

# The Eighteen Associations of Corinth

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EVER SINCE the eighteenth century, there have been suggestions that early Christian groups, and the Pauline churches in particular, should be understood as voluntary associations analogous to Greek *thiasoi* or Roman *collegia*.<sup>1</sup> Early on, the Pauline group at Corinth has been regarded as the most promising example for making that case, as the problems and instructions recorded in 1 Corinthians offer an unusual amount of information about the social aspects of early Christian worship.<sup>2</sup> Not least due to the new availability of translations, the “association-model” has now become a standard tool in religious studies and New Testament scholarship.<sup>3</sup> And not surprisingly given the wealth of information offered by 1 Corinthians, the Christian community of Corinth still takes pride of place.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Johann Gottfried Häntzschel, *De hetaeris veterum Christianorum* (Leipzig 1729); Giovanni Battista de Rossi, *La Roma sotterranea Cristiana I* (Rome 1864) 101–108; Ernest Renan, *Histoire des origines du christianisme II Les apôtres* (Paris 1866) 351–364.

<sup>2</sup> The first detailed treatment was offered by Georg Heinrici, “Die Christengemeinde Korinths und die religiösen Genossenschaften der Griechen,” *Zeitschrift für wissenschaftliche Theologie* 19 (1876) 465–526.

<sup>3</sup> New collections of translated inscriptions have been published recently: see John S. Kloppenborg, Richard S. Ascough, Philip A. Harland, *Greco-Roman Associations: Texts, Translations and Commentary I–II* (Berlin 2011–2014), and *Associations in the Greco-Roman World. A Sourcebook* (Waco 2012). On Philip Harland’s website additional data are provided and numerous corrections of the published translations can be found: <http://philipharland.com/greco-roman-associations>.

<sup>4</sup> See among recent contributions John S. Kloppenborg, “Greco-Roman *Thiasoi*, the *Ekklesia* at Corinth, and Conflict Management,” in Ron

In a recent article on the state of the question, Richard Ascough sums up much of the work that has been done—not least by himself—in the past fifteen years. It is the story of a triumph, underlined by the italics in the title (“What are they *now* saying about Christ groups and associations?”), and it cites a large number of works (mainly in English) profitably comparing Christian groups to Graeco-Roman associations.<sup>5</sup> As is fitting with regard to both chronology and the history of scholarship, Ascough devotes more than half of his article to the Corinthian Christ group. He introduces his overview of scholarship with a contextual note (208):

Ironically, evidence for associations in the city is slim, not because they did not exist at Corinth but due to the nature of archaeological finds. Although the stele are broken and fragmentary, there are 17 known references to associations attested at Corinth, dating from the sixth century BCE through to the third century CE (...) These data are sufficient to assume that Corinth was similar to cities across the Greek and the Roman Empires in having an array of associations of various sorts populating the urban landscape.

Thus, while evidence for associations at Corinth is not as abundant as would be preferred, this is due “to the nature of archaeological finds,” which, we are to understand, differs from that of other cities. The problem is not seen as a very significant one, because reassuringly, seventeen references to associations are attested even at Corinth over a long timespan. Ascough then proceeds to summarize a study that uses “five of

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Cameron and Merrill P. Miller (eds.), *Redescribing Paul and the Corinthians* (Atlanta 2011) 206–240; Rachel M. McRae, “Eating with Honor: The Corinthian Lord’s Supper in Light of Voluntary Association Meal Practices,” *JBL* 130 (2011) 165–181; Richard Last, *The Pauline Church and the Corinthian Ekklesia. Greco-Roman Associations in Comparative Context* (Cambridge 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Richard S. Ascough, “What Are They *Now* Saying about Christ Groups and Associations?” *Currents in Biblical Research* 13 (2015) 207–244. The reference in the title is to his earlier summary of scholarship; *What Are They Saying about the Formation of Pauline Churches?* (New York 1998).

these association texts” to elucidate the Corinthian Christ group; they come from Athens, Andania, Lydian Philadelphia, Egyptian Philadelphia, and Lanuvium.<sup>6</sup>

In his recent monograph on the Corinthian Christians and associations, Richard Last focusses a bit more on the negative sides of the Corinthian evidence, but otherwise offers a similar argument. Having discussed evidence from Roman Egypt for associations of ten to twenty-five members, he notes:<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, we do not know the typical size of associations in Roman Corinth; our extant Hellenistic and Roman association inscriptions from Corinth amount to eighteen; however, they do not inform us of average membership size. It would be special pleading to suggest that Corinthian associations were larger on average than Hellenistic and Roman era Egyptian ones.

Again, the Corinthian data are of no interest for themselves, but the very fact that there *are* data on associations—eighteen inscriptions—makes comparison with other associations from all over the empire legitimate.

Neither Ascough nor Last give any information on what we actually do know about associations at Corinth, apart from the fact that they existed. However, the strength of the association-model is precisely that it promises to root Christianity in its local social environment. So if there were seventeen or eighteen associations at Corinth, a clear idea about what these associations did in this local context should be of primary importance, while evidence from Athens or Egypt can only serve to fill in gaps. This article therefore explores the evidence for associations at Corinth. But as a first step, some remarks about the local context are in order, for although the new scholarly movement in favor of the comparison tends to eliminate the differences between the various cities and regions of the

<sup>6</sup> Incidentally, we may note that neither the mysteries of Andania (*IG* V.1 1390) nor the household of Dionysios in Lydian Philadelphia (*TAM* V.3 1539) qualify as associations.

<sup>7</sup> Last, *The Pauline Church* 77.

Graeco-Roman world, it should be clear that associations must be understood within their particular society.

1. What should we expect from Corinth?

The point supposed to be proven by mentioning the eighteen association inscriptions of Corinth is, as we have seen, that while the evidence may not be totally satisfactory, it is legitimate to assume that the city was populated with a large number of associations, “similar to cities across the Greek and the Roman empires.” This then enables scholars to base their actual arguments on the famous statutes of the Athenian Iobakchoi or similar texts, for the only difference between the cities would be that what has not been preserved in Corinth has been preserved in Athens. However, before looking more deeply into the evidence for Corinthian associations, it is worth reconsidering the apparent generalization in the latter part of this argument. There obviously were different types of cities in the Roman Empire.

Corinth, as is well known, was destroyed in 146 BCE in the course of the Achaean war. When it was refounded by Julius Caesar in 44 BCE as *Colonia Laus Iulia Corinthiensis*, its status differed markedly from other Greek cities. Not only was the population of this new colony necessarily drawn from various places and a certain reservoir of people—mostly veterans and freedmen, although the precise social makeup of the city remains debated;<sup>8</sup> it was also bound to Roman civil law, which could be advantageous in some respects, but also entailed clear expectations how a society was to be organized.

That associations would have been a part of that society is not at all evident. Corinth’s foundation as a colony falls in a time when associations were held in especially low regard by Roman authorities. Only shortly before the foundation of

<sup>8</sup> Strab. 8.6.23; Plut. *Caes.* 57.8; App. *Pun.* 136. For a recent view see Benjamin W. Millis, “The Social and Ethnic Origins of the Colonists in Early Roman Corinth,” in Steven J. Friesen et al. (eds.), *Corinth in Context. Comparative Studies on Religion and Society* (Leiden 2010) 13–35.

Corinth, Caesar himself had “dissolved all *collegia* apart from those that had been constituted a long time ago.”<sup>9</sup> This legislation was a reaction to recent experiences at Rome with gangs mobilized by Clodius, and was therefore aimed first and foremost at Rome itself, with no immediate consequences for the empire.<sup>10</sup> But a letter of Octavian in defense of Jewish rights in Parion (or Paros) shows that Caesar’s regulations, which were upheld by Octavian, could be used as a precedent in the Greek world as well (Jos. *AJ* 14.213–216), and in any case, Corinth was a colony. Any developments in Roman civil law were much more likely to have a direct impact here than in other Greek cities of different status.

What this could mean becomes clear when we look at another colony founded by Caesar in 44 BCE, *Colonia Iulia Genetiva*, Urso in Spain. Four bronze tablets have preserved significant parts of the *lex coloniae Genetivae Iuliae*, the municipal law under which the colonists had sworn to live.<sup>11</sup> Of special interest for us is chapter 106:

*quicumque colonus coloniae Genetivae erit, quae iussu C. Caesaris dictatoris deducta est, ne quem in ea colonia coetum conventum coniurationem.*

Whoever will be a colonist in the *colonia Genetiva*, which has been established by the order of Gaius Caesar the dictator, shall not in this colony make a gathering, an assembly, or a conspiracy.

The word *collegium* is not used here, perhaps because it only assumed a legal relevance at a later stage; if reconstructions of the

<sup>9</sup> Suet. *Iul.* 42.3: *cuncta collegia praeter antiquitus constituta distraxit.*

<sup>10</sup> On Clodius’ politics and *collegia* see Ian Harrison, “Catiline, Clodius, and Popular Politics at Rome during the 60s and 50s BCE,” *BICS* 51 (2008) 95–118, at 111–115; on the lack of direct consequences of legislation on *collegia* in the East see Ilias N. Arnaoutoglou, “Roman Law and *collegia* in Asia Minor,” *RIDA* 49 (2002) 27–44, who in my view overstates his (legitimate) case.

<sup>11</sup> *FIRA* I 21; Crawford, *Roman Statutes* 25. For an overview on the organization of Urso see Aldona R. Jurewicz, “La lex Coloniae Genetivae Iuliae seu Ursonensis – rassegna della materia. Gli organi della colonia,” *RIDA* 54 (2007) 293–325.

Twelve Tables can be trusted, *coetus* was the much older term.<sup>12</sup> It is nevertheless clear that this regulation could easily be read as a ban on associations, and Caesar's politics at Rome make it likely that this is in fact how the text should be understood. This interpretation is further supported by the Flavian municipal law as it is preserved in the *lex Irmitana*, from the second half of the first century CE.<sup>13</sup> Chapter 74 is very close to the *lex Ursonensis*, but more precise in its terminology:

*de coetu sodalicio collegio. ne quis in e[ro] municipio coetum facito, neue sodalici[um] conlegiumue eius rei causa {m} habeto, neue habeatur coniurato, neue facito quo quid earum rerum fiat.*

On gathering, club, and association. No one in this municipium shall make a gathering, nor shall he have a club or an association for that purpose, nor shall there be a conspiracy, nor shall he do anything through which one of these things comes into being.

This elaborate interdiction against *coetus* and its possible organizational basis leaves very little room for associations, and it is a direct follow-up on the earlier formulation found in Caesar's municipal law for Urso.<sup>14</sup> That the latter was not found to be insufficient is shown by the fact that it remained unchanged when the *lex Ursonensis* was republished in the Flavian period.

It is very likely that Corinth, like Urso and Irni, received its legal code upon foundation or shortly after. The fact that the evidence for municipal laws is scanty, with a strong preponderance for Spain (recently modified by the discovery of the *lex*

<sup>12</sup> For insightful remarks see Andreas Bendlin, "‘Eine Zusammenkunft um der *religio* willen ist erlaubt...?' Zu den politischen und rechtlichen Konstruktionen von (religiöser) Vergemeinschaftung in der römischen Kaiserzeit," in Hans G. Kippenberg and Gunnar F. Schuppert (eds.), *Die verrechtlichte Religion. Der Öffentlichkeitsstatus von Religionsgemeinschaften* (Tübingen 2005) 65–107, at 90–91.

<sup>13</sup> J. González, *JRS* 76 (1986) 147–243.

<sup>14</sup> See the discussion by Rosa Mentxaka, "El derecho de asociación en Roma a la luz del cap. 74 de la 'Lex Irmitana,'" *BIDR* 37/38 (1995/96) 199–218, at 207–214.

*Troesmensis*), should not distract from the fact that there must have been thousands of municipal laws all over the empire, published on bronze plaques which have survived only under special circumstances, as the bronze was reused in those cities with continuous habitation.<sup>15</sup> It is also very likely that the law of *Colonia Laus Iulia Corinthiensis* already contained a ban on *coetus*, *conventus*, and *conjuratio*. This regulation may have been updated when the city became *Colonia Iulia Flavia Augusta Corinthiensis* under Vespasian, but the case of Urso shows that the Caesarian text may also have been regarded as sufficiently clear.

So should we expect no associations at all in Corinth? Not quite so. The Roman Empire was built to no small extent on both the readiness of administrators to rely on corporate organizations and the willingness of the inhabitants to build them.<sup>16</sup> Even in an environment where the creation of associations was subject to a much tighter legal order than elsewhere, useful groups could emerge. Several types of corporate organization fall into this spectrum: priesthoods with a collegiate form of self-organization, but also professional *collegia* (especially the *fabri*, but also *negotiatores* and other trade organizations), groups related to public festivals (like the *symphoniaci* of Augustan Rome who received official permission *ludorum causa*: *CIL* VI 4416), and associations for emperor-worship like the

<sup>15</sup> This point is stressed by Hartmut Galsterer, “Die römischen Stadtgesetze,” in Luigi Capogrossi Colognesi and Emilio Gabba (eds.), *Gli statuti municipali* (Pavia 2006) 31–56, at 35. The new municipal law from Troesmis (177–180 CE) has now received its first more or less official publication by Romeo Cîrjan, “The Municipal Law of Troesmis: Preliminary Remarks,” in Adriana Panaite et al. (eds.), *Moesica et Christiana. Studies in Honour of Professor Alexandru Barnea* (Brăila 2016) 289–300.

<sup>16</sup> For important remarks (though not focused on corporate organization) see Clifford Ando, “Imperial Identities,” in Tim Whitmarsh (ed.), *Local Knowledge and Microidentities in the Imperial Greek World* (Cambridge 2010) 17–45; and for a regional study reaching similar conclusions Benedikt Eckhardt, “Romanization and Isomorphic Change in Phrygia: The Case of Private Associations,” *JRS* 106 (2016) 147–171.

Augustales. All these groups were, at least to some extent, voluntary associations operating according to their own rules, but at the same time they were intimately connected to the civic order, to an extent that makes it legitimate to think of them as an integral part not of the private sphere, but of the institutional makeup of a Roman city. In Corinth, we should expect to find such associations, perhaps occasionally supplemented by local variants of associational life that had somehow managed to receive permission or at least some sort of recognition. What we should not expect to find, however, are significant numbers of Dionysiastai, Sarapiastai, *thiasoi*, and other associations that were common in the Hellenistic period and survived in many cities of the Greek world into the third century CE.

With these expectations in mind, let us turn to the seventeen or eighteen inscriptions adduced by Ascough and Last.

## 2. The evidence for associations in Corinth

Both Ascough and Last offer the very same list of references to associations in Corinth.<sup>17</sup> The overlap cannot be a coincidence as the same typo (*Corinth* VIII.3 46 should be *Corinth* VIII.3 40) is present in both. As both authors do not give further information on the origin of their information, I refer to it as the Ascough/Last list.<sup>18</sup>

That list is puzzling indeed, for the first ten inscriptions adduced (*Corinth* VIII.1 1–10, i.e. the whole section “laws and decrees”) have nothing to do with associations whatsoever. Nor is there any room for doubt or mistake: No. 1 is a five-word fragment mentioning pigs, no. 2 is an honorific decree by the people of Corinth, no. 3 is a proxeny decree, no. 4 is a fragmentary civic decree having something to do with the Great

<sup>17</sup> Ascough, *Currents in Biblical Research* 13 (2015) 208; Last, *The Pauline Church* 77 with n.120. The references are identical; the number of inscriptions adduced is eighteen, not seventeen as Ascough has it.

<sup>18</sup> No such list can be found in the pre-publication version of Last’s dissertation (2013), which otherwise could have solved the issue.

Dionysia, and so on.<sup>19</sup> It is simply impossible to connect any of these inscriptions even speculatively with associations. That means that of the eighteen references to Corinthian associations included in the Ascough/Last list, ten can be eliminated without further discussion.

This disconcerting find naturally raises doubts with regard to the other cluster of inscriptions in the list, *Corinth* VIII.3 306–310. And again, review of the texts reveals severe problems. No. 306 mentions athletes coming to Corinth for a competition; while some of them might be organized in the world-wide organization of athletes, this has no bearing on associations at Corinth. No. 307 is a fragmentary decree mentioning the *Achaioi* and the *Helladarches*; it thus concerns the Achaean *koinon*, not associations. No. 309 is another fragment consisting of single words; b.5 reads [– – σ]ύνεδ[ρου(?)] – –. Even if the reconstruction is accepted, the reference would be to *synedroi* of the Achaean *koinon* (cf. *Corinth* VIII.1 81), not to some local *synedrion*. No. 310 (in Latin) is again too fragmentary to gain any secure information; even Kent’s comment that “the document may have contained official minutes of some religious gathering” is rather bold. Again, there is not a trace of an association here.

So four additional inscriptions have to be eliminated; *Corinth* VIII.3 308 will be discussed below, as the three remaining inscriptions from the list are easier to deal with. Two of them concern the Dionysiac *technitai*. The first pre-dates the destruction of Corinth and refers to the Romans, possibly in the context of some sort of arbitration (*Corinth* VIII.3 40; the text is again very fragmentary). The second is a letter of Trajan to

<sup>19</sup> To continue for the sake of completeness: No. 5 is the very fragmentary end of another civic honorific decree, no. 6 is a six-word fragment mentioning a decision, no. 7 contains ten legible letters and might mention a γρα[μματεύς], no. 8 contains fragments of four words at the beginning of a civic decree, no. 9 contains five letters, four of which are needed for [ἐ]δοξε, no. 10 (from the fourth century CE) is a letter by the proconsul Flavius Ulpianus Macarius.

(presumably) the Isthmian *synodos* from the year 98/9 CE (*SEG* XLV 234 = Oliver, *Constitutions* 47). The stone is too broken to reveal the content of the letter, but for the present purposes, it is of secondary importance. The main question is whether or not anything can be gained from incorporating the worldwide synod of actors or its local branch at Corinth into a comparative study on Christianity and associations. The *technitai* were an organization with enormous prestige, privileged by Hellenistic kings and Roman emperors, who were ready to defend the performers' interest against cities and their magistrates.<sup>20</sup> Membership was possible only for those who actually practiced the art, and leaving the organization was apparently very difficult if not impossible. Both the respective rulers and the performers themselves treated the Dionysiac *synodos* as a state for all intents and purposes. It is possible to label them a private or voluntary association, but their dealings—and the experience of membership in the group—must have been so removed from day-to-day realities in Corinth or elsewhere that no reasonable comparison to the small-scale Christian gatherings can be drawn.

This leaves us with only two inscriptions from the Ascough/Last list. The first is a Latin text from around 120 CE, *Corinth* VIII.3 62:

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 [— *decernente*] *collegio Larum domu[s]*  
                   *divinae*  
                   *curam agentibus collegiani[s]*  
 4 *primi<s> T. Flavio Aug. lib. Antio[cho]*  
    *et Ti. Claudio Primigenio.*

(This has been set up) through a decree by the *collegium* of the *Lares* of the divine household. The first members of the *collegium*,

<sup>20</sup> As has become so extraordinarily clear in the newly published letters of Hadrian from Alexandria Troas: Georg Petzl and Elmar Schwertheim, *Hadrian und die dionysischen Künstler* (Bonn 2006) [*SEG* LVI 1359].

Titus Flavius Antiochus, an imperial freedman, and Titus Claudius Primigenius, have taken care of it.

The supplement in line 1 is insecure, as there is no parallel for the phrase and we could easily imagine other options, like *positum a collegio*. The sense is nevertheless clear: the *collegium Larum* has set up a monument, and its two leaders, a freedman and (likely) the son of a freedman, have seen to its completion.<sup>21</sup> *Collegia Larum* are known from other cities. Apart from their mere mention in votive or dedicatory inscriptions (e.g. *CIL* III 4792 from Virunum, V 4432 and 4400 from Brixia, IX 2481 from Saepinum, XIII 1747 from Lugdunum), some inscriptions are a bit more informative. In Poetovio, Gaius Valerius Tettius Fuscus, *decurio* of the colony and holder of various offices, dedicated *loca* for “the great *collegium* of the *Lares* and of the images of our lord Caesar” (III 4038). In Hippo Regius, “the *collegium* of the *Lares* of our Caesar and the freedmen and the family and the contractors who are in the region of Hippo” set up a monument for Titus Flavius Macer, who not only was a perpetual priest in Ammaedara, but also had other important functions, some of which were directly bestowed upon him by the emperor himself (*AE* 1922, 19). Two inscriptions from Rome and Ostia show how *collegia Larum* were able, through dealing with *procuratores* and *curatores*, to secure a place for themselves on imperial domains where they could worship the images of the emperors.<sup>22</sup>

It emerges from this overview that a *collegium Larum* is exactly the kind of association we would expect to find in a Roman colony like Corinth. It was a semi-public group of freedmen who worshipped the imperial household, a noble purpose that

<sup>21</sup> Misunderstood by Cavan W. Concannon, “When You Were Gentiles.” *Specters of Ethnicity in Roman Corinth and Paul’s Corinthian Correspondence* (New Haven 2014) 208, who thinks that “it [the association] honors two of its oldest or leading members.”

<sup>22</sup> *CIL* VI 455 (168 CE), XIV 4570 (205 CE); see Anne Kolb, “Vereine ‘kleiner Leute’ und die kaiserliche Verwaltung,” *ZPE* 107 (1995) 201–212, at 204–211.

was of course legitimate even in Roman eyes. The evidence for such groups comes from colonies or from Rome and its immediate environment. They are interesting for the way corporate organizations of (imperial) freedmen were integrated into the Roman civic order, but they have nothing in common with the Hellenistic tradition of associations. Their comparative potential is obviously limited, as personal status and the stated purpose completely determined their existence. They are therefore to be treated no differently than the *Augustales*, another group of (usually) freedmen worshipping the emperor, also attested at Corinth (as in other colonies), but not included in the Ascough/Last list.<sup>23</sup>

One inscription from that list remains to be investigated. We have seen above that from the cluster *Corinth VIII.3* 306–310, only 308 deserves discussion:

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 τ' ἔρχεσθ[αι(?) -----]  
 ἡλίου δυο[μένου(?) -----]  
 να π[ρα]ξι[-----]  
 4 του ευκο[-----]  
 τοῦ ἀγορα[νόμου -----]  
 τοῦ θιάσου κ[-----]  
 τειμὴν τῆς [-----]  
 8 οὐκ ἐξέεται δ[ἐ-----]  
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The inscription is obviously too mutilated to give a translation. It is apparently a normative text of some sort, as line 8 forbids something. The first lines can perhaps be restored a bit further than Kent thought: the final omicron in 2 is not in fact visible on the photograph provided (pl. 25); the remains of a letter can just as well belong to a sigma, which is lunar in the inscription.

<sup>23</sup> For *sodales Augustales* see *Corinth VIII.2* 53, 62; *VIII.3* 185, 213, 219, 253; and the monument connected with *VIII.2* 53, on which see now Margaret L. Laird, “The Emperor in a Roman Town: The Base of the *Augustales* in the Forum at Corinth,” in *Corinth in Context* 67–116.

This would allow for [ἄχρι] ἡλίου δύσ[εως], “until sunset” (cf. *IG IV* 597.16–17, from Roman Argos). More important is the reference to a *thiasos* in 6. It stands in close proximity to the “market overseer” in 5, which in turn might suggest that the meaning of *τειμήν* in 7 is “price” or “worth” rather than “worship” or “fine” (the options suggested by Kent). We might speculate that this was a rule regulating access to a certain space or event (“until sunset”), where a market-overseer was involved in the sale of, for example, sacrificial meat which had to be sold at a certain price.<sup>24</sup> The role of the *thiasos* in this context is unclear. The term can refer to an association, but it does not have to be private one, and there are also instances where *thiasos* means a sort of gathering.<sup>25</sup> While *Corinth VIII.3*

<sup>24</sup> The normal assumption would be that the ἀγορανόμος is a civic magistrate. However, inscriptions from Dion and Beroia suggest that ἀγορανόμοι could be closely related to θίασοι. See on the evidence Anne-Françoise Jaccottet, *Choirs Dionysos II* (Zurich 2003) 45–49, nos. 13–18, who argues for a rather official character of these θίασοι, and the critical remarks by Kloppenborg and Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations I* 301–302. While in Dion, the ἀγορανόμοι/*aediles* make dedications to Dionysus and the θίασος, the inscription from Beroia (*SEG XLVIII* 751, 7 BCE) might suggest that the ἀγορανόμος belonged to the θίασος (A.3 ἀγορανομήσας τοῦ θίασου); however, what that might mean for the character of the group is as unclear as the interpretation of the text (*pace* Kloppenborg and Ascough, the text does not use the substantive form ἀγορανόμος; the participle makes the construction with a genitive a bit more ambiguous). I also note that the dedications from Dion (Διονύσω καὶ τῷ θιάσῳ/*Libero Patri et thiaso*) might actually refer to the mythical θίασος of Dionysus, not to an association, while in the case of Beroia the existence of an organized group is made clear by side B: τὸ κοινὸν τῶν θιασωτῶν.

<sup>25</sup> A list of names might have stood at the end of the inscription if *Corinth VIII.3* 369 was indeed part of the same stone, as argued by Mary E. Hoskins Walbank, “The Cults of Roman Corinth: Public Ritual and Personal Belief,” in Athanasios D. Rizakis and Claudia E. Lepenioti (eds.), *Roman Peloponnese III* (Athens 2010) 357–374, at 369. The letters look similar indeed, and her point against Kent that the different size of the letters does not rule out the combination (given that the second fragment contains a list of names) is valid. But other factors do not add up (the thickness of the

308 therefore deserves a place on the Ascough/Last list, a question mark seems apposite.

The discussion can, however, be extended, for while the Ascough/Last list includes quite a lot of data that have no bearing on associations, two items might actually be added if we include the harbor areas. The first is a very fragmentary inscription from some time in the imperial era found at Lechaëum, Corinth's northern harbor (*SEG* XXIII 170). It mentions a θίασος, possibly of Aphrodite (line 2 Ἀφ[ροδίτης]), but the remains are too poor to reach any conclusions.<sup>26</sup> The second text was published by Joseph Rife in 2010. The inscription was found in Kenchreai, is dated by its editor to the first or second century CE, and offers its own problems of interpretation:<sup>27</sup>

Γ. Ἦιος Ἀγαθήμερος καὶ Τε-  
 ρεντία πῶμα θιάσφ ἄρτο-  
 κρεωνικῶ ὑπὲρ Ἦιας Παυ-  
 4 λείνας θυγατρὸς αὐτῶν λι-  
 κναφόρου ἀνέστησαν.

Gaius Heius Agathemeros and Terentia Polla have set this up for the bread-meat-*thiasos*, on behalf of Heia Paulina, their daughter, the *liknos*-bearer.

Sophia Zoumbaki has realized that Rife's πῶμα should be read ΠΩΛΛΑ = Πόλλα,<sup>28</sup> a suggestion that has been incorporated into the translation above. A Dionysiac context could be in-

fragments is quite different), and they were not found at the same spot; no secure conclusions can therefore be reached.

<sup>26</sup> Hoskins Walbank, in *Roman Peloponnese* III 369, nevertheless offers a rather speculative translation. As we do not know how many letters are missing in each line, I do not think that the text can be confidently reconstructed.

<sup>27</sup> Joseph L. Rife, "Religion and Society at Roman Kenchreai," in *Corinth in Context* 391–432, at 413–417 [*SEG* LX 329].

<sup>28</sup> "Thiasos artokreonikos in Kenchreai," forthcoming in a Festschrift edited by F. Camia et al., 2017.

ferred from the word *liknaphoros* and might be supported by an incised ivy leaf, but there are other options, as several miniature *likna* in the region are connected with Demeter.<sup>29</sup> As for the *hapax* ἀρτοκρεωνικός, it obviously has to do with bread and meat; Rife translates the compound θιάσῳ ἀρτοκρεωνικῷ as “for the ritual of distributing bread and meat.” Instead of “ritual,” something like “revelry” might be appropriate as well; in any case, the inscription does not clearly attest to an association.<sup>30</sup> The distribution of bread and meat as well as the office of *liknaphoros* certainly suggest a procession of worshippers, but that revelry, which may be the thing called θιάσος ἀρτοκρεωνικός, could well have been an element of a festival in a civic cult. This is at least as likely as the existence of an association whose stated purpose was to distribute bread and meat (to whom? on what financial basis?), and it would fit the approach developed above for *Corinth* VIII.3 308. The alternative would be to assume that the characteristics of a Roman municipal order were more and more replaced by Greek ideas about social organization in the course of the second century or so, perhaps especially in the harbor areas, but this would not be of much help for a comparison with the Pauline group.

In sum, the Ascough/Last list is in serious need of correction. Of the eighteen inscriptions adduced, fourteen have nothing to do with associations. Of the remaining four, three refer to groups that cannot profitably be compared with early Christian gatherings (or other associations like the Iobakchoi in Athens).

<sup>29</sup> Note the comment by Nancy Bookidis and Ronald S. Strout, *The Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore. Topography and Architecture (Corinth XVIII.3)* (Princeton 1997) 427 n.28: “Apparently, more *likna* have been found in the Demeter Sanctuary on Acrocorinth than at any other site in the Greek world.” Rife notes this alternative, but points to the fact that the term λικναφόρος is largely limited to Dionysiac contexts.

<sup>30</sup> Pace Rife, in *Corinth in Context* 416, who notes the ambiguity of the term *thiasos* and also thinks that the *likna* were carried in a public procession, but at the same time argues for the presence of an association; and Zoumbaki, who regards this as “certain.”

The one remaining inscription is a rather doubtful reference to an association, and the same is true for the two inscriptions that could actually be added to the list.

### 3. Conclusion

So where does this leave us? It is not *a priori* wrong to compare Christian groups to associations from Greek or Roman cities. Quite the contrary: this approach has opened up new possibilities for understanding the social realities behind the Pauline epistles and other Christian texts, and it has stimulated new research into associations as well. It has helped to overcome traditional arguments and to create a new awareness of common ground between Christians and their neighbors. No matter which side of the debate one prefers, the argument that early Christians should be understood in terms of voluntary associations has many merits indeed.

However, when that argument is strengthened by a list of eighteen references to associations in Corinth that is never put to any practical use and can in fact easily be reduced to one or two possible candidates, something is clearly wrong. In the case of Corinth, the model has failed to do exactly what it promises to do: to understand early Christianity in context. By simply assuming that there was a uniform associational culture from Spain to Syria, scholars have overlooked the local conditions for the foundation of associations.<sup>31</sup> Of course, the legal context and the publicly visible institutions are never the whole story. Even in a Roman colony, things were going on under the radar of the authorities, be it theft, murder, rape, or *coetus*. The very existence of the Christian group at Corinth proves this. And at any rate, it would be possible to argue that Paul knew how associations functioned elsewhere and wanted the Corinthian group to be built according to this model. The point is that if we then simply claim that Corinth was populated by many similar groups, or if we compare the Christians to associations in

<sup>31</sup> And I have not even tackled the question how that list of eighteen associations was made in the first place.

Athens or Lanuvium, i.e. to groups that had managed to present themselves as part of the local civic order and did not have to be afraid of acting in public, we miss a fundamental factor that most likely determined the options available to Christians at Corinth. And given that these questions have been raised here only for Corinth, it might be worth investigating anew the date and type of associations in other cities where they have been compared to Pauline churches.<sup>32</sup>

So it might be time for a conservative backlash against the model so forcefully brought forward by (mainly) Anglophone religious studies scholars. After all the detailed comparisons and all the elaborate methodological suggestions, the actual problem in need of explanation might be how groups that superficially look quite similar to the Greek and Roman associations known from inscriptions could end up being something entirely different. This might not be the worst thing that could happen to the “association-model” after all, because as successful as it may claim to be at situating Christian groups in their social environment, it has nothing to offer whatsoever when it comes to explaining the very different path Christianity took at least from the later third century onwards. While most associations either disappeared or became obligatory professional groups supervised by the state, Christianity became the state religion. The more effort we put into eliminating the specifics of early Christian groups, the less likely we are to find a solution to this historical problem.

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<sup>32</sup> Most interestingly *Colonia Iulia Augusta Philippensis*, where the existence of associations (again taken to encompass every form of voluntary corporate organization) has been used to elucidate the social profile of Paul’s community: see Peter Pilhofer, *Philippi I Die erste christliche Gemeinde Europas* (Tübingen 1995) 144–146; Richard S. Ascough, *Paul’s Macedonian Associations. The Social Context of Philippians and 1 Thessalonians* (Tübingen 2003) 110–161.