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“The most sacred society (*thiasos*) of the Pythagoreans:” philosophers forming associations

<https://doi.org/10.1515/jah-2018-0018>

Abstract: Scholarly use of the label “school” to describe groups of philosophers has sometimes led to a neglect of the ways in which such gatherings of philosophers could function as unofficial associations of recognizable types (e.g. “societies,” θιάσοι). Concerns to distance supposedly “secular” philosophers from any “religious” connection have fed into this image of the philosophical “school,” diverting attention away from other important dimensions of associative life among philosophers and other literate professionals (e.g. physicians), including involvement in honours for the gods and in commensal activities. Epigraphic evidence helps to elucidate the broader associative context. The fact that some philosophers formed associations has implications for adjacent fields, such as Christian origins, where there is a tendency to ask whether groups of Jesus followers were socially analogous to a Judean synagogue, an association, or a philosophical school, as though these were distinct options rather than overlapping social phenomena. Such associations of relatively literate people were among the few in antiquity that can also be described using the scholarly category of “reading communities.”

Keywords: ancient associations, guilds, θιάσοι, philosophers, ancient physicians, Muses, reading communities

I Introduction

To identify oneself and one’s companions as seekers after wisdom – as “philosophers” – was widespread among those who wished to present themselves as intellectuals or experts in the late Hellenistic and Roman periods. This occurred to the point where people such as Dio Chrysostom complained of those who falsely claimed the designation “philosopher” without adopting an appropriate way of

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life (*Or.* 32.8–11; cf. *Luc.*, *Nigr.* 24–25). This situation served to foster contests over the title and to further blur distinctions between traditions, schools (σχολαί) or sects (αἱρέσεις) of philosophy, which were themselves less distinct during this period (cf. *Luc.*, *Demon.* 4–7). Members of ethnic or cultural minorities, for instance, could claim a place within Greek intellectual traditions by presenting those occupied with their own ancestral customs and writings as “philosophers” on the Greek model, as when Josephus conceives of the Judean philosophical “sects” (αἱρέσεις) of Sadducees, Pharisees and Essenes or when Justin talks about his journeys through numerous Greek philosophical traditions before landing on the ultimate position of a philosopher devoted to the teachings of Jesus.¹ To provide a quite different example of this fluidity in identifications, sometimes physicians (ἰατροί) trained in the art of healing labeled themselves “philosophers,” and Galen himself pictures the true physician as a philosopher, stressing the need for physicians to engage in the study of philosophical and medical writings.²

One corollary of this situation is that, when “philosophers” did form ongoing groups (rather than wandering or working alone as others might),³ these groups would naturally reflect local social forms familiar to both participants and contemporary observers in the eastern Mediterranean. One of the more significant social forms of the Hellenistic and Roman eras was what I am going to define as the “unofficial association,” a scholarly concept that envelops a number of related ancient categorizations including the “society” (θίασος). In this article, I argue that scholarly use of the label “school” to describe groups of philosophers – whether the philosophers in question used a roughly equivalent ancient designation (e.g. σχολή, διατριβή, αἵρεσις) or not – has resulted in missing a more complicated associative context.⁴ Scholarly concerns to distance supposedly “secular” philosophers from any “religious” connection have sometimes fed into the image of the philosophical “school,” diverting attention away from important affinities with other associations that are often characterized by scholars as merely “religious.” Epigraphic evidence helps to elucidate this context in which philoso-

¹ Joseph., *Vit.* 7–12; *BJ* 2.119–166; *AJ* 18.11–25. Cf. Philo, *Prob.* 73–75; *Contempl.*, as discussed further below. See Mason (2009), 217–238; Runia (1999). Justin, *Trypho* 2. See also Eshleman (2012), and from another angle, Wendt (2016).

² For physicians identifying as philosophers see, for instance, Samama (2003), nos. 194, 231, 294, 321, 341, 334, 329, 365. Cf. Galen “That the Best Physician is also a Philosopher,” translated in Brain (1977). Now see Eijk (2005).

³ There were less communal notions that idealized individual study or wandering on one’s own to expand one’s horizons. See Montiglio (2000) and (2005); Scott (2011); Harland (2011).

⁴ Granted that the term “school” is often employed to speak of a school of thought rather than a group or institution, but the usage in scholarship seems to fluctuate back and forth between the school of thought usage and a more concrete notion of a school as social institution.

phers formed associations. The engagement of certain philosophical groups in regular meetings in which meals and honours for gods played a key role and in participation within networks of benefaction, for instance, points to ways in which these groups functioned as associations at the local level and could sometimes be recognized as such.

This situation has implications for studies in related fields, including Christian origins. Recently, many scholars of the Jesus movements have engaged the important question of what contemporary social analogies help us understand the social formations of those devoted to both the Israelite god and Jesus (i.e. Christians). Problematic here is the tendency to frame the discussion in terms of whether these groups were analogous to a Judean synagogue, an association, or a philosophical school, as though these were completely distinct options rather than overlapping social phenomena. Understanding how at least some philosophical groups—like some Judean gatherings and assemblies of Jesus followers—functioned as associations or were often viewed as such also provides a new angle of vision on scholarly debates regarding what ancient associations are better illuminated using the scholarly category of “reading communities.”

II Defining associations

Here I argue that certain groups formed by educated professionals and philosophers are in some important respects better understood within the context of unofficial associations that were especially characteristic of the Hellenistic and Roman imperial eras. I use the scholarly, etic category of “unofficial associations” to describe a variety of social formations located between the family and the structures of the city (πόλις).⁵ Our ancient subjects need not have consistently identified philosophical groups as unofficial associations using any one particular ancient corporate term (e.g. θίασος, κοινωνία, κοινόν, σύνοδος) in order for us, as scholars, to recognize organizational or social resemblances and to engage in comparison of these groups in a sociological manner under the rubric of unofficial associations. Nonetheless, this scholarly category of the unofficial association does in fact envelop, or thoroughly overlap with, a number of ancient categorizations that our historical subjects did employ in relation to philosophical groups, which adds another important dimension to this particular enterprise of comparison.

⁵ Now see Last and Harland (2020), forthcoming introduction, for further explanation of the category.

I use the scholarly category “unofficial associations” to describe ongoing groups located between the structures of the family and the structures of the city that were relatively small, unofficial, and non-compulsory (more or less “voluntary”), usually consisting of about 5–30 members though sometimes larger.⁶ The focus in this study is on these groups within the Greek-speaking eastern Mediterranean. Official civic groupings (e.g. tribes, phratries, demes, or other subdivisions) and gymnasial organizations (boys, ephebes, young men, elders) where membership was largely predetermined are excluded from this definition.⁷ Official boards of priests or other civic temple functionaries are excluded as well. The organizational or leadership structures of associations as defined here could vary quite widely, so unlike Haake I do not see organization – whether modeled on the structures of the city (πόλις) or not – as a key factor in determining whether or not certain philosophical groups would be better understood if placed alongside other associations.⁸

Several overlapping social networks contributed to the formation of unofficial associations in the sense I define it here, including neighbourhood, domestic, ethnic, and occupational webs of connections.⁹ In this definition, virtually all associations may have been “religious” in some way, and it is problematic to isolate particular groups as “cultic associations” merely because their patron deities or sacrifices happen to be mentioned on a surviving piece of evidence or in the title of the group. Further below I also point to problems in the use of the modern category of “religion” in the study of the ancient world generally.¹⁰

Central to this definition of unofficial associations are certain functions and activities of such groups as especially attested in epigraphic and papyrological sources. Unofficial associations were groups with *ongoing communal involvement* in a combination of (1) honouring deities or heroes, (2) banqueting (often entailing sacrifice), (3) interacting with external or internal benefactors, and (4) engaging in mutual aid, including funerary functions. Another corporate activity that is closely related to the third point is attested for some associations, though certainly not all: namely, (5) involvement in diplomatic connections with civic or

⁶ See Harland (2013) [2003], 19–69; cf. (2009), 26–35 and (2014).

⁷ Jones’s (1987) study of “public organization” in southern Greece speaks of official civic subdivisions (e.g. demes and phratries) in terms of “associations,” and so the qualifier of “unofficial” here may help to distinguish the different groups under investigation here.

⁸ Haake (2015), 73–77, 81

⁹ See Harland (2013) [2003], 19–44, where I demonstrate problems with the older categories of (1) burial associations, (2) occupational associations, and (3) religious associations. Now see also the introduction in Last and Harland (2019).

¹⁰ Cf. Last and Harland (2020), introduction.

imperial authorities or organized attempts to gain recognition or privileges for a group or its members. This diplomatic activity is noticeable in connection with groups of initiates (e.g. *IEph* 213, on which see *GRA* II 128) and ethnic associations (e.g. Judeans, Egyptians), for instance, but particularly well attested for shippers, athletes, and performers (e.g. *IKosS* ED 7) whose occupations involved considerable movement and for physicians, instructors, and philosophers that occupy us here.¹¹ Though we do not necessarily need evidence of all five communal activities combined with ancient associative terms in order to posit that an *ongoing* association existed, we are on more solid ground when we find both corporate terms and some of these five activities in connection with a particular group.

This analytical category of the association envelops a number of more specific ancient designations. In the Greek-speaking areas that are the focus of this study, common emic designations for what I am calling “associations” include: κοινόν (translated “association” in this paper), θίασος (“society”), σύνοδος (“synod”), συνέδριον (“assembly”), ἔρανος (“contribution-club”), συνεργασία (“guild”), ἑταῖροι (“companions”), φιλοί (“friends”), μύσται (“initiates”), ὀργεῶνες (“sacrificing-associates”), and συναγωγή (“gathering”). Certain participants, observers, or authorities within the ancient context may or may not have considered some of these designations together or used some of these terms synonymously. With his notion of “partnership” (κοινωνία), which I discuss below, Aristotle does indeed begin to theorize in a manner that brings some of these emic designations together and that overlaps significantly with my analytic category. But once again, the perceptions of any one person in antiquity are not essential to the scholarly category as defined above, which is more concerned with functions and with social location between the family and the city.

III Philosophical groups as “societies” (θίασοι)

There are several factors that first led to the suggestion that philosophical groups in Classical and Hellenistic Athens might be fruitfully understood in the context of “societies” (θίασοι) specifically, one ancient designation for an unofficial association. Cultic dimensions of Plato’s Academy are readily noticed. Plato himself argues that the Muses preside over the activity of philosophers and that “education comes originally from Apollo and the Muses.”¹² By the Roman period, it was

¹¹ E.g. *Digest* 27.1.6.1–12; *GCRE* 38; *IEph* 4101. Cf. *IG* II,2 1099.

¹² Pl., *Leg.* 654a; cf. *Leg.* 653–654; *Phdr.* 259b–d; *Res.* VI 499d, VIII 545c–546d. See also Mikalson (1998), 64–67.

thought that Plato had established a shrine devoted to the Muses – a Mouseion – within the area of the Academy, with the implication that the Muses were patron deities of the collectivity that gathered there (Diog. Laert. 4.1; *FragGrHist* 328 F224). It was evidence such as this that, in the late nineteenth century, led Foucart to discuss philosophical gatherings in the context of what he labels “religious associations.”¹³

A few years later, in 1881, Wilamowitz-Moellendorff took this further in developing a legal theory. Wilamowitz proposed that philosophical collectivities, like other groups, sought and sometimes received legal recognition as “societies” (θίασσι) by Athenian civic authorities.¹⁴ Categorized from the outside as societies, internally they were also educational institutions that were precursors to the university, in this view. Other scholars readily took on Wilamowitz’s suggestion, imagining a very clear legal definition and procedure for founding a philosophical “society” in late Classical and early Hellenistic Athens.¹⁵ However, there is in fact no evidence to suggest that there was such a procedure or that all groups designated a “society” were in any way officially recognized.

So careful qualifications are necessarily here with regard to how, in scholarly terms, we can speak of Plato’s or Aristotle’s philosophical gatherings as “societies.” Apparently there are no surviving references to Aristotle’s or Plato’s adherents as a “society” (θίασος) in early writings, and these groups were not societies in some legally registered sense, as Lynch also observes.¹⁶ As with many in his scholarly era, Wilamowitz was assuming a far higher degree of development in legal theory and practice behind a technical notion of a “society” than was actually the case.¹⁷ The phrase “society of the Muses” (θίασος Μουσῶν) – which Wilamowitz uses – does indeed occur in Aristophanes (*Thesm.* 41.38–45). Furthermore, the “Life of Sophokles” (6) in *The Suda* has Sophokles gathering together educated people to form a “society” dedicated to the Muses (ταῖς δὲ Μούσαις θίασον ἐκ τῶν πεπαιδευμένων συναγαγεῖν). Yet both sources seem concerned with musicians, poets, or playwrights rather than philosophers (though the boundaries between these categories could of course be blurry, as the philosopher known for his *poetic* medical and philosophical works will soon demonstrate). A number of epigraphic sources as early as the third century BCE (but not known to

¹³ Foucart (1873), 177–187. Cf. Bruns (1880), 32–33, on the foundation by Theophrastos.

¹⁴ Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1881). See also the more extensive summary of the theory by Natali (2013), 78–83. Cf. Jones (1999), 227–234; Haake (2015).

¹⁵ Cf. Poland (1909); Boyancé (1937); Guthrie (1975), 20–21; Isnardi Parente (1986).

¹⁶ Lynch (1972), 108–134.

¹⁷ See Maffi (2008) on the legal question and the malleability of Peripatetic organization specifically.

Wilamowitz at the time) similarly attest to the formation of associations devoted to the Muses at various locales, though with no explicit reference to philosophers.¹⁸

Although specific details of Wilamowitz's legal theory are problematic, it may still be that he along with Foucart, Bruns and Boyancé were nonetheless on track in their general recognition of elements in some philosophers' activities and social arrangements that make these collectivities comparable to other associations both from a scholarly perspective and, in certain cases, from the perspective of our historical subjects.¹⁹ More recently, Dorandi counters Lynch's wholesale rejection of comparison with societies and proposes that there "would seem to be no serious reason to oppose the recognition of *thiasos* characteristics in the Athenian philosophical schools."²⁰ The fact remains that philosophers gathered together around the teaching of Plato or others were more or less voluntary groups that sometimes honoured the Muses or founding heroes and engaged in communal rituals and meals within this context.²¹ Others, such as the Peripatetics, likewise seem to have established a sanctuary for the Muses containing statues of these goddesses. Aristotle's successor, Theophrastos, is reputed to have outlined this in his final foundation for the group.²² So although a formal, legalistic approach to the question is problematic, there are clear signs that some gatherings of philosophers might be better understood in relation to the analytical category of "associations" as defined here, which encompasses the specific ancient designation "societies."

Moreover, certain scholars who deny any value in placing "religious" associations and gatherings of philosophers side by side in scholarly comparison sometimes seem influenced by modern ideological concerns to insulate philosophical or supposedly "scientific" inquiry from any ostensible "religious" connection. Van der Eijk offers a similar critique of scholarship on philosophers, physicians, and medicine, although he continues to use the category of "religion" himself.²³ Often a false and anachronistic dichotomy of "religious" vs. "secular" or "rational" lurks partially in the shadows. Lynch, for instance, asserts that "philoso-

18 E.g. "fellow-sacrificers" at Thespiai in Boiotia (*IThespiai* 60, 65; third c. BCE), a family-based association (κοινόν) that met in a sanctuary for the Muses on Thera island (*IG XII,3 330* = *AGRW 243* (210–195 BCE), "Muse-devotees" (Μουσαῖοι) at both Ialysos and Rhodos on the island of Rhodos (*IG XII,1 680*; *IRhodPC* 19; third c. BCE) and at Dion in Macedonia (*SEG 49:697*; 179–168 BCE), and hymn-singers at Histria in Skythia (*IHistria* 167; 150–200 CE).

19 Foucart (1873), 177–187; Bruns (1880); Boyancé (1937). Cf. Fraser (1972), 314.

20 Dorandi (1999), 56. Cf. Mikalson (1998), 64–67.

21 Dorandi (1999), 55–58.

22 Diog. Laert. 5.51.

23 Eijk (2004), 1–8.

phical schools” should be seen in “purely secular terms.”²⁴ More recently, Jones expresses similar views, dismissing what he labels the “superficial sacral trappings” of philosophers’ activities.²⁵

Jones nonetheless counters Lynch in viewing some philosophical groups as “partnerships” or “associations” (κοινωνία) as defined by Aristotle in a passage I discuss below, though “secular” rather than “religious” ones. In this respect, Jones seems to presume a clear distinction between varieties of “associations” (κοινωνία), on the one hand, and “societies” (θίασοι), on the other, rather than seeing these as overlapping terms for similar social phenomena as does Aristotle.²⁶ As Nongbri’s recent work on the category of “religion” shows, there are major problems with scholarly tendencies to impose modern categorical distinctions between “religious” and other realms of human activity when studying antiquity.²⁷ Unlike other more useful scholarly or analytic categories, the modern category of “religion” tends to cause more problems than it solves in studying phenomena in the ancient context. And, so in this case conceiving of ancient philosophers as “secular” rationalists and viewing ancient philosophical gatherings as “secular” educational institutions or as precursors to modern universities is problematic at best.

IV Other ancient characterizations of philosophical groups

Scholars like Wilamowitz are not the only ones who have noticed affinities between philosophical groups, on the one hand, and associations, on the other. Despite minimal scholarly attention to this evidence, literate contemporaries of philosophers in the Classical, Hellenistic and Roman eras did so as well, designating philosophical groups using other specific associative designations. This is valuable evidence where scholarly observations and categories overlap significantly with ancient perceptions and categories.

As both Jones and Haake show, there are signs that Athenian philosophical gatherings in the late Classical and early Hellenistic eras were sometimes sub-

²⁴ Lynch (1972), 109.

²⁵ Jones (1999), 228–234.

²⁶ Cf. Haake (2015), 60–62. See below on Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1159b26–1160a23; 1164b2–3; 1172a1–8; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 5.52–53.

²⁷ Nongbri (2013). Cf. Last and Harland (2019), introduction.

sumed by κοινωνία, “partnership.”²⁸ This is one of the most general emic terms for an association as theorized by Aristotle in a substantial passage in *Nicomachean Ethics* (1159b26-1160a23). In that passage, Aristotle speaks of “friends” (φίλοι) such as fellow-soldiers (συστρατιῶται), sailors (πλωτῆρες), members of civic tribes or subdivisions (φυλέται, δημόται), members of contribution-clubs (ἐρανισαί), and members of societies (θιασῶται) who form an ongoing “partnership” together, so the connection with “societies” (here a sub-type of “partnerships”) is clear in Aristotle’s conception of this ancient categorization. Regarding application to philosophers specifically, there are two places where Aristotle uses cognates of partnership (in this case κοινωνεῖν) to describe the activities of philosophers specifically.²⁹ Furthermore, Diogenes Laertius’ presentation of Theophrastos’ will (ca. 287 BCE) uses a substantive of this same verb – “those forming a partnership” (οἱ κοινωνοῦντες) – to identify Theophrastos’ fellow Peripatetic philosophers who inherit the garden and adjacent buildings.³⁰ So for this early period, philosophical gatherings are sometimes described using emic designations drawn from the same semantic field as those designations used for associations of various types.

There are further associative designations attributed to the followers of Aristotle, some of which work against Lynch’s attempts to characterize the Peripatetics as “secular.” According to *The Suda* (tenth century CE), Valerius Harpokration’s second century CE lexicon chose Peripatetic philosophers as its principle example of an early instance of “sacrificing associates” (ὀργεῶνες). This is another specific emic self-designation for members of an association in Attica whose sacrifices were *not* financed by civic institutions. The passage ostensibly refers to some section of Theophrastos’ will:

Sacrificing-associates are those coming together to honour gods or heroes; for *orgiazein* is sacrificing and seeing the customary acts... Perhaps the custom of giving the same name to people gathered together to honour some of the dead and to sacrificing associates arose later, as can be seen from the will of Theophrastos.³¹

²⁸ Jones (1999), 228–234; Haake (2015), 61–67.

²⁹ Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1164b2–3 and 1172a1–8; Jones (1999), 228; Haake (2015), 66.

³⁰ Diog. Laert. 5.52–53. For a study of the informal or malleable nature of the organization of the early Peripatetics (based on preserved versions of wills), see Maffi (2008).

³¹ Trans. Whitehead, with adaptations, from *Suda Online* <<http://www.stoa.org/sol/>>. Cf. Ferguson (1944), 62-64: ὀργεῶνες δέ εἰσιν οἱ ἐπὶ τιμῇ θεῶν ἢ ἡρώων συνιόντες; ὀργιάζειν γὰρ ἔστι τὸ θύειν καὶ τὰ νομιζόμενα ὀρᾶν ... μήποτε δὲ ὕστερον νενομίσθαι τὸ ἐπὶ τιμῇ τινος τῶν ἀποθανόντων συνιέναι καὶ ὀργεῶνας ὀνομάζεσθαι, ὡς ἔστι συνιδεῖν ἐκ τῶν Θεοφράστου διαθηκῶν.

Regardless of whether this notion goes back to Theophrastos in the third century BCE, philosophical gatherings are at some point in antiquity being described with early Hellenistic terms used in Attica for associations of both citizens and immigrants.³² As the inscriptions show, these were associations that engaged in meals and in honours both for benefactors and for deities or heroes. One honorary inscription from the Piraeus (*GRA* I 16 = *IG* II² 1316; 272/1 BCE), which involves a group devoted to a goddess, happens to employ both sacrificing associates (ὀρϋεῶνες) terminology and society membership (θιασῶται) terminology for participants in the honours. This suggests that participants or at least the inscription cutter (whether in error or not) considered the terms almost interchangeable.³³

Turning to Pythagorean gatherings, Zhmud deals with the question of social organization and ancient perceptions, presenting three possible models: (1) the “school” (σχολή), (2) what he interprets as a “political society” (ἐταιρεία), and (3) what he interprets as a “religious society” (θίασος).³⁴ Zhmud rightly observes that ancient terms for “leisure” or “school” (σχολή) and for “course” (διατριβή) are not used in sources pertaining to Pythagoreans. On the second designation, it is noteworthy that some late fourth- and third-century sources do use the designation “companion-group” (ἐταιρεία) or “companions” (ἐταῖροι) – both my translations, not Zhmud’s – for Pythagorean groups or their members in the Greek cities of southern Italy and in Greece.³⁵ Regarding “companion-groups” generally, studies by Calhoun and Connor suggest that such groups (in fifth to third-century Athens) were informal dining clubs of elite men of about the same age whose “activities were as varied as the disposition of [their] members.”³⁶ Beyond feasting and drinking, companions engaged in mutual assistance in court cases or in financial difficulties, and they also involved themselves in supporting certain persons or patrons in competitions for power within the civic arena.³⁷ Finally,

32 On some of the over one hundred inscriptions involving sacrificing-associates (ὀρϋεῶνες) in Attica, see Ferguson (1944), Arnaoutoglou (2003), 31–60, and, especially, Kloppenborg and Ascoug (2011), especially *GRA* I 2, 4, 5, 6, 14, 16, 22, 23, 25, 28, 29, 32, 33, 34, 35, 37, 39, 45 and 52. There are only about a half dozen attestations of this group terminology outside of Attica (cf. *IG* XII.8 19 and 21 from Lemnos; *LSAM* 4 from Kalchedon).

33 Cf. *SEG* 22:122, where “sacrificing associates” and “society” are used together in connection with a group. See a summary of scholarly debates about this inscription in Kloppenborg and Ascoug (2011), 93–96. Cf. Ferguson (1944), 138–140; Arnaoutoglou (1994), 105–106; Mikalson (1998), 143.

34 Zhmud (2012), 142. Cf. Cornelli (2013), 61–77.

35 Zhmud (2012), 146, citing Aristoxenos, frags. 17 and 31; Dikaiarchos, frag. 34; Neanthes, *FGrHist* 84 F30, 31; Iamb. *VP* 254. Meeting-places of Pythagorean groups could be labelled συνέδρια (cf. Polyb. 2.39.2).

36 Connor (1971), 26. Cf. Calhoun (1913), 26.

Andikodes' account of the controversy surrounding the supposed imitation of Eleusinian mysteries by a companion-group in 415 BCE shows that such associations might also engage in ritual activities, even if these rituals could on occasion be interpreted as impious.³⁸

When dealing with the emic “companion-group” designation for Pythagorean collectivities, Zhmud tends systematically to dismiss evidence for what he considers “religious” or “superstitious” dimensions of Pythagorean life while insisting on the “scientific” or “political” nature of Pythagoreanism.³⁹ This becomes the basis for Zhmud’s claim that Pythagorean groups would not be considered comparable to what he calls “cultic societies” (θιάσοι) and his assertion that the “companion-group” (ἐταίρεια) designation is a purely “political” rather than a “religious” communal designation.⁴⁰ Moreover, evidence I present here suggests that these ancient terms for a group would be used in a less strict or compartmentalized manner.

There are considerable anachronisms involved in the category distinctions that scholars such as Zhmud presume. Much like Lynch’s insistence on the “secular” nature of the Peripatetic “school,” problematic presuppositions and vaguely defined categories serve to isolate “philosophy” from “religion.” So, for example, Zhmud systematically details and dismisses some apparent (in his view) “religious” or “superstitious” connections to Pythagoras, such as Iamblichos’ claim that the Krotonites built a temple for the Muses on the advice of Pythagoras (*VP* 45, 50) and the notion that Pythagoreans made use of secret symbols (σύμβολα) comparable to those used in the mysteries.⁴¹ An insistence on separating the gods from philosophical inquiry or educational pursuits is very much a modern concern, I would propose. Ancients of most stripes (even Epicureans) did not isolate gods or heroes from intellectual pursuits. The result is that most ancient philosophers would not recognize the sort of distinctions that are so valued by Zhmud and Lynch, and the characterization of ancient philosophical groups as “secular” does little to further modern scholarly understanding of the phenomena in question (though it may get some “amens”).⁴²

Furthermore with respect to the third, “society” (θιάσος) option, by the Roman era an author like Philo of Alexandria can without hesitation speak of “the most sacred society of the Pythagoreans” (*Prob.* 2: τῶν Πυθαγορείων ἱερώτατον

37 Connor (1971), 25–29.

38 Andikodes, *Myst.* 37–69. Cf. Calhoun (1913), 35–38.

39 Zhmud (2012), 144–146.

40 Contrast Cornelli (2013), 61–77.

41 Zhmud (2012), 144–146.

42 Cf. Snyder (2000), 6–7.

θίασον). Zhmud’s assertion that the “sources never call the Pythagorean community a θίασος ... or use any other terms peculiar to religious associations” is inaccurate.⁴³ Unfortunately, Zhmud passes over this and other Roman period evidence discussed below, evidence that is contrary to his assertion. A better approach to the passage in Philo would be to suggest that this Hellenistic Judean philosopher anticipated that his educated, Greek-speaking audiences (in the early first century) would not likely object to this characterization of a Pythagorean gathering and would instead accept it as meaningful. In a similar manner, Strabo can – in reference to followers of Plato and Pythagoras – claim that “all educated men, and especially the musicians, are attendants of the Muses” (πρόπολοι δὲ τῶν Μουσῶν οἱ πεπαιδευμένοι πάντες, καὶ ἰδίως οἱ μουσικοί). Strabo simultaneously speaks of such philosophical gatherings as analogous to groups of “initiates” (μύσται) engaged in mysteries (*Geogr.* 10.3.10).

A further case of emic associative terminology for Pythagoreans comes from the early decades of the third century of the common era, as Philostratos seems to sustain a picture of a first-century philosopher forming such a group. On one occasion, Philostratos says that Apollonios of Tyana “called his companions (ἑταῖροι) and the slaves of his companions an ‘association’” (κοινὸν δὲ ἐκάλει τοὺς τε ἑταίρους καὶ τοὺς τῶν ἑταίρων δούλους; *VA* 4.34; cf. 1.16). Of course, other translations of the key term – κοινόν – could be proposed here (e.g. “community”). Yet another passage sheds further light on the sort of social formation that Philostratos may have in mind.

In an extended discussion between Apollonios and the Indian king-philosopher, Phraotes, Philostratos has the two engage in an interchange. Here Apollonios’ philosophical companions are described on the analogy of initiates in the mysteries of Dionysos and as members of a “society” (*VA* 2.37):

“For we are captured by nymphs and are bacchic-devotees (βάκχοι) of sobriety.” “Well, then,” said the king, “you must also make me a member of your society (θιασώτην), Apollonios.” “I would do so,” said the other, “if only you would not appear lowly to your subjects. For in the case of a king, a philosophy that is at once moderate and relaxed makes an excellent mixture, as is clear in your own case. But an excess of strictness and severity would seem lowly, O king, and beneath your revered position.”

In light of the suggestive evidence I have outlined so far, Cornelli seems more on track (than Zhmud) in proposing that a Pythagorean gathering might find its

⁴³ Zhmud (2012), 144. Apparently, Philo does not count as a “source” (perhaps because Greco-Judean literature is not considered canonical by Zhmud), although Zhmud does quietly cite and dismiss the Philo passage in an endnote.

“most appropriate typological place under the *thiasos*.”⁴⁴ Here again, though, it is important to keep emic and etic categories straight: *thiasos* was, of course, just one specific emic category that a scholar might observe alongside other emic categories, all of which might be usefully collected together for comparison within the etic, analytic category of associations. Scholarly comparison of the groups or acknowledgement that there were social resemblances between Pythagorean groups in the Roman era and other associations need not require that our historical subjects consistently employ any particular ancient self-designation. We have seen that different ancient associative terms could be employed on different occasions.

Since Epicureans usually considered the gods as removed from human affairs, these gatherings of philosophers did not necessarily focus their attention on honouring traditional deities such as the Muses.⁴⁵ Still, Epicureans did gather for regular meals and could sometimes be viewed as an association focused, among other things, on celebrating the deceased founders. “To the question of whether the Epicureans were united in a kind of *thiasos*, the answer can only be yes,” states Clay in playfully disagreeing with Lynch. And “there is good reason to view this *thiasos* as devoted to a hero cult in honour of the first generation of the founders of the Epicurean community.”⁴⁶

Recurring rituals in honour of the deceased heroes Epicurus and Metrodorus each month led to the descriptor “twentieth day celebrator” (εἰκαδιστής) for an Epicurean, according to Athenaeus of Naukratis in Egypt who writes around 200 CE (*Deipn.* 298d).⁴⁷ That Epicureans would be designated “twentieth day celebrators” (εἰκαδισταῖ) aligns with common terminology adopted by members of other associations gathering on certain days of the month to honour heroes or deities and to engage in commensal activities (e.g. *IG* II² 1258, from Athens). A precise terminological parallel is offered by the immigrant “society” of Syrians devoted to Atargatis on Delos, who also designated themselves the “twentieth day celebrators” (*AGRW* 229).⁴⁸ There were also “ninth day celebrators” and “tenth day celebrators” devoted to Egyptian deities, for instance.⁴⁹ To the ancient ear, then, the

⁴⁴ Cornelli (2013), 62. Cf. Boyancé (1937).

⁴⁵ But do see my discussion of Epicureans as priests in *GRA* II 146.

⁴⁶ Clay (1998), 73. Cf. Wilamowitz (1881), 275.

⁴⁷ Lucian shows that adherents of Epicurean philosophy in the Roman era, including the group led by Lepidus at Amastris in Pontus, called one another “companions” (ἑταῖροι; *Alex.* 23, 25, 43). On associations using the designation “companions,” see *IEph* 3466a; *MAMA* IV 299 (from Dionysopolis); *IPrusaOlymp* 24; *GRA* 152 = *LSAM* 80 (from Elaioussa Sebaste).

⁴⁸ First published and discussed by Siebert (1968).

⁴⁹ ἑνατισταῖ: *IKosS* EV 13; *IG* XI, 4 1228–1229, from Delos. δεκαδισταῖ: *IG* II² 2701, from Athens; *IG* XI, 4 1227, from Delos; *IPrusaOlymp* 48.

description of Epicureans as “twentieth day celebrators” would ring of an association regularly engaged in festal honours, sacrifices and meals for specific figures.

In light of evidence discussed so far, it is not surprising to find authors from ethnic or cultural minorities employing similar discourses drawn from the semantic field of associations in order to characterize groups of philosophers. Thus, when the Judean Philo attempts to convince readers that the Judean therapeutists (θεραπευταί) near Alexandria were an ideal group of seekers of wisdom engaged in a “sacred philosophy,” he does so in language that compares them to groups of initiates engaged in Bacchic rites (e.g. *Contempl.* 12–13, 25–27, 85). In his attack on other intellectual styles of devotion to Jesus, Irenaeus commonly refers to followers of Valentinus as a “leisure-group” or “school” (σχολή), but he also praises a group of women for leaving the Marcosians specifically, labelling the group they left a “society” (ἐχωρίσθησαν τοῦ τοιούτου θιάσου: 1.13.4).⁵⁰

V Epigraphic evidence from the Roman imperial era

Beyond literary sources, there is significant inscriptional evidence from the Roman imperial era showing that certain philosophers and physicians did form associations.⁵¹ People occupied with the pursuit of wisdom could regularly meet together with colleagues for meals, engage in honours for deities or heroes, and act together as a group in honouring benefactors, sometimes taking on specific self-designations that further suggest ongoing associations of recognizable types.⁵² In a few cases, there are also signs of corporate involvement in funerary functions and in seeking favours from authorities. This is evidence that some philosophical groups functioned as associations in the Roman era.

Due to subsequent settlements on the site into the modern period, relatively few inscriptions have been found at Alexandria. For this reason, non-funerary evidence for associations of different kinds is limited to about a dozen monu-

50 Cf. Förster (1999), 129. Ismo Dunderberg (2008, 3, 113) takes this further to suggest that there were two main types of social organization among Valentinians: the school movement and the cult society. Yet it is not clear that the followers of Marcus themselves used this as a self-designation, and it may be that Irenaeus employs both “school” and “society” in a derogatory manner to suggest alignment with problematic philosophies or with rites for “demonic” deities. Cf. Thomassen (2010), 191–192.

51 On philosophers in epigraphy generally (though not focussed on gatherings), see Tod (1957).

52 Cf. San Nicolo (1912), 1.195–197.

ments and, of these, only a handful involve occupational groups: perfume-dealers (?), physicians (discussed further below), weavers, and athletes or performers.⁵³ Despite such limited sources, one inscription does entail a gathering of philosophers in Alexandria honouring a rhetorician with a statue around 150–200 CE: “The philosophers honoured Aelius Demetrios, the rhetorician, with Flavius Hierax, fellow-banqueter, having set this up for his (?) ... and ‘father’.”⁵⁴ So beyond further ritual and other activities which I outline in more detail below, groups of philosophers in Alexandria could also function in a manner similar to other occupational associations. They can be witnessed corporately honouring benefactors and banqueting together. No further group designation is used in this case, however. The metaphorical use of “father” to speak of a leader or benefactor of an association is well attested, and this could be the case in the damaged portion of the inscription, if this is not a reference to a literal father.⁵⁵

In hindsight, the most famous sanctuary dedicated to the Muses in the Roman imperial era seems to have been the one at Alexandria.⁵⁶ It is worth quoting Strabo of Amaseia’s reference to a “synod” (συνόδος) of scholars (φιλόλογοι) that gathered for meals there, a group that likely included philosophers and physicians (e.g. *TAM* II 147 = Samama, no. 278) in this case:

The Mouseion is also a part of the royal buildings. It has a public walk, built-in seating area, and a large house in which is located the banqueting-hall of those scholars who are members of the Mouseion (ἐξέδραν καὶ οἶκον μέγαν ἐν ᾧ τὸ συσσίτιον τῶν μετεχόντων τοῦ Μουσειου φιλολόγων ἀνδρῶν). This synod (συνόδω) also holds property in common and has a priest in charge of the Mouseion, who was formerly appointed by kings but now by Caesar (*Geogr.* 17.1.8).

Centuries later, Philostratos also underlines the importance of communal meals, defining the Mouseion as “a dining-table (τράπεζα) in Egypt that unites in a feast those who are highly respected in the whole world” (*VS* 524).⁵⁷

In the quotation above, Strabo refers to the principal cultic functionary—the “priest” (ιερεύς)—of the Mouseion, who was chosen by the Ptolemaic kings and,

53 *IAlexandriaK* 96 (first c. BCE–first c. CE), 97 (7 CE), 99 (third c. CE), 100–101.

54 *IAlexandria* 98 = *OGIS* 712 = Puech (2002), no. 86: Ἀἴλιον Δημήτριον | τὸν ῥήτορα | [οἱ] φιλόσοφοι, | [Φλα]ουτίου Ἰέρακος || [τοῦ] συσσίτου ἀναθέντος, [. ca. 13.] καὶ πατέρα. Cf. Jones (1967); *AE* 1903, 227, on Aelius Demetrios (cf. the rhetorician Hierax in *Ieph* 435–436, 3062).

55 Cf. Harland (2009), 82–95.

56 Cf. Oliver (1934); Tod (1957); Nutton (1971); Fraser (1972), 312–219; Lewis (1963) and (1981).

57 The Mouseion at Alexandria was well recognized and respected. Some of its members did not “voluntarily” join together but were rather *appointed* as a privilege, sometimes by the emperors themselves according to Philostratos (*VS* 524, 533; Millar (1977), 503–506; see the comments on *ISmyrna* 697 in *GRA* II 139).

in Strabo's time, by the emperor Augustus. Some inscriptions indicate that there were other functionaries overseeing activities in the Mouseion as well, including a superintendent (ἐπιστάτης) in charge of maintaining the building and an assistant-superintendent in charge of supplying food for those who feasted there.⁵⁸

Although Lewis and others deal with the question of Mouseion-membership at some length, the relationship between the position of “temple-warden of Sarapis” and the Mouseion has not been clearly explained, as far as I can find.⁵⁹ An example of the position occurs on an honorary inscription set up around 200 CE by an athletic synod at Rome for a successful Alexandrian pancratist (all-powers fighter), Asklepiades. That pancratist is described as “temple-warden of Sarapis” and “of the philosophers who banquet in the Mouseion.”⁶⁰ Beyond Asklepiades, who is identified in this role in two inscriptions (*IGUR* 241, 250), there are at least five other individuals identified as a “temple-warden of Sarapis” who were also connected with philosophers that met in the Mouseion at Alexandria.⁶¹ However, those who held this leadership position were not necessarily actual philosophers themselves, as our pancratist demonstrates. Moreover, the positions of “priest” and “temple-warden of Sarapis” both point toward ritual activities performed by a synod of scholars or philosophers.

In further evidence from Egypt and elsewhere, it is not entirely clear whether this Mouseion at Alexandria or some other local Mouseion is meant. In these cases also there is reference to philosophers gathering in the Mouseion or to philosophers feasting and to some sort of exemption, including cases in evidence from Halikarnassos in Caria, Tavium in Galatia, Panamara in Caria, and Athens.⁶² Inscriptions from Ephesos show that there was a Mouseion there, and that other educated professionals beyond philosophers might form associations and meet

⁵⁸ See *IDelos* 1525 = Samama (2003), no. 111 (181–145 BCE) for the *IGUR* 62 (130 CE), on the one hand, and Bernand (1984), no. 32 (1–50 CE), on the other.

⁵⁹ Lewis (1963) and (1981).

⁶⁰ *IGUR* 241 = *IG* XIV 1103. Cf. *IGUR* 239–240, 250.

⁶¹ *PMeyer* 6 (125 CE): Ἀνδρονείκῳ νεοκόρῳ τοῦ μεγάλου Σαράπιδος τῶν ἐν τῷ Μουσείῳ σειτουμένων ἀτελῶν; *BGU* 73 (135 CE): Κλαύδιος Φιλόξενος νεοκόρος τοῦ μεγάλου Σαράπι[δ]ος γεν[ό]μεν[ο]ς ἔπαρχος σπει[ρ]ης πρώτης Δαμα[σκη]νῶν τῶ[ν] ἐν | τῷ Μουσειῳ σειτουμένων ἀτελῶν; *PSICom* 14 (185 CE): νεοκόρ[ω] | [τοῦ μεγάλου Σαράπιδος τῶν ἐν] τῷ Μουσειῳ σειτουμ[έ]νων ἀτελῶν; and, *IGR* I 1200 (122 CE): νεοκόρος τοῦ μεγάλου | Σαράπιδος τῶν [ἐν Μουσειῳ] | σειτουμένων ἀτελῶ[ν]. On the papyrological cases, see Lewis (1963), although he says nothing about the role of the temple-warden.

⁶² See Haussoullier, *BCH* 4 (1880), 405–406, no. 21 (1st cent. CE); *RECAM* II 417; *SIG*³ 900.53–54 (early fourth c. CE); *IG* II² 3810 (210 CE). From Egypt, compare *PRyl* II 143 (38 CE); Bernand (1984), no. 14 (250–300 CE). See also *IMagnMai* 189 and *IPerge* 193, which mention someone who meets in the Mouseion without reference to philosophers.

within such a building. At Ephesos, the assembly (συνέδριον) of physicians and a group of instructors gathered regularly at or near the Mouseion.⁶³ There are indications that such local buildings dedicated to the Muses also existed at Pergamon in Mysia, Smyrna in Ionia, Mylasa in Caria, Stratonikeia in Caria, Antioch in Pisia, and Side in Pamphylia.⁶⁴ In these latter cases, we unfortunately know almost nothing about what groups may have frequented the buildings, but the association of instructors attested at Smyrna may well have met within the Mouseion (*ISmyrna* 215). So, philosophers and other educated professionals elsewhere may have been forming similar associations, and in some cases gathering in a building dedicated to the Muses.

Three other potential – though not certain – epigraphic cases of philosophers forming associations in Attica and Asia Minor are worthy of note. First of all, at Rhodiapolis in Lycia, the civic institutions and the elder’s organization (*gerousia*) honoured a man named Herakleitos son of Herakleitos, who was priest of Asklepios and Hygeia some time in the second century CE (*GRA* II 146 = *TAM* II 910). They did so by setting up a golden image of the honoree and a statue of Education (*paideia*) personified. The inscription also mentions that Herakleitos had previously been “honoured by the Alexandrians, the Rhodians, the Athenians, the most sacred council of Areopagos, the Epicurean philosophers at Athens, and the sacred theatrical synod.” These groups acknowledged Herakleitos (who may well have been an Epicurean himself) as “foremost physician of his era, writer and poet of medical and philosophical works, whom they consider to be the Homer of medical poetry.” The most important thing to notice for our purposes is that Epicurean philosophers at Athens seem to function corporately like an association in this honorary setting, appearing alongside a synod of theatrical performers and alongside other more official organizations or civic communities.

Secondly, in the time of Trajan, T. Flavius Pantainos, the son of a head (διὰ δόχου) of some unidentified philosophers, dedicated a library building at Athens, southeast of the Agora. The inscription identifies Pantainos as “the priest of the philosophers’ Muses” (ὁ ἱερεὺς Μουσῶν φιλοσόφων) which, if taken literally (rather than just figuratively), may suggest he was a functionary within an ongoing association of philosophers who regularly engaged in rituals together, which would parallel the situation at Alexandria.⁶⁵ At Athens, the connection of this group of philosophers to a library also suggests the importance of texts in group life, a point to which I return later. Since another inscription from this

⁶³ *IEph* 719, 2304, 3239, 4101a. Cf. Keil (1905) and (1945); Nutton (1971).

⁶⁴ *IPergamonAsklep* 152 (175 CE), *ISmyrna* 191.16–17, *IMylasa* 413.5, *IStratonikeia* 310, *JRS* 2 (1912), 95–97, no. 25, from Antioch (third c. CE), *ISide*, p. 84. Cf. Şahin, *IPerge* 193, notes.

⁶⁵ *SEG* 21:703 = *Agora* I 848 (ca. 98–102 CE). Cf. Oliver (1979), 159; *GRA* II 146.

building forbids taking books out, it may be that these philosophers gathered together in the library building itself.⁶⁶

Thirdly, turning to a possible case from Bithynia, Corsten argues that two second-century inscriptions – now in the Bursa museum – may point in the direction of what he labels a “club” of Stoic philosophers at Prusa (or at Hadrianoi).⁶⁷ Both involve honours for a philosopher who is also designated a “friend” (*IPrusaOlymp* 17–18 = *IHadrianoi* 51–52; second century CE):

To good fortune! T. Avianus Arrianus, the friend (τὸν φίλον), honoured P. Avianus Valerius son of Lysimachos, philosopher, according to the decree of the Council and the People.

To good fortune! Avianus Apollonios, philosopher, honoured T. Avianus Bassos Polyainos, Stoic philosopher, according to the decree of the city of the Hadrianoi by Olympos. ... He set this up (?) ... for his own friend from his own resources.

As Corsten also notes, the term “friends” (φιλοί) was somewhat commonly used as a designation among fellow-members of associations in Asia Minor, and one of the instances of this practice is encountered at Prusa itself.⁶⁸ Corsten proposes that a group of Stoic philosophers in Bithynia were following common custom in gathering together in an association and referring to fellow-members as “friends.” Judge too readily dismisses Corsten’s suggestion (*NewDocs* X 1), but Judge seems generally unaware of the sort of associative materials I have gathered here.⁶⁹

Since physicians such as Herakleitos at Rhodiapolis (*GRA* II 146 = *TAM* II 910), Menekrates at Daldis (*TAM* V 650), and Galen at Pergamon could self-identify as philosophers, it is worth mentioning that these educated professionals likewise formed ongoing associations or guilds, in this case based on common occupation.⁷⁰ In the imperial era we have clear evidence for occupational associations of physicians at Alexandria, Ephesos, Pergamon, and both Histria and Dionysopolis in Moesia Inferior.⁷¹ As with philosophers in the inscriptions, sel-

⁶⁶ Wycherley (1957), 150, no. 464 = *Agora* I 2729.

⁶⁷ See Corsten’s notes to *IPrusaOlymp* 17–18.

⁶⁸ *IPrusaOlymp* 24. Cf. *TAM* V 93 and *IlydiaM* 109 from Saittai; *IG* XII,5 912, from the island of Tenos.

⁶⁹ Judge (2012).

⁷⁰ Cf. Samama (2003), nos. 194, 231, 294, 321, 341, 334, 329, 365. On the blurry or nonexistent boundaries between philosophy and medicine, see Eijk (2004).

⁷¹ *IAlexandriaK* 97 (7 CE); *IEph* 719 = Samama (2003), no. 205 (time of Trajan); *IEph* 2304 = Samama (2003), no. 218 (II CE); *IEph* 3239 = Samama (2003), no. 201; *IEph* 4101a, lines 16–18; *IEph* 1161–1167 (II CE) cf. *Idelphi* I 12; *GCRE* 38, lines 14–15, from Pergamon; *IHistria* 57, lines 25–33 (150–200 CE). Cf. *IGBulg* I² 15bis and 15ter; c. 200 CE. For associations of Asklepiadai in the Hellenistic era, see *Idelphi* I 12 (c. 360 BCE); *IKosM* 461; *IAsos* 227 (150 BCE); *CIL* VI 8895.

dom do such groups of physicians identify the group by tradition or “sect” (αἵρεσις),⁷² although it may be that a proponent of the Method at Smyrna was a “leader” or “patron” (προστατής) of an association of doctors (*ISmyrna* 537).

Numerous inscriptions from Ephesos speak of the assembly (συνέδριον) of physicians who met within the sanctuary of the Muses there.⁷³ The range of activities mentioned in the inscriptions sound familiar and reflect those common to other occupational associations, including sacrifice, meals, taking care of the grave, and diplomacy with authorities. There are also possible hints of the use of written materials in connection with the Ephesian physicians’ medical competitions in honour of Asklepios: that is, if the reference to σύνταγμα as one of the four main areas in contests can be interpreted as a reference to the use of pharmacological or medical “treatises” or “books.”⁷⁴

VI Communal use of writings in some associations: “Reading communities”

Evidence of literacy and the use or production of writings have appeared now and again in the inscriptional evidence we have surveyed for associations of philosophers and physicians. Still, it is important to say a few more words about such literary activities in these circles, which suggest that some of these associations may be considered under the rubric of “textual communities” (a term employed by Snyder) or “reading communities” (employed by Johnson).⁷⁵ A recent study by Kloppenborg considers associations devoted to Jesus in terms of “reading communities,” but he does not fully explore other examples in the ancient context, such as the associations of philosophers I discuss here.⁷⁶ These two sets of associations, some of which engaged in the use of writings, might be fruitfully placed alongside one another in future investigations of reading communities. A brief synthesis of recent scholarly work on the use of literature in reading communities

⁷² On this, see Edelstein (1987) [1967].

⁷³ *IEph* 719, 2304, 3239, 4101a. Cf. Keil (1905); Keil (1945); Nutton (1971).

⁷⁴ See *IEph* 1161–1167; Keil (1905) and (1945).

⁷⁵ Snyder (2000); Johnson (2010). Last’s (2012) interesting article on the *production* of written media within associations and groups of Christ-devotees (particularly with respect to gospel writings), while important to note here, does not focus on issues of literacy or the usage of such writings in a communal setting, although it acknowledges such.

⁷⁶ Kloppenborg (2014).

in antiquity will provide a framework for considering certain associations of philosophers as reading communities.

Physicians and proponents of specific medical sects engaged in debates about what degree of education was necessary, and so Galen complains about the physician Thessalos of Tralles who was known for offering a six-month apprenticeship in the Methodical approach to medicine and who supposedly included among his students “cobblers, carpenters, dyers, and bronzesmiths (*De methodo medendi* 1.1–2).” Nonetheless, some degree of literacy seems to have been the norm among those who called themselves “physicians,” as when Galen complains not that many physicians were illiterate but that many were “unable even to read in a fully educated manner.”⁷⁷

Research has been done on the use of texts within gatherings of philosophers, even though inscriptions are usually not the place where evidence for this practice is mentioned, so it is important to notice this evidence which points to associations of philosophers as reading communities.⁷⁸ Cambron-Goulet convincingly argues that an ongoing tension continued among philosophers into late antiquity between a more prominent preference for oral forms of teaching and a hesitancy about written forms.⁷⁹ In part because of the value placed on direct interaction between teacher and students and due to an emphasis on ensuring that students did not misunderstand teachings, direct discussions in a communal setting remained the preferred method.⁸⁰ Yet this does not mean that written media were therefore unimportant in these contexts. Although there are some occasional complaints about supposed “illiterate” Epicurean philosophers,⁸¹ for instance, it seems likely that most philosophers and physicians were able to read and to engage with a text at some level. Cambron-Goulet’s study shows that many philosophers would approach reading in a way that *replicated orality* in a group setting, and she cites passages to that effect from Xenophon (concerning Sokrates), Plato, Aulus Gellius, and Diogenes Laertius. Overall, she states, “[r]eading is presented as a social practice that allows the reader to imitate friendship with an author while sharing his thoughts with friends. In that sense, reading aloud in groups is a way of imitating orality and of grounding the use of literacy in friendship and discussion.”⁸² Eijk’s study of philosophers and physicians likewise points to a

⁷⁷ *De libris propriis* 19.8–9K. See Johnson (2010), 85.

⁷⁸ On orality and literature among physicians and philosophers, see Eijk (2005), 34–41.

⁷⁹ Cambron-Goulet (2011). Cf. Rydberg-Cox (2003); Eijk (2004), 34–41.

⁸⁰ Cf. Galen, *De alimentorum facultatibus* 1.1.47; *De simplicium medicamentorum facultatibus* 6. See Eijk (2004), 36–37.

⁸¹ Cf. Snyder (2000), 8, 64, on *PHerc* 1005, cols. 16.1–19 and 17.5–11.

⁸² Cambron-Goulet (2011), 221.

gradual increase in the importance of writing within the Hippocratic tradition specifically, speaking of a “common reservoir of knowledge accessible to a group of physicians ... and admitting of additions and changes by this same group of physicians.”⁸³ Johnson’s study of reading communities makes similar arguments about the prominence of communal reading and interpretation among intellectuals generally, including Galen’s circles. So, although we should not exaggerate the importance of writings, it is highly likely that literate media played a significant role in the meetings of at least some associations of philosophers and physicians.

Snyder’s monograph goes into greater detail regarding the use of texts by philosophers of particular traditions in the Roman era specifically. Snyder finds that evidence for the Peripatetics’ consistent use of texts in group situations towers above the Stoics and, less so, the Epicureans and the Platonists.⁸⁴ In comparison with some others, Epicureans were renowned for their reverence for the founder’s body of teaching accessed, in part, through texts interpreted together in the gathering of friends. With respect to Platonists of the Roman era, teachers such as L. Calvisius Taurus and Plotinus (as described by Aulus Gellius and Porphyry respectively) are regularly portrayed using group exposition of texts as a key means of educating adherents.⁸⁵

It is noteworthy that many of the philosophers and physicians we encountered within inscriptions did not expressly align themselves with any specific tradition or sect, and so it is difficult to relate the inscriptional evidence to Snyder’s comparative study of the sects as reflected in literature. It seems that self-identification as a “philosopher” or “physician” or both was primary more so than identification with a sect. This also suggests that cross-pollination among the sects was common and that traditions were not always clearly delineated by the late Hellenistic and Roman eras, as Galen also indicates (*De aff. dig.* 8). Still, Galen thought that some people were still overly concerned with the distinctions as he complains that “one might more easily teach new things to those following Moses and Christ than to physicians and philosophers who have clung to the sects (τῶν ταῖς αἰρέσεσι προστετηκότας ἰατροῦς τε καὶ φιλοσόφους: *De diff. pulsuum* 3.3).”

83 Eijk (2004), 38.

84 Snyder (2000), 57–61, 92.

85 Snyder (2000), 111–121.

VII Conclusions

There are difficulties when scholars adopt hard-and-fast distinctions between social forms adopted by philosophers and those adopted by other people who formed groups based on common occupation or other factors in the ancient Mediterranean. Not all those who self-identified as “philosophers” or “physicians” even joined or formed ongoing groups, but some of those that did can be better understood within the context of other unofficial associations. While a number of scholars of ancient philosophy have touched on the value of considering philosophical groups as “societies” (θίασσοι) specifically, others such as Zhmud tend to emphasize a clear distinction between such “religious” associations, on the one hand, and organizations formed by philosophers, on the other. One result of this tendency is the neglect of evidence for sacrifices and meals for heroes or deities within groups of philosophers, for instance, a neglect which I have sought to remedy here.

The preferred scholarly terminology for groups of philosophers has been “philosophical schools.” It seems to me that – when this is used of a social *collectivity* and not as a reference to a *tradition* of teaching – this scholarly terminology begins to presume that the social structures and activities of philosophers were somehow categorically different than those adopted by other associations, such that a single, separate category is needed – “school” – rather than several that overlap with non-philosophical groupings.

As there are no stark boundaries between the models of the philosophical school and the unofficial association, the question of whether groups devoted to Jesus (whose organizations could in fact vary) were, in general, closer to one than the other is misguided in certain respects.⁸⁶ For instance, Alexander builds on the work of Nock and on Judge’s and Meeks’ outline of four social models in the ancient Mediterranean environment: (1) household, (2) Judean synagogue, (3) philosophical school, or (4) association.⁸⁷ Alexander then draws heavily on Galen’s comment about “the school (διδασκαλίαν) of Moses and Christ” and states that for understanding gatherings of Christ-devotees “the school has distinct advantages over the more familiar models of the household or the association, neither of which usually produces literature, or sees itself as part of a worldwide movement.”⁸⁸ More recent studies, such as Eshleman’s work on *The Social World of Intellectuals in the Roman Empire*, begin to take more care in noticing the simulta-

⁸⁶ For an outline of these models in relation to Pauline groups, see Ascough (1998).

⁸⁷ Nock (1933); Judge (1960) and (1961); Meeks (1983), 75–84.

⁸⁸ Alexander (1994), 82. Cf. Kooten (2009), 10. This is not the place to engage fully the significant overlap between household structures and associations (on which see Meeks 1983, 77; Harland

neous importance of various structures-associations and households included – while also dealing with affinities between educated Jesus followers, on the one hand, and philosophers or sophists, on the other.⁸⁹

Some groups of philosophers did function as associations where communal reading and interpretation of literary sources (though not necessarily “scriptures”) was a notable part of group activity, if not production of literature in some cases. As the social and cultural study of many associations in the ancient context is only in its infancy, we have much more to learn about literacy and the relative importance of literate media within associations of various kinds. Further exploration in this area may also provide context for certain diaspora associations devoted to the Israelite god who happened to make writings and their interpretation a more or less significant facet of communal activity as well.

Acknowledgment: Maia Kotrosits (Denison University) provided extensive feedback that helped to transform what has become this paper. I would also like to thank Tiziano Dorandi (Centre Jean Pépin, Paris), Ben Kelly (York University), Birgit van der Lans (University of Bergen) and John S. Kloppenborg (University of Toronto) for helpful suggestions at various stages of research and writing. I am grateful for the feedback of participants at the Italian Centre for Advanced Studies on Religions (in September 2016). Epigraphic and papyrological abbreviations in this article follow those outlined on the “Associations in the Greco-Roman World” website (under the tab ‘How to use this site’):

<http://www.philipharland.com/greco-roman-associations/?p=12/#abbrev>.

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2013 [2003], 24–26), or the importance of households for philosophers. On this, see Stanley Stowers (1984), 65–67.

⁸⁹ Eshleman (2012), 17, 100–101. Cf. Wilken (1972), (1980), 118–119 and (1984).

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