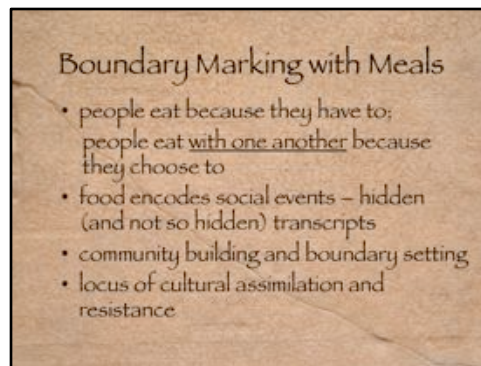
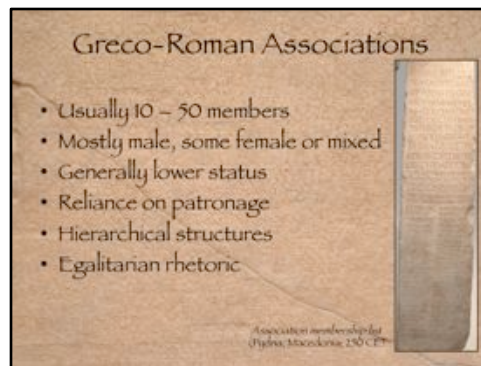


It is an honour to have been invited to speak with you this evening about some of the work that I have been doing on the earliest history of Christianity. I hope to present an overview of some of that work to demonstrate that early Christian groups were much like other small religious groups of the Roman period that used regular communal meals as an essential means to establish group identity and cohesion. In order to grow, they employed what I call “recruitment rhetoric” in a manner which again is very much like other groups from that time that sought to enhance their own reputation by differentiating themselves from other groups. In doing this sort of comparative work, scholars are finding that Christian groups did not particularly stand out from their surrounding culture but blended in quite nicely. While this might seem like a rather modest claim, its implications are far reaching in that it is challenging the long dominant picture of Christianity that sees Christianity as moving from a highly visible and violently persecuted minority to become a triumphal dominant force in the Roman empire through its vast numerical growth.



Food, and the social interactions that accompany the eating of food, are a means whereby humans both encode and display boundaries. With whom one chooses to eat, for example, sends a message about the company one is willing to keep. Many people will gladly supply food to the food bank, for example, but would not so willingly invite a needy family into their own homes to share a meal. Often meals are ways of reinforcing social boundaries. For example, before the *agape* of a Freemason's lodge, non-members are required to leave the premises. Put another way, meals become a way of defining and maintaining who is "inside" a group and who is on the "outside."

This is part of what can be deemed a "hidden transcript" and encodes particular messages, most notably the "pattern of social relations being expressed." What and with whom we are willing to eat sends a signal, both to ourselves and to others, as to the types of social engagements we are willing, and unwilling, to tolerate. This is why a meal often is a ritualized centerpiece of important occasions. For example, a large meal often follows a marriage ceremony, thus conveying the sense that two formerly separate families and sets of friends have agreed to join to convey approval to the individuals who have committed themselves to one another. In similar fashion, how one eats encodes a message of acceptance of culturally dominant forms of behavior. At a formal banquet we might be horrified at a person who chooses to eat with his hands, whereas when a boy picks up a hamburger at a barbeque we think it is natural. Having thus established common bonds and shared cultural habits, those who eat together can trust one another – and so the stage is set for another important aspect of meals: networking. This networking might be social or political or even economic, the "business lunch, if you like." Dietary restrictions, on the other hand, may limit with whom one can eat, and thus the range of with whom one networks – for example, restrictions on pork among Jews or Muslims, or meat in general among Hindus.



Shared meals were a ubiquitous element of the social life of small groups in antiquity. These associations set up thousands of Greek and Latin inscriptions that reveal much about their membership and organization as well as their social status and aspirations. The associations usually included somewhere between 10 and 50 members, although we do have evidence for groups that were smaller or considerably larger. Most associations for which we have evidence were comprised of lower status males, although there is a small amount of evidence all-female groups or mixed gender groups. Since all these associations drew from the lower strata of society they needed to supplement the small membership fees they sometimes collected by reliance on the patronage of the wealthy. Patrons sometimes joined the group, while others simply provided support in exchange for honorifics. The groups were organized hierarchically with clearly demarcated leadership roles, although they frequently employ the rhetoric of egalitarianism to suggest that anyone could occupy the elected positions.



There is no established taxonomy for Greco-Roman associations, although generally scholars are in agreement that most associations had a clear sense of what bound members together. Some issues are quite clear in the inscriptions, such as the gathering of members along the lines of ethnic identity (*Asainoi*; *Ioudaioi*; Tyrians; *Berytians*) or similar occupation (e.g., barbers; dyers; silversmiths; ship owners). Other groups were constituted with a particular purpose in mind, such as the *symposiastai* (drinking buddies), *synthytai* (sacrificing associates), or *synklitai* (banqueters). Almost all groups were involved in the worship of a deity or a set of deities, although some associations make this their primary focus (e.g. *mystai*; *Iobacchoi*; *Christianoi*; *Heroistai*; *Sarapiastai*).

### Greco-Roman Associations

- imitated civic nomenclature and structures
- however, they were suspect
  - potential to become "political"
  - some banned during Republic and Empire
- but, generally ignored or tolerated
  - contributed to society
  - functional integration in cities




*Senate decree banning Bacchic associations (Rome, 186 BCE)*

In order to integrate into the wider culture within which they were situated, many associations adopted civic nomenclature and structures. Nevertheless, the Romans viewed them with suspicion as having potential to become involved in political machinations. After these fears were realized in the late Republic, there were laws enacted that banned most associations outright. Nevertheless, associations were generally ignored or tolerated so long as they remained politically neutral and could seem to be contributing to the good of society, particularly in helping foreigners better integrate into civic life.

### Jesus Groups as Associations

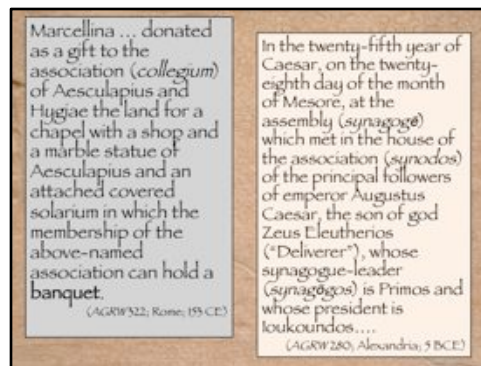
- Look and sound like associations
  - structure
  - organization
- Self-describe as associations
- Technically illicit
- Tolerated as insignificant with a few localized exceptions



Much of the work with which I have been involved over the past few decades has focused on the similarities among Jesus groups and the so-called voluntary associations. Without rehearsing all of the evidence, suffice it to say that in their structure and organization, early Jesus groups certainly look and sound like associations. Among some second century writers, both Christian and non-Christian, we find association terminology used for Jesus groups (Tertullian [AGRW L18]; Celsus [AGRW L19]; Eusebius [AGRW L21]). The exchange of letters between Pliny and the emperor Trajan in the early second century CE indicates that, like most associations, Jesus groups were technically illicit, but enjoyed a fair degree of toleration with a few localized exceptions. In the “grand narratives” of origins these exceptions expand into great “persecutions” of Christians by various emperors (see AGRW L40), although these probably did not take place on the scale usually assumed.



Associations often met in public places such as temples, grottos, taverns, and workshops, although many also gathered in private houses. Only the minority of associations had dedicated buildings, many of which were built generations after the group first formed, much like the Christians whose church buildings post-date the first few generations. In both cases, extant buildings were often adopted and adapted to become dedicated meeting spaces. In these spaces the association members participated in a number of different activities, often including cult. Honors were bestowed upon patrons and members who evidence exemplary service to the group. Social and business networking rippled throughout the meetings (although unlike modern unions, occupational associations lacked any kind of economic clout). When members died, their association could ensure proper burial of their corpse and, in some cases, commemorated their life and death on an annual basis. Far and away, however, the main activities of many of the groups involved some form of eating and drinking.



A few examples should suffice to demonstrate the concern with meals in associations. A private association on the Campus Martius in Rome (*AGRW* 322; 153 CE) had a dedicated building space for banquets and drew attention to its restricted membership in an inscription:

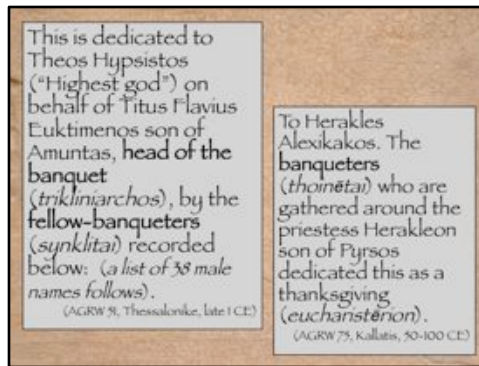
Marcellina ... donated as a gift to the association (*collegium*) of Aesculapius and Hygiea the land for a chapel with a shop and a marble statue of Aesculapius and an attached covered solarium in which the membership (*populi*) of the above-named association can hold a banquet.

From Alexandria in Egypt the following is recorded on papyrus (*AGRW* 280, 5 BCE):

In the 25<sup>th</sup> year of Caesar, on the 28<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Mesore, at the assembly (*synagogē*) which met in the house of the synod (*synodos*) of the principal followers (*archakolothoi*) of emperor Augustus Caesar, the son of god Zeus Eleutherios (“Deliverer”), whose synagogue-leader (*synagōgos*) is Primos and whose president is Ioukoundos....

It goes on to note that the patron of the group is honored at a banquet.





A late first century CE inscription from Thessalonike records the following dedication (*AGRW* 51):

This is dedicated to Theos Hypsistos (“Highest god”) on behalf of Titus Flavius Euktimenos son of Amuntas, head of the banquet (*trikliniarchos*), by the fellow-banqueters (*synklitai*) recorded below: (*a list of 38 male names follows*).

An association of banqueters in Kallatis (Scythia Minor) set up the following in the first century CE (*AGRW* 75):

To Herakles Alexikakos. The banqueters (*thoinētai*) who are gathered around the priestess Herakleon son of Pysros dedicated this as a thanksgiving (*eucharistērion*).



Although we do not have much evidence for the form in which the banquets took place, the literary, epigraphic, and archaeological data we do have suggests that associations followed the format that was in use in any other context in Greek and Roman times – reclining on couches around a central table.

There are not a lot of archaeological remains from buildings dedicated to association meetings, among those that do remain it is striking that that often there are rooms dedicated specifically to eating. We know this by the layout of the room, which is in the form of a *triclinium*, the natural seeing arrangement for meals in Greek and Roman times.

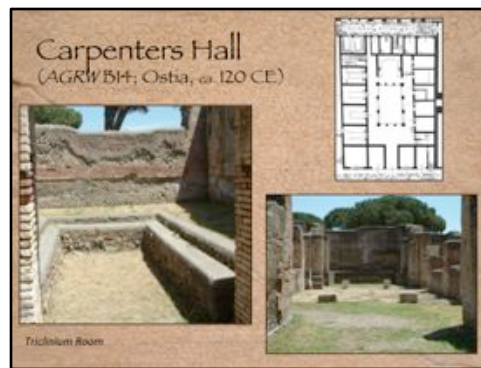
*The floor mosaic sets out the frame for the couches to be placed around the sides and the table in the middle.*

*Somehow I was placed at the “lowest” position, while the guy who posed us and who owns the camera (Dennis) took the place of honour.*

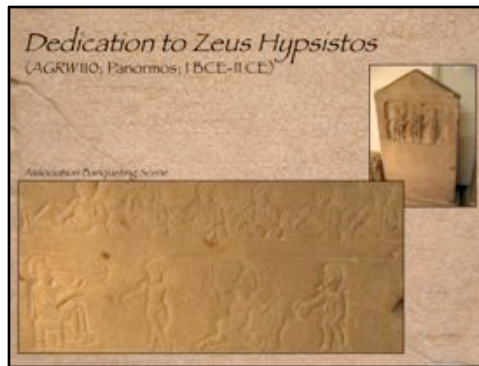
*Also note the complete lack of women, all of whom refused to be in the picture because everyone “knows what that means”!*



Some association meeting places reflect this arrangement, such as the building of the Dionysiac “cowherds” at Pergamon (AGRW B6). The hall is comprised of two permanent stone *triclinia*, which together could accommodate about seventy participants. The East end was constructed first, with its mirror constructed sometime later to accommodate twice as many diners, suggesting a doubling of the size of the association.





The association of carpenters at Ostia built a meeting facility that contains four *triclinium* rooms, each of which could accommodate up to a dozen diners (AGRW B14). Alongside these forty-eight members, more diners could participate if temporary structures were set up in the central portico.



We do see this in a relief on an inscription set up by an association devoted to Zeus Hypsistos at Panormos, in Asia Minor (*AGRW* 110; I BCE - II CE). The relief depicts the association members having a banquet – they are reclining on their left arms, leaving their right hand for use to pick up food from the shallow table in front of them. The diners are watching a female dancer, who is accompanied by a flute player and a percussionist. Beside them (lower right) a man seems to be pouring water into wine in preparation for the symposium – the drinking party that follows the meal, which often involved philosophic discussion.

### Memorializing with Food

- Paul recalls Jesus' last meal (1 Cor 11) and discusses other meals (e.g., Gal 2)
- Matthew, Luke, and Mark all narrate Jesus at meals, including instituting a ritualized memorial meal
- John narrates a banquet with Jesus' disciples

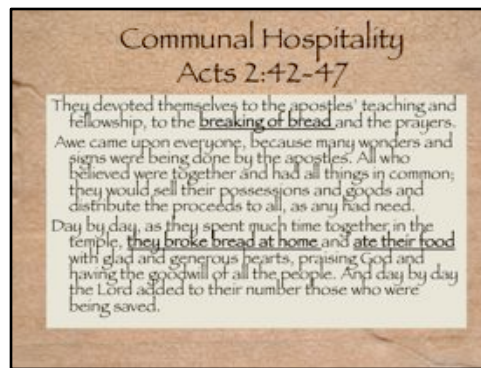
Catacomb of St. Priscilla, Rome, 3rd C.

It seems from the New Testament evidence that meals were an important part of communal interaction among early Jesus believers. Paul mentions meals a number of times in his letters (1 Cor 8:1-11:1; 11:17-22 Gal 2:11-13, Rom 14:17, and perhaps Rom 13:8-10), including the communication of a tradition of events and words that transpired at Jesus' final meal with his disciples (1 Cor 11:23-31).

The Synoptic gospels record this latter event in more detail, although there are frequent references to other contexts of eating, particularly in Luke's gospel.

John's Gospel includes a meal setting in which Jesus delivers his lengthy farewell speech (John 12-17) but also includes other meal references (e.g. John 6:4-13; 12:2; 21:12).

*Note the format of the meal in the catacomb fresco. Greek Chapel, Catacomb of St. Priscilla, fresco, third century, on the arch over the altar tomb upon which the sacrament of the Eucharist was performed. Although this one may (interestingly) depict women, there are others that include men and thus may be the disciples and Jesus. In all cases, the reclining at table is the position of the diners.*




In narrating the establishing of Jesus groups in Jerusalem the writer provides a snapshot summary of their practices:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Twice in this brief summary passage the writer notes that sharing food was a key aspect of the early Jesus groups. Along with prayer and teaching, group members "broke bread" together. Although such language resonates with Jesus' actions at his final meal, and thus evokes what later Christian groups will refer to as the "eucharist," at this point the emphasis is on sharing meals.

### Similarities to Associations

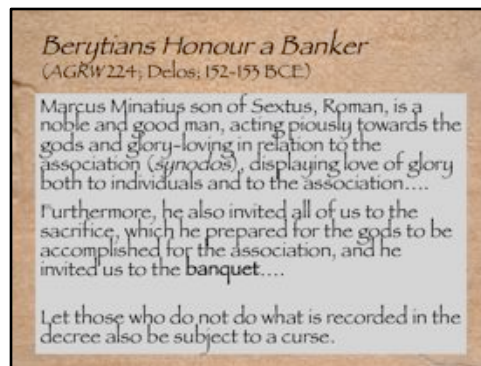
- Family-like relations ("brothers")
- Ideal of friendship
- Joint property
- Individual benefaction
- Meeting in private accommodations
- Egalitarian membership but with hierarchy of leaders
- Meal celebrations



Grave inscription for a transport worker (Thessalonica, 197/260 CE)

In this summary, the writer presents the Jesus believers in ways that resonate with the language and practices of associations, such as family-like relations, an emphasis on friendship, shared property, individual benefaction, and meetings in private residences. There is also the emphasis on meals, which are a mark of belonging to an association as can be seen in a number of inscriptions.

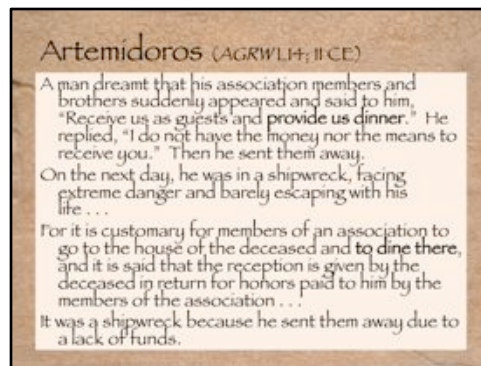




For example, an association of workers from Beirut who live on Delos set up an inscription honouring their patron, who paid for a sacrifice that included a banquet:

Marcus Minatius son of Sextus, Roman, is a noble and good man, acting piously towards the gods and glory-loving in relation to the association (*synodos*), displaying love of glory both to individuals and to the association.... Furthermore, he also invited all of us to the sacrifice, which he prepared for the gods to be accomplished for the association, and he invited us to the banquet.... (*AGRW* 224, 152-153 BCE)

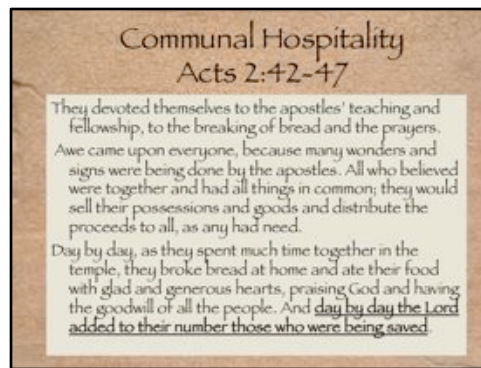
The patron's promise to continue this and other practices that enhance the sense of shared purpose among the members earns him the accolades. The emphasis on members having been "invited" to participate singles out the means by which group belonging is established. At the same time, a final warning suggests that failure to abide by group regulations results in punishment: "Let those who do not do what is recorded in the decree also be subject to a curse."



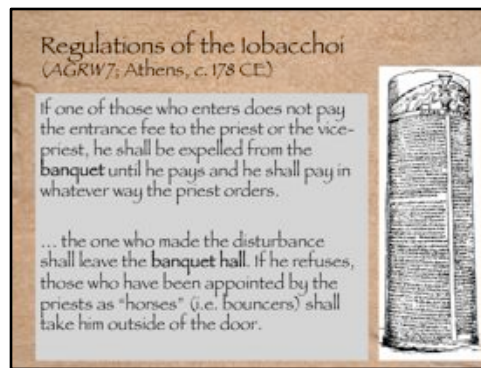
The importance of meals as a marker of group identity and belonging is also present in a literary text recording the consequences of not providing a meal for one's group compatriots.

A man dreamt that his association members and brothers suddenly appeared and said to him, "Receive us as guests and provide us dinner." He replied, "I do not have the money nor the means to receive you." Then he sent them away. On the next day, he was in a shipwreck, facing extreme danger and barely escaping with his life. . . . For it is customary for members of an association to go to the house of the deceased and to dine there, and it is said that the reception is given by the deceased in return for honors paid to him by the members of the association. . . . It was a shipwreck because he sent them away due to a lack of funds. (AGRW L14; Artemidoros, II CE)

When the man failed to provide the dinner that was rightly expected by his "brothers," the gods intervened to send a message that such failures would not be tolerated.



Although the initial text in Acts does not include such dire consequences, these are picked up a bit later. Within the same community setting a husband and wife are struck dead for their failure to be honest about the amount they contributed to the common fund (Acts 5:1-11). For those who do share in the meal together, not only does it establish a sense of belonging, their meal practices result in the continued growth of their community in and around Jerusalem: “day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (2:47). The shared meals not only have a formative aspect, they also include a performative element.

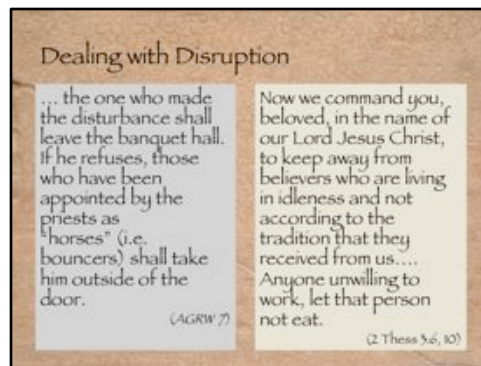


Literary texts mentioning associations often comment on their meal practices, largely in noting the uncivilized behaviors that resulted from the eating and drinking. Even among the association inscriptions, meals are often a concern, if not the primary concern, of regulations around membership and behavior – what to eat, when, where, by whom, along with issues of who supplies the funds and who gets the bigger portion. A typical example can be seen in an inscription of the Iobacchoi at Athens (AGRW 7, c. 178 CE):

If one of those who enters does not pay the entrance fee to the priest or the vice-priest, he shall be expelled from the banquet until he pays and he shall pay in whatever way the priest orders....

The one who made the disturbance shall leave the banquet hall. If he refuses, those who have been appointed by the priests as “horses” (i.e. bouncers) shall take him outside of the door.

Other associations had similar regulations against bad behavior, both at general meetings and especially at banquets.

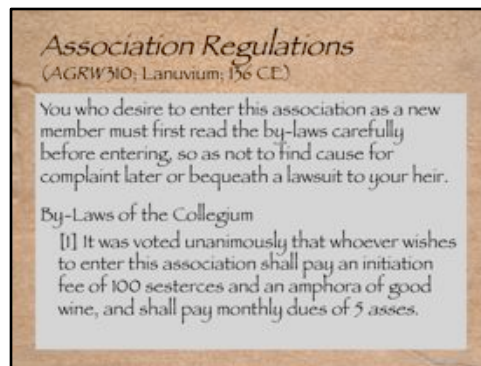


I have argued that we can see a similar concern with proper decorum in meetings in 2 Thess 3:6-16: “Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us....”

The writer decries those who are acting contrary to the group norms and not pulling their weight (either through laziness or disruptiveness). The writer provides the sanction against such people: “let that person not eat” (3:10). It is difficult to imagine this as advocating death by starvation, which seems a bit extreme (even for Christians!). Nor can we imagine that the believers can control whether or not a person eats elsewhere. Thus, the focus of the command is what takes place internally to the group. It is best understood as a ban from ritualized meals. The person who is not integrated into the group is not welcome at the meals. They are placed outside the group’s boundaries.



Having noted the key function of meals in early Christian identity formation and group boundaries, we come round to the question of how did Christianity grow? When we look at examples of the rhetoric of recruitment from many different type of associations in the Greco-Roman world we find that they are engaged in a polemical exchange with their respective surrounding cultures. However, often the rhetoric is not a matter of competition, and certainly not competition for adherents. Rather, it is the language of self-definition. While the rhetoric found in Christian groups reflects a process of self-definition and recruitment, it is not Christian groups alone that are found to be engaged in this process (as if Christianity is, as is often supposed, “missionary” religion unlike other groups). All kinds of “embedded” associations in antiquity are employing the rhetoric of superiority, including the “othering” of those not among “us,” and in this way are involved in self-definition as well as persuasion for recruitment and adherence to their own particular group.



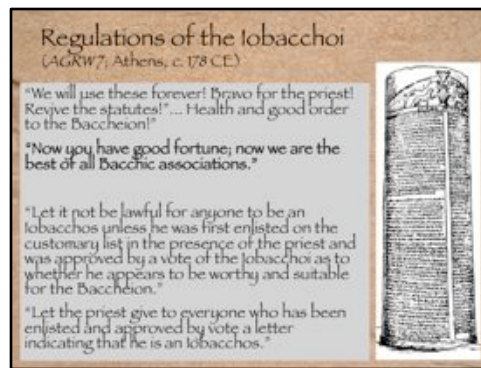
We begin with a consideration from a sampling of the evidence from associations in antiquity. An inscription from Lanuvium, Italy, and dating to 136 CE, records the by-laws of an association established under the guise of a commitment to burial of members. The first by-law addresses the issue of membership:

“It was voted unanimously that whoever wants to enter this society shall pay an initiation fee of 100 sesterces and an amphora of good wine, and shall pay monthly dues of five *asses*.”

Through this inscription the association invites the inquirer to consider taking up membership. Immediately before the by-laws the stone reads,

“You, who wish to join this association as a new member should first read the by-laws carefully before entering, so as not to find cause for complaint later or bequeath a lawsuit to your heir.”

In this inscription, the association links itself to the Imperial household through the honouring the Emperor Hadrian. By noting these connections the association indicates, and thus promotes, the high status that any (paid-up) member will enjoy. Thus, this inscription seems to function, at least in part, as a billboard advertising the association in order to recruit new members.



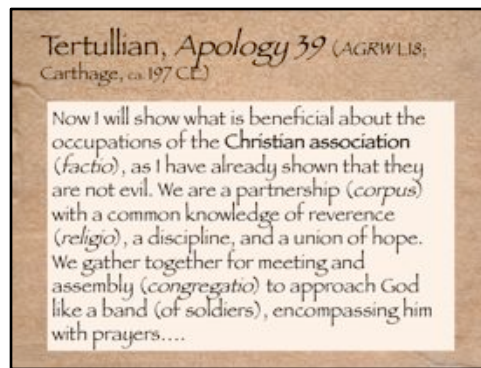
In the Iobacchoi inscription we find the statutes of the group and the process whereby they were ratified. The inscription opens by celebrating the adoption of the statutes by the association. Recalling their foundation some years ago they note that their statutes were drawn up earlier by their priests but are now being presented to the group. The inscription records the “spontaneous” celebration of the membership: We will use these forever!” Bravo for the priest! Revive the statutes!”... Health and good order to the Baccheion!

There follows a ratification by the general membership, passed unanimously, and followed by more celebration, recorded verbatim in the inscription: “Now you have good fortune; now we are the best of all Bacchic societies.” This claim to preeminence is important to note. By comparing themselves with others, they highlight their own outstanding qualities. The Iobacchi claim to have surpassed all other groups of Iobacchi in their ratification of these statutes.

The self-praise serves to advertise the group to outsiders and sends a not-so-subtle message that it is a group worthy of adherence. Having raised this possibility, then, the inscription immediately names the process whereby one can join: the goal is to only accept those who are “worthy and suitable,” again a means to bolstering the desirability of membership in the group to those both on the inside and on outside. This is an exclusive group – to be part of it is to be part of the honourable and praiseworthy members of society.

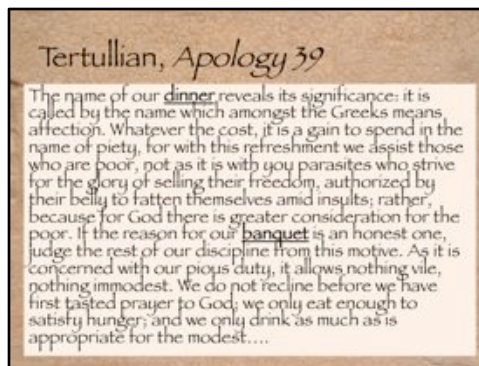
After receiving approval, and paying the requisite entrance fees, one becomes a card-carrying member of the group: “Let the priest give to everyone who has been enlisted and approved by vote a letter indicating that he is an Iobacchos.” Presumably, this letter functions as one’s ticket into privileged circles in the *polis*, allowing one access to persons, places, and events reserved for this preeminent group of Iobacchoi. Again, this text clearly conveys a message of the desirability of belonging to *this* particular group of Iobacchoi rather than any other group of Iobacchoi or, for that matter, any other group in Athens.





For a Christian perspective we can look to the late second century apologist Tertullian, who uses epideictic rhetoric in his *Apology* to contrast groups of Christians with other groups, particularly associations.

READ SLIDE



## READ SLIDE

Tertullian argues that Christians should receive a proper place among the law-tolerant associations. Like the associations, the Christians meet together as an assembly. However, unlike the associations, claims Tertullian, the Christians do not require of their members financial donations. Money that is collected is given to support and bury people, help the destitute and the house-bound, and those who have suffered misfortune. The money is not “spent on feasts, and drinking-bouts, and eating-houses” – namely, those very things that the associations are reputed to have focused on and for which they have received various imperial sanctions. In fact, Tertullian is splitting hairs. Christians do collect funds and they do eat together.

For Tertullian, praise for the Christians is gained by placing blame on the associations and making the contrast clear, with an emphasis on meals. And while the primary aim of his rhetoric is to convince the authorities that Christians are innocent of many of the charges against them, his text lavishes such great praise on the Christian groups and such vitriolic arguments against not only the associations but all forms of Greco-Roman religion and philosophy that it is clearly also a form of recruitment. In Tertullian’s presentation, all other forms of religion are rendered base and empty in comparison the superiority of the Christian religion.

### (Re)Constructing the Past

- Jesus groups were much like other groups
- They had similar modest growth and underwent similar periodic imperial sanctions
- Recruitment took two main forms:
  - Positive: hospitality through meals
  - Negative: rhetorical differentiation from others

## SLIDE

We need to ground our understanding of the development of early Christianity within the socio-cultural context and the *realia* of the first through fourth centuries CE as best we can reconstruct it.

