtually none of the images, even those in stone, are inscribed, that is, they name no personal names and therefore cannot have served the socially communicative function that ordinary inscribed votives serve in public or semi-public spaces. Moreover, there are no inscribed altars, so there are no images of urcei and paterae to affirm incorporation into the Roman sacrificial system – indeed the images show that the cult deliberately ignored or rejected important aspects of that system (see below). We do not even know the name or identity of the divinities addressed. In other words, although the images incorporate Graeco-Roman iconographic elements, they do not seem to have much to do with the ordinary Graeco-Roman votive system. The variety of types among the lead plaques, together with the existence of many virtually identical casts of some types, imply the existence of a number of workshops in the Balkan provinces that produced them in

31 Tudor (1969 – 1976) collected 142 monuments in materials other than lead, all of them relatively small, or even tiny, as against 88 lead plaques. All but a handful of the 333 lead plaques in Rudolf Ertl’s collection are supposed to have been found in Sirmium (Sremska Mitrovica in Serbia), some 75 km west of the confluence of the Sava with the Danube. The site was of great strategic importance: the city was made a colonia already under Vespasian, and became the main residence of the governor of Pannonia Inf. under Trajan. The sheer number collected by Ertl suggests that some shrines must have existed, even if many are likely to have come from tomb-robbing. Ertl did however buy a couple that were supposed to have come from Carnuntum, and a few plaques are now known that were discovered in regular excavations there, one at least in the legionary castra (e.g. Humer 2009, 248 fig.980; Humer and Kremer 2011, 129 fig. 60; 223 fig. 211; I owe these references to Romy Heyner of the Badisches Landesmuseum, Karlsruhe).

32 The most important exception is the sculptor’s signature Γέρμανος ἐποίησεν on the marble plaque T. 29 (‘Dacia’, provenance unknown). A few gems carry ‘magical’ words, cf. Zwierlein-Diehl (2010), but these are of course not interpersonal communications in the ordinary sense.

33 The sole exception here is one of the new lead examples from Carnuntum that reads DOMINO (AE 2006: 1052, mid-III\(^{th}\)), which is baffling, since two Riders are shown, as usual, on either side of a female deity.
series.\textsuperscript{34} This in turn, as well as the presence of ‘mystagogues’ on some types, who direct the sacrifice without themselves being sacrificants, implies the existence of local centres, whether we call them shrines or not, where these figures were active and where they presumably produced the different designs.\textsuperscript{35} In other words, this was a form of worship conducted or directed by ‘mystagogues’ outside the civic context in which small groups may not have figured very largely: the plaques, though individually surprisingly heavy (up to 180 gr., though most are lighter), seem to have been intended to be carried on the person. Manfred Clauss has recently drawn attention to five lead examples, two in his own collection, roughly 10 x 9 cm or slightly larger, that carry the legend \textit{Comes tibi so(m)}, ‘I go with you’.\textsuperscript{36} The fifteen or so intaglios with similar imagery, which mainly derive from finger-rings, were also carried on the person and functioned as protective amulets.\textsuperscript{37} Small objects of this sort might easily travel very great distances.

### 2. Dionysiac associations

Of the ‘mystagogic imperative’ in relation to Dionysus during the imperial period, there can be little doubt. In some of the relevant cases, such as the association that worshipped Dionysus Eripeakios at Hierocaesarea in Lydia (second

\textsuperscript{34} Ertl (1996) identified 10 major types (A-H) of the lead plaques, most of which occur in several different sub-types. The commonest sub-types are F01, of which Ertl lists 72 examples, B03 (66 examples), H02 (55 examples) and H01 (36 examples). All these figures are notional, since Manfred Clauss has acquired more than 800 plaques over the past twenty years, which have not been classified and may well include types unknown to Ertl. Most derive from clandestine excavations in Serbia. The antiquities trade in Munich and London is particularly involved in the business, though Ertl mentions that he picked up some of his collection at flea-markets in Vienna.

\textsuperscript{35} Virtually all of Ertl’s lead plaques are supposed to have been found in Sirmium (Sremksa Mitrovica in Serbia), some 75 km west of the confluence of the Sava with the Danube. The site was of great strategic importance: the city was made a colonia already under Vespasian, and became the main residence of the governor of Pannonia Inferior under Trajan. Even in Tudor’s day, it was realised that the main centre must have lain between the triangle between Teutiburgium and Viminacium on the Danube and the Sava up to Sirmium (cf. the distribution map in Tudor 1969–1976, 2: fig. 2, at the end of the book).

\textsuperscript{36} See \textit{AE} 2006: 1828–1831. An identical legend appears on a rather damaged plaque found in the shrine of Liber at Apulum (\textit{IDR} III.5, 371) but was, perhaps unsurprisingly, misunderstood by the editor. In all these cases the legend was first inscribed on the clay matrix from which the lead-alloy plaque was cast.

\textsuperscript{37} See again Zwierlein-Diehl (2010).
century CE), the basis seems to have been an (extended) family, exactly as one would expect of individual mystagogic efforts. In the other thirteen cases that are visible in the epigraphic record, however, a formula is used to indicate that the group was founded by a specific individual, such as the Bakcheastai περὶ Ἐράτονα Δημοφίλου at Dionysopolis (Thessalonike) or Alexandros κτίστη εἰς ρών μυστών on the island of Melos. A group at Puteoli called itself Plancidianus after its founder (or a benefactor). In two cases, the honour due to the founder is further elaborated by a portrait bust or statue. In some cases, on Jaccottet’s criterion, these mystagogues had introduced τελεταί into their scheme of things, since a hierophant is attested: Junius Laberius Macedon was not only the founder of his group of Thasos but also hierophant; the thiasos of a woman named Paso at Tomis was presented with a statue of Dionysus Pyrribromios by the owner of a local workshop, who had gained the μυστικὸν στέφος in the baccheion and was himself hierophant of the ἀρχαίην [...] τ[ελετήν]. In one or two cases we can see these mystagogues at work: the brief lex sacra of a thiasos founded by Amandos at Physcus in Caria survives: the rituals are to be held after two meetings; each member is to pay a minimum of 14 obols; the common fund is to provide three lamps; no maenad is to provoke or insult another maenad; no boukolos is to provoke or insult another. Failure to observe this rule incurs a fine of 4 drachmae for each insult; a fine of the same amount for failure to turn up to a meeting; of 5 dr. for failing to turn up ‘to the mountain (journey)’ (εἰς ὁρος μὴ συνέλθων [...] τ[ελετήν]). The use of ’maenad’ and ‘boukolos’ here suggested to Jaccottet that Amandos’ inspiration was literary (Euripidean), since by the second century ‘maenads’ who rush off to the mountains are otherwise unknown, and certainly not in the company of men. Such an allusion might also be a source of authorisation for a personal innovation. The very fact that failure to ‘go the mountain’ – the very pitch of Bacchic inspiration in Eur-

38 TAM V.2, 1256 = J. 110 with her discussion on p. 200. On such family relationships, real or fictive, in associations, see more generally Harland (2009, 61–81).
39 Resp. IGBulg 20 = J. 52 (IIIP); IG XII, 3 1098 = J. 166 (early IIIP).
40 CIL X 1585 = ILS 3366 = J. 174 (Severan).
41 Rufus son of Zipas at Philippae, both founder and benefactor: BCH 17 (1983) 634 (IIIP); Junius Laberius Macedon on Thasos: IG XII, 8 387 = J. 34 (Caracalla).
42 Macedon: see previous n.; Tomis: IScythMin 2: 120 = J. 62 (I’), cf. Jaccottet (2003, 1: 132). The statue was actually made by a sculptor named Hermogenes.
pides – might incur a hefty fine wonderfully captures the paradox Jaccottet notes between a refracted ideal of liberation from the quotidian and prosaic reality.\textsuperscript{44}

The issue of control of such groups founded upon individual initiative was evidently in many cases a pressing one: how best to ensure not merely that the wishes of the founder were followed but also how to ensure that an association would outlast him (or her)? In some cases, at least the answer was found within the family. Thus the treasurer of a thiasos in Byzantium for Dionysus Parabolos at the time of Hadrian was either brother or father of the prostates, while the secretary seems to have been the son of the gymnasiarch honoured by the group, who may in turn have been the son of the prostates.\textsuperscript{45} After the decease of its founder Dionysios of Marathon, an Hellenistic association of Dionysiastai in the Piraeus resolved to ensure the succession to leadership through his family.\textsuperscript{46}

The choice of initiatory language might be another means of binding a group to the leader in a quasi-familial structure: Lykomedes, the priest of a ‘large [or ‘grand’: μεγάλοιοι] baccheion’ dedicated to Zeus-Dionysos at Malko-Tarnovo (in modern Bulgaria), evidently the founder, dedicated an altar for himself, for his children, for his own honourable position, καὶ μυστῶν ιδίων, ‘and my initiates’, whom he asks Dionysos to preserve.\textsuperscript{47}

Another significant form of control is the inscribed list of members: the externalisation, monumentalisation, of a list (normally confined to papyrus) exercises a tacit hold over the individuals so commemorated. An inscription from Năpoca (Cluj, Romania) of a speira Asianorum, now lost, contained a list, separated by gender, of at least 24 men and more than 16 women, in separate columns, under the rubric of the spirarches Germanus and the mater Tattaro Epipodia; another from Apollonia on the Black Sea at least 29 names, mostly with filiation.\textsuperscript{48}

This latter employs an even more effective device, often found elsewhere, namely the enumeration of posts and grades attained or filled by individuals. Such hierarchies, of which a text from Cirpan (Bulgaria) and again the Torre Nova in-

\textsuperscript{44} Cf. Cole (2011, 264): “The traditional themes of Dionysiac literature seem absent from his rituals as reported in inscriptions”; and the remarks of Stella Georgoudi in the same volume on routinisation (Georgoudi 2011).

\textsuperscript{45} IByz. 37 = J. 40. Poland (1909, 87f.) already stressed the frequency of such family relationships within associations. The epithet Parabolos seems to refer to a special type of fishing-net; this group may have called itself the Dionysobolitai (IByz. 38 = J. 41).

\textsuperscript{46} Syll.\textsuperscript{3} 1101 = LSGC 49 = J. 2 (176/5 BCE), with Jaccottet’s comments ad loc.


\textsuperscript{48} Resp. CIL III 870 = ILS 4061 = J. 71 (235 CE); IGBulg 421 = J. 46 (late II/early III\textsuperscript{p}). This list runs continuously, i.e. no columns.
cription are the finest examples, attest to the additional motivations that could be given to individual commitment to the group by the elaboration of titles that run parallel to the ordinary administrative offices. Here Dionysism, with its plethora of imaginable functions, carriers of the narthex, bearers of the thyrsus, bearer of the cistus, lamp-carrier, bearer of the liknos, and many more, to say nothing of grades such as boukolos or bacchos/bacchê, and serendipitous addition such as sebastophoros, carrier of the image of the emperor, semiophoros, bearer of the thiasos-emblem, scored highly. Such hierarchies created ambitions, goals and commitments. As Jaccottet observes, out of temporary rôles or functions that individuals could slip in and out of, mystatogues learned how to create formal structures of responsibility, of rights, of personal interests. Yet at the same time, there are hints of quite humble people offering simple mystagogic services: a third-century BCE resolution from Miletus allows any woman to initiate others within the city and its chora, and in the dependent islands, so long as she pays the civic priestess (who will have purchased the position) a statér every two years.

It is time to turn to my other concern here, the ‘consumption’ of such associations by the city. One of the major means of perpetuating an association was for it to possess property that would render it less dependent upon the subscriptions of members, which would hardly cover more than minimal regular expenses. The point of such property, such as a vineyard or an insula, was not merely to throw up regular interest at 10% or 15% but to align the association with other property-owners in a society of orders based on wealth. Property meant perdurance and status. This meant that the founders of associations had a direct inter-

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49 Cirpan: IGBulg 1517 = J.47 (235 CE); for the Torre Nova inscription (IGUR 1.160), see n. 22 above.
50 For many of these terms, see the relevant entries in Turcan (2003, 49–93). The appropriation of Dionysiac imagery by Hellenistic rules and Roman emperors, e.g. in Pergamon, is discussed by Insler-Kerényi (2011).
51 LSAM 48 ll. 18–20= J. 150 (276/75a). It is not clear (to me) whether the preceding stipulation about women sacrificing also refers to such small-time mystagogues, i.e. whether they are sacrificing on behalf of others; Suys (2011, 216) at any rate seems to take it in this sense. Note Dignas (2002) on the relationship between civic priesthood and small-time mystagogic activity in the case of the Corybantes at Erythrae.
52 Jaccottet (2005, 193) goes so far as to suggest that we should be asking ‘Why are not all Dionysiac thiasoi public?’ Her answer is couched in religious terms: every thiasos, public or private, plays a rôle in rehearsing or re-actualising the reception of this ambivalent god into the city.
53 Vineyards of course had a direct connection with a major activity in Dionysiac associations, the consumption of wine. For interesting comments on the resources required to run a Dionysiac group, see Horster (2011).
est in attracting members who could not merely afford the entrance fee and the annual or monthly payments but were in a position to assign fixed property to the association in perpetuity. At least 34 of Jaccottet’s 200 texts (17%) contain explicit reference to members of the high- or sub-élite (such as doctors or owners of businesses), either as themselves members, or as donors of cult-furniture, sometimes entire buildings, or as patrons or benefactors, or as honorands in consideration of gifts, political or financial help. In one case at Kallatis on the west coast of the Euxine, for example, the honorand, a man named Bikôn, had not only given the thiasos presents but administered the laying out of the common fund at interest; and when this investment – probably a bottomry loan at very high interest (say 30–40%) – failed, he restored both capital and the promised interest out of his own pocket.⁵⁴ About the same number of texts (36) record energetic gestures, payments, foundations etc. This dependence of recorded Dionysiac associations upon members of local élites must have led to their assimilation to the dominant concerns, prejudices and social exclusions of such socially-prominent groups.⁵⁵ As Susan Cole pointed out, although several thiasoi ran their own cemeteries, or at least saw to the fitting burial of their members, expressions of post-mortem hopes in epigraphy are either purely conventional, in that they make no reference to what we think of as the Dionysiac mortuary imaginaire, or content themselves with conventional Dionysiac themes: eternal dances in the thiasos, the idea of satyrs weeping, or the possibility of gazing at Dionysus after one’s death.⁵⁶

These texts do refer to a number of themes that indicate the interest of mystagogues and members in imagining the continuing force of Dionysiac myth and Dionysiac presence in the life of the associations,⁵⁷ through appeal to local man-

⁵⁴ Syll.¹ 1108 = ISM (=Kallatis) 3: 36 = J. 55 (late III¹), with Avram (2002, 74), who emphasises the eminently public profile of the Dionysiac thiasos in the city.
⁵⁵ Cf. Harland (2009, 145–160) on rivalries for social prominence between associations in Asia Minor, citing inter alia ISmyrna 639 = J. 121 (the synodos of Dionysos Breiseus honouring the Asiarch M. Aurelius Iulianus, later II¹); also Hirschmann (2006, 49f.).
⁵⁶ Cole (1993). In one case at Ancyra Sidera in Phrygia, the text simply mentions that the person commemorated, a boy of 12 who had held the rank or grade of boukolos, was killed by a wall falling on him during an earthquake: unpubl. = J. 86 (the text is not listed in MAMA X, which covers Ancyra Sidera).
⁵⁷ Magnesia on the Maeander claimed to have been instructed by an oracle from Delphi to fetch three Maenads from Thebes as founders of its official Dionysiac thiasoi – who duly settled in Magnesia and died there (IMagn 215 = FGrH 482 Anhang F5 = J. 146). In his commentary (IIIB Komm., Text, p. 387), Jacoby points out that the inscription is dated by the prytanis, which means that the original text (our version is a Roman copy of Hadrianic date) must date from be-
manifestations of the god, through dramatic performances and mime, through 'going to the mountain', through 'initiation', through dances, sometimes at least in costume, such as a *boukolos* apparently dressed in skins from Philadelphia in Lydia or Rufus at Kestel (?Bursa) in Bithynia, whose tomb shows him dressed in a sort of harness covered in little bells, and holding a shepherd’s pedum and a wriggling snake. On the other hand, Dionysiac motifs are virtually unknown on sarcophagi found in Asia.

Despite all this, it seems to me that, especially in the larger towns of the eastern Mediterranean, the pressures exercised by public cults, by the desire of local élites to demonstrate euergetism, by financial need and the interests of founders in the perpetuity of their associations, that there was a continual tendency for ‘Dionysism’, for all its diversity in associations and the energy and imagination expended by mystagogues, to be assimilated into the religious habits of the dominant class and thus lose its potential for alterity. The leaders of most, if not all, Dionysiac associations saw themselves as extending, amplifying, intensifying the civic cult(s) of the deity. For the wealthy and nearly-wealthy had two powerful arguments: not only did they enjoy social power but they themselves already enjoyed divine blessing, as their wealth itself, irrespective of character and ethics, tended to prove.

### 3. Mithraic associations

The opportunities offered to mystagogues by Dionysus had to be navigated within the framework of Greek convention. As I have already observed, Mithraic mystagogues could claim their god was Persian. The truth of this claim is currently, and in all likelihood permanently, insoluble – we simply are not in a position to write the early history of the forms of the cult that established themselves in the West. I want instead here to highlight the category ‘specialised small-group cult’,
and look at the ways in which the mystagogues who elaborated the cult of Mithras all over the Latin-speaking part of the Empire, but especially in Italy and the provinces along the Rhine-Danube frontier, used the notion of alterity to clear a space for the construction of private, relatively focused experiences aiming to provide specific types of ethico-religious capital. That is, I take ‘Persia’ primarily as a metaphor for the assertion of a religious difference, namely the claim that religious experience is not a mere function of socio-political life but can, through routinisation of alternative ritual structures, become relatively autonomous. At the same time, I would want ultimately to fall back on the Weberian position that it is intermediate urban populations who are most open to the assertion of alternative religious goals, since they are not particularly susceptible to the Theodizee des Glücks subscribed to by the élite, but are still in a position to take advantage of new currencies. However, the surviving material dictates a different approach from that in the previous section, in that the epigraphy is relatively poor and confined by the tight generic rules for votives. It thus seems preferable to offer a very brief synthetic account based mainly on iconography. This is intentionally a mere sketch of a complex historical reality, since it goes without saying that every modern account of the Roman worship of Mithras necessarily both oversimplifies and over-generalises – no writable scenario can manage the unforgiving dialectic here between the particular/local and the general/supra-regional.

I recur to the term ‘narrativity’, albeit in a sense not unrelated to but rather different from, Harrison White’s usage. Here the word stands for one aspect of the construction of specifically Mithraic meanings, namely the evocation of mythic narrative as a device for generating subjective experiences over the long term. Viewing Mithraic cognition as a long-term matter helps to escape from the closure that still tends to be implied by the term ‘mystery’, understood in the Eleusinian sense of a momentary revelation or illumination. At the same time, I retain something of White’s insistence on the implicitly conflictual character of such narratives: the mystagogue says ‘this is my version; the differences are my differences’. By increasing the number of personal or individual inputs and influences the mystagogue directly affects the degree of differentiation between individual religious careers, and so the degree of religious individualisation.

The most important contribution of narrativity in this sense is to sustain the religious group that practises it. I have already stressed the organisational needs of the founder of small, voluntary groups, dependent on individual financial con-

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62 On the options offered by ‘Persia’, see further Gordon (2017b).
63 See n. 21 above.
tributions and an often considerable input of time and energy by members. In the case of Mithraic associations, there is little trace of generous gifts by wealthy individuals, though they are not completely unknown. That is, the drive to survive had to be satisfied in a different manner from the Dionysiac associations in the eastern Mediterranean, namely by continually renewing their investment in their own activity, not arbitrarily but (a) in such a manner that each separate activity was meaningfully connected to others, and (b) by linking that construct to the acquisition of moderate symbolic and moral capital. A differentiated, non-standard narrative, such as that of Mithras, which can invoke a distinctive religious authority – in this case from a ‘wise nation’ – can be thought of as the simplest means of combining first-level coherence with such a promise of symbolic capital.

To illustrate the cognitive strategies at work under the heading narrativity, I take four related themes: drawing boundaries, the Mithraic body, cosmic play, and re-staging myth. All, in one way or another, illustrate how Mithraic mystagogues might use aspects of a narrative in order to create over time a series of ‘interesting’ moments, short-term goals, emotionally-laden experiences, that aimed at constructing a meaningful (but of course not exclusive) ‘Mithraic life’. I have selected them partly because they require very little use of material derived from sources outside the archaeological record. They make no claim to exhaustiveness and one could easily multiply them; nor should I be thought to be claiming that every mystagogue used these materials, either at all, or in the same way. The archaeological evidence (and we have really no other reliable source of information) suggests considerable diversity – as it were, every mystagogue for himself; but it was easier to adapt from a (local or regional) model than to invent from whole cloth.

(1) Drawing boundaries. Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out that what is significant in so-called rites of passage is not so much the shift of status itself as the nature of the boundary/ies asserted. In the Mithraic case, we find two types of exclusion being legitimated through reference to the narrative. One of the commonest by-scenes is the birth of Mithras from a heap of rocks. For example the elaborate (and expensive) marble sculptures donated in the mid II P by C. Accius Hedychrus at Emerita (V. 773 – 781), or the complex panelled reliefs at Saarburg (V. 966), Königshoffen/Strasbourg (V. 1359), Neuenheim/Heidelberg (V. 1283 = S. 141a) or Osterburken (V. 1292 = S. 148a), all of which must have meant considerable outlays of cash.

For the originality of Mithras’ mythic sacrifice in terms of Graeco-Roman norms, see e.g. Turcan (2016, 43 – 84).

For a fuller discussion, see Gordon (2017a).

Bourdieu (1995, 176 f.).
cation, this event connoted a claim about how light and fire came into the world. But it also implied a negative: if he was born from rocks, Mithras can have had no mother. This negative in turn legitimated the Mithraic exclusion of women. A symbolon recorded by Firmicus Maternus implies that, at any rate in the eastern Mediterranean, the assembled worshippers might acclaim the god so born by repeatedly shouting: θεὸς ἐκ πέτρας, ‘God from Rock!’ The frequent presence in mithraea of individual representations of this moment, detached from their narrative context in the cult-relief and turned into free-standing objects within the temple, suggest that such acclamations, which ‘staged’ the Rock-birth at a certain point in the ritual, were also a feature of the cult in the west. The group affirms its own solidarity by invoking the continuing immediacy of the mythical event, simultaneously encoding its implicit references, including: “No women here!” The existence of such monuments in the temple was a permanent reminder of the importance of this boundary for group-identity.

If ‘God from Rock’ constructed one sort of boundary, another allusion to myth, the agreement between Mithras and Helios-Sol at the altar prior to their joint banquet, constructs another, namely between those who have become, or are eligible to become, syndexioi (‘those bound by the handshake’) and those who are not, i.e. the great majority. Membership in the group is referred to a mythical moment after the death of the bull, when Mithras shakes the hand of Helios/Sol, just as the Father might at certain ritual moments assimilate himself to Mithras. The same gesture draws for its authority upon the grander world of political harmony and concord, implying the internalisation of an ideal model of controlled, non-aggressive male collegiality, which was directly relevant to the

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69 The most important archaeological evidence for the role of acclamations in the cult of Mithras comes from the large number of dipinti that were painted all over the interior walls of the final Mithraeum at Dura, c.240 – 256/57: Rostovtzeff et al. 1939, 116–127. Most of them mark the acquisition of a new grade, which suggests the significance of this type of mechanism in creating loyalty and commitment to longer-term membership of the group.
70 It is often supposed that the exclusion of women was a ‘weakness’ of the cult. But the vast majority of ancient associations were likewise exclusively masculine.
71 The term syndexioi for the members of a small Mithraic group is known from Dura: Rostovtzeff et al. (1939, 87 no. 848 (= V.54); 120 no.858 (= V.60)); and from a foundation inscription from Rome: AE (1950:199 = V.423): ut possint syndexi hilares celebrrare vota per aevom (mid-third century CE); cf. Clauss (2012, 101). The word syndexios, like several others in the cult, such as heliodromus or nymphus, is of course Greek, and thus hints either at the historical origin of the cult in the eastern Mediterranean or at any rate a claim to such an origin.
72 Ritual moments based on evocations from myth: Clauss (2012, 98 – 100 with fig. 99; 142–144 with fig. 110).
survival of such small groups and is directly thematised in many *leges sacrae* in the Greek East.

(2) The Mithraic body. Following up work by Foucault and Bourdieu, the late Catherine Bell has explored the dialectical relationship between body and ritual performance. This invites us to look more carefully at representations of the body in Mithraic contexts. In the present context I select just one image (fig. 1), taken from a now well-known Schlangengefäß in Wetterauer ware found in the mithraeum beneath the Ballplatz at Mainz that was deliberately destroyed in 1976 before it could be excavated. My drawing shows two members of an imaginary procession (led by an initiate into the grade *Miles*, not shown here), namely a Father and a *Heliodromus* (i.e. an occupant of the next grade down), both of whom are considerably larger and more imposing than the preceding *Miles*. The Father strides forth, wearing an exaggerated Phrygian cap as an unmistakable reference to the ‘Orient’, and a long shapeless robe that leaves the right shoulder naked, and is thus sharply differentiated from the toga – this is no Roman priest. The wavy lines on the material and the angle of the staff in his right hand convey a sense of brisk, purposive forward movement. But it is above all the angle of the head that gives the desired impression of *gravitas* and *auctoritas* suitable to the ritual moment. The element of masquerade is still more prominent in the case of the *Heliodromus*, whose inferior status is marked by the shorter, simpler robe and his shorter steps – he is really just a lay-figure for the magnificent whip that evokes the whole gamut of associations in the cult with Helios/Sol as charioteer, lord of the entire cosmic order, that he represents. These two highest members of the grade-system – we cannot say what form it took at Mainz in the first half of the second century – thus exemplify an ideal corporeal manifestation of authority, the satisfaction of distinction, itself the fruit – notionally at any rate – of submission to and internalisation of the moral rules.

(3) Cosmic play. Though the themes of light and darkness are naturally omnipresent in polis- or civic-cult, the condensation effected by the mithraeum lent itself to the systematic use of ritual-dynamic impressions in allusion to the theme of Mithras as controller of the cosmic order. Most familiarly, the presence of pierced reliefs, statues and altars, which could be illuminated at certain mo-

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74 On what can now be known of this temple see Huld-Zetsche (2008); on the Schlangengefäß, ibid. 99–108. ‘Schlangengefäß’ is the German term for a type of wine-krater decorated with a snake and sometimes (as in this case) with other significant creatures, for specifically ritual purposes. In my view, Roger Beck’s account of this scenario (Beck 2000, 154–158) is unnecessarily speculative.
ments, implies a widespread determination not merely to communicate the universal and continuing implications for the cosmos of Mithras’ act but, by sharing in their re-enactment, to realise a personal responsibility for the maintenance of the cosmos understood as an order regulated by this god. The lighting and extinguishing of lamps, torches and incense-burners constituted a performative rehearsal of mythic events, and thus a personal participation in them.⁷⁵ Not the least interesting aspect of this play is the incorporation into it of images of the Lion-headed god, a purely Mithraic conception of the highest cosmic divinity, the diversity of whose representations admirably illustrates the theme of mystagogic inventiveness.⁷⁶

(4) A similar desire to communicate a ‘direct’ emotional experience of mythic events to members of such groups is suggested by many monuments, of which I select just two:

a) The mosaic floor of the mitreo degli Animali at Ostia (mid-second century CE) contains a number of images alluding to the cult-image, whose spatial distribution implies that they had some ritual rôle.⁷⁷ The most interesting in the present context is an image of a bull’s head, with fibulae, with part of a culter, the usual equipment of the victimarius, beside it (fig. 2). The bull’s death has been, as it were, brought down ‘out’ of the cult-relief (which would have been close by, in the cult-niche) down to the level of the human actors, in a manner analogous to the excerpting of the rock-birth discussed earlier (and many other Mithraic monuments); yet here its head faces forward, so that it appears to look back up to the relief, just a few metres in front. Packed into the mosaic image, on which individuals could evidently at certain ritual moments take their place, are many of the links between cosmic order, divine action, death, blood, meat, wine, and ‘salvation’ (i.e. well-being and other Heilsgüter), that this mystagogue was concerned to assert and enact. In other words, the ‘floor-decoration’ has a modelling function for ritual performances, even if we can only guess at their precise nature. “L’image est spectacle et support de spectacle rituel”.⁷⁸

b) A different mode of subjectively re-experiencing myth is suggested by the large Schlangengefäß from the late third-century Mithraic feast at Tienen/Belgium described by Marleen Martens, which is furnished inside with a hollow clay tube that on the outside is modelled as a snake.⁷⁹ Here the crater-snake

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⁷⁶ Cf. now Turcan (2016, 419–442).
⁷⁷ See Becatti (1954, 87–92 = V. 278–279).
⁷⁹ Martens (2004, 34–38 with fig.10). The external ‘snake’ is likewise a tube, so that it could serve as a drinking ‘straw’.
motif, which occurred on the Schlangengefäß from Mainz and is frequently found on images both of the bull-killing, and occasionally at the divine banquet shared by Mithras and Helios/Sol (fig. 3), has been operationalised, so that the individual participant could directly experience the warm blood drunk by the serpent at the moment of the original bull-killing, transmuted into the wine it 'drinks' from the krater. Every Schlangengefäß, used to mix the wine for the cult-meal, implicitly conveys these allusions (several also include the lion from the lion-snake-krater triad), but only in late third-century Tienen, so far as we know, did it occur to anyone to take the next step in subjectivisation of the experience. Nevertheless, it can usefully stand as an exemplum of the performative creativity inspired by the centrality of myth in the cult.

4. The ‘Danubian Riders’

Although it is concentrated in the Danube-Sava triangle in southern Pannonia Inferior (later Pannonia Secunda), the iconographic evidence for the cult of the Danubian Riders is found scattered all along the heavily Romanised valley of the Danube from Carnuntum in Pannonia Superior to Durostorum in Moesia Inferior, but also in the major towns of northern Dacia, and even as far West as Poetovio, Virunum and Salonae. For whatever reason it seems to have emerged only after the Roman conquest of Dacia, perhaps around the middle of the second century CE, and the cult in this ‘classic’ form is therefore likely to have been developed through contact with Roman cultural habits. Its basic element, the Rider-god, is however closely related to that of the Thracian Heros, a cult of the same general area, the Moesias, especially Moesia Inferior, and Dacia, but for which there is much more evidence.

Given the very limited degree of integration into the civic religious system (itself, in this general area, of no great antiquity), with a correspondingly low degree of normative control over evocations and meanings, it is a plausible inference that there were numerous different, individual or personal, understandings of the nature of the cult of the Danubian Riders, if indeed we should think of them as the major focus at all – the name ‘Danubian Riders’ is after all simply a modern pigeon-hole to distinguish the cult from that of the Thracian Rider. A

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80 The wine-krater shows clear signs of having been repeatedly placed on the cooking-fire, so the wine would have been warm. It contained no fatty residues, so had never been used for ordinary cooking.

81 The standard catalogue is Gočeva et al. (1979–1982), but see now Oppermann (2006), whose ample discussion supersedes that of Dimitrova (2002).
case in point is the radical doubt over whether there was just one or two Riders, or whether the two Riders, which were evidently in some way related to the Dioscuri, were thought of as a sort of hendiadys, the equivalent of one – the dedication DOMINO at Carnuntum might support such a conclusion. There are rather more than thirty examples of a single Rider; it used to be thought that they were early, but Manfred Oppermann showed that they continued well into the third century and thus co-existed for several decades with the Double-Rider type. There was evidently freedom to choose even on so fundamental a point. The designers of the various matrices known to us clearly had a variable set of notions of what was important and needed to be represented; the finished objects in turn communicated these choices to purchasers, thus influencing their understanding of priorities as well as of their own cultic experience. Serial production thus provided a degree of normativity within the context of a highly decentralised religious praxis. In the case of stelae and roundels on stone, individual urban craft-shops evidently disposed of composition models, both for the registers and for individual groups, which bestow a family resemblance on the monuments even though no type is identical to any other.

Since I do not want to get involved in the details of these images, I simply reproduce one rather well-preserved example of a single type, Ertl’s B03 (fig. 4), from Sirmium. The frame, the egg-and-dart vault supported by columns or pilasters, evokes the general idea of a high-prestige public building. Just as one looks up to such a vault, this vault claims to be the sky – hence the stars in the field; the principal inhabitant of the visible heaven is Helios/Sol, who here faces front towards the spectator. This focus on Helios/Sol, which is common in the Pannonian plaques, is replaced elsewhere by joint representations of Luna (l.) and Sol (r.). This sun in this case is simply there in majesty, he does not evoke the diurnal rhythm of the two major luminaries.

Below Helios/Sol, and less prominent, but nevertheless centrally placed, and likewise in ‘heaven’, are 1) the Great Goddess, as always facing front towards the spectator, flanked by 2) the two Riders who hold up their right hand in a gesture of respect. The left-hand horse stands on a large fish; behind him is a gladiator, generally identified with the god Mars. Behind the right-hand Rider, whose horse stands on or over a prostrate man, is a female deity with her finger to her mouth, usually identified as Nemesis. In the present context these divine figures,

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83 E. B03 – 37 with Taf. XXXIX. As I have observed above (n.34), Ertl knew 66 virtually identical examples of this type.
84 E.g. Ertl’s types F, G, and H which are likewise extremely common.
85 I ignore here the possible allusion to imperial solar iconography.
though obviously of great importance to the cult’s conceptual apparatus, do not concern me, except to make a point about protection/well-being: the Riders’ ability to overcome ills is enshrined in the routinised iconography of the cult; and it must be this aspect of their power that lies behind the production of the plaques, the tiny stone roundels and the intaglios.\textsuperscript{86}

My main concern here, however, is with the lower part of these plaques, which clearly relate to human religious action. In the centre is a sacrificial feast-scene with one dominant seated figure placed directly below the Great Goddess, and a smaller figure seated on either side. On the table is clearly a large fish, a creature closely bound up with the Goddess.\textsuperscript{87} To the right of this group there approach two young men who are holding hands. To the left is what is for me the crucial scene among these representations, namely (fig. 5) a tree on which a sacrificed ram has been hung by the hind-legs for skinning and disembowelling by a male figure.\textsuperscript{88} To the left of this group there stands a taller, and therefore in the context more important, figure with the head of a ram. In the single Rider types, the ram is shown being dragged by the sacrificant to an altar; in others, we find a ram’s severed head in the field.\textsuperscript{89} Tudor called this scene the \textit{occultatio} and saw it as a kind of initiation, implying a shift of moral and religious status through the merit of subduing the ram, cutting its throat, hanging it up and disembowelling it – that is, single-handedly doing all the things involved in sacrifice that in civic cult were done by slaves; i.e. a rejection of civic rules.\textsuperscript{90} This seems plausible enough, but lends still greater interest to the taller, ram-headed figure who supervises the action. I do not believe this is a mask (any more than I believe members of Mithraic groups wore masks): the ram’s head is a visual sign of a specific rôle or dignity in connection with a ritual performance whose aim is to establish a special relationship with the Riders. The difference in height between this figure and the disemboweller suggests that this is a mystagogue directing the process of skinning and disembowelling and perhaps explaining its significance.

\textsuperscript{86} On some other images, the Rider on the l. is accompanied by a lion, which attacks the prostrate figure beneath the horse’s hooves.

\textsuperscript{87} On the Goddess and the fish, see the remarks of Tudor (1969 – 76, 2: 208 – 212).

\textsuperscript{88} This is still today a standard means of butchering sheep and pigs. I remember coming up to a Greek farmer in the Mani in the early 1980s shortly before Easter, who was preparing a large lamb in just this manner.

\textsuperscript{89} Single Rider: Tudor (1969 – 76, 2: 213); head in field: e.g. Ertl’s G02 and G04; in exedra: C01 and C02.

\textsuperscript{90} Tudor (1969 – 76, 2: 243 – 249), picking up the term from M. Abramić. In some cases, bulls are shown (though not in this scenario of butchery), implying a shift in husbandry, differential wealth, and the search for distinction thereby within the general context of the Rider-cult.
The reproduction of this scene (and its analogues) on several series of lead plaques suggests that we should understand it as a site of intense personal memory, in which a special relation was established between the ‘initiate’ (for want of a better term) and his mystagogue. The second aspect of this memory is the central scene of eating the fish, which must represent another stage or a complement to the relation to the Riders established by the ram-sacrifice. One cannot but be struck by the plaques’ interest in detailing or ‘rehearsing’ cultic instruments, victims and emblems, in a manner reminiscent of the series of sacrificial instruments on Flavian temples. We should understand these as individual points of evocation, or triggers for personal cultic memories, even if we can make much less sense of the items than we can for public cult.

One of the advantages of using cast lead as the medium was to communicate greater detail cheaply – as though the protection provided by the lead plaque was in direct proportion to the information it could convey. We should therefore not use ‘schemes’ and ‘types’ in a mechanical way to construct pseudo-histories of development but treat them as so many divergent choices relating to the communicative problem, which is at the same time also an interpretative problem: what is important (to me, the mystagogue)? How am I best to communicate it? Each iconographic choice is conditioned partly by personal experience, partly by ‘theological’ concerns, and partly by other iconographic choices known to the designer. To a significant degree, I think these monuments were intended to act, inter alia, as sites of memory, recalling ritual events in the lives of those who owned them, but by that very fact, perpetuating and memorialising the authority and charisma of the individual mystagogue who controlled both the ‘ram-event’ and the communicative form in which it was held fast to become, as an amulet, a source of physical protection.

5. Conclusion

My general aim here has been to illustrate not merely the inventiveness of mystagogues working on different materials but also the price to be paid for the struggle to maintain the viability of these small groups – and the unexpected benefits arising. If we take Michael Stausberg’s rough scheme of the development of a category of ‘religion’, namely attributive, structural and functional differentiation, we can locate the emergence of small group religion as one aspect of the transition between attributive and structural differentiation, that is, between the phase of making things ‘religious’ and the phase of making institu-
tions ‘religious’.\textsuperscript{91} In a recent article Jörg Rüpke has proposed several kinds of questions we can ask of our material in order to get a purchase on individual religious action perceived as communication.\textsuperscript{92} For my purposes, two of these are of special interest: How does ‘religion’ influence the ability and willingness of individuals to deal creatively with daily and extraordinary problems? And how does human agency contribute to the institutionalisation of what is specifically perceived as religious practice? In both cases, we would do well to start from the Weberian idea of natural talent (if not necessarily ‘virtuosity’) and focus on the linkage between pragmatic awareness and individual performances in the acquisition of personal religious authority. Authority in turn founds a plastic narrative identity which, however, remains at this historical juncture, between attributive and structural differentiation, just one among many possible identities. The emergence of ‘religion’ is the essential precondition for this narrative to be considered even by ego as plausible; and without the narrative there can be no drive to create a specifically religious institution.

\section*{References}


\textsuperscript{91} See Stausberg (2010, 361–363).

\textsuperscript{92} Rüpke (2015, 355).


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Fig. 1: Drawings of the Father (l.) and the Heliodromus (r.) on face 2 of the Schlangengefäß in Wetterauer ware from the Mainz Mithraeum, c.120–140 CE. The figures, which occupy the two central elements of a short ‘procession’ of four persons, were created individually in barbotine technique. Image: Generaldirektion Kulturelles Erbe Rheinland-Pfalz, Direktion Archäologie, Mainz.
Fig. 2: The bull’s head on the mosaic floor of the Mitreo degli Animali, Ostia (Reg. IV, Ins. II, 11). Note the fibulae (ribbons) hanging from the horns, and the butcher’s knife, both of which serve to refer the human practice of sacrifice with the mythic moment of Mithras’ sacrifice, which is connotated by the severed tail on the right. Photo: R.L. Gordon.
Fig. 3: The reverse of the double-sided relief from Proložac Donji, nr. Imotski, Croatia, showing the usual scene of the 'First Sacrificial Meal' shared between Mithras and Helios/Sol, who are reclining on the hide of the skinned and butchered heavenly bull. In front of the table with the meat is the symbolic group lion-krater-snake, which imaged the relationship asserted between Mithras’ act in sacrificing the bull, the blood that flowed, and the food and wine consumed in Mithraic groups. Photo: Muzej Hrvatskih Arheoloških Spomenika/Museum of Croatian Archaeological Monuments Split.
Fig. 4: A lead plaque from Sirmium, Pannonia Inferior (Sremska Mitrovica, Serbia) of type B03 (Ertl 1996 no. B03.37). The upper section shows a schematic version of heaven, dominated by Helios-Sol, yet centred upon a Great Goddess, the two Riders, and some other divine figures. The central section focuses upon a sacrificial meal based on fish, an event that bears an unknown relation to the ‘ram-sacrifice’ on the left. The lowest register contains a sequence of objects of high symbolic value in the ritual praxis. Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum, Mainz, inv. no. O/42691/57. Photo: RGZM/Sabine Hölper.
Fig. 5: Detail from fig. 4, showing the skinning and disembowelling of the sacrificed ram, a procedure directed by a ‘Ram’, i.e. a mystagogue who assumed a managing rôle in this praxis. Its precise significance is however unknown to us.