

Associations, Greek and Roman

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Many associations were voluntary and private organizations of some durability, with formal structural features such as a name, magistrates, member lists, by-laws, admission requirements such as entrance fees, some sort of common treasury, meeting places called *schola*, *domus*, *templum*, *oikos*, and so on, and benefactors and/or patrons. Voluntary associations had a long history in Greece and Rome, and flourished particularly in the Hellenistic world and the Roman Empire, as shown by a large number of inscriptions and papyri. The evidence for associative life is particularly abundant in port cities and/or cosmopolitan centers such as Delos, Rhodes, Ephesos, Rome, Ostia, and Lugdunum. A variety of Greek and Latin terms may denote an association: for example, *koinon*, *synodos*, *synergion*, *thiasos*, and *hetaira* in Greek; *collegium*, *corpus*, *sodalitas*, and even *familia* in Latin. Nominative plurals such as the worshippers of Serapis (*Serapiastai*), the weavers (*gerdioi*), or the builders and carpenters (*fabri tignarii*) may sometimes designate formally structured associations.

The size, membership base, and recruitment policy varied from association to association. Although many associations had a few dozen members, some could have been as large as a few thousand members. Association members usually came from the lower classes, although they were not necessarily poor. The associations were usually formed around a common ethnic or geographic origin, a common occupation, common neighborhood, or a cult of a deity. The boundaries between these categories are by no means clear-cut. In Hellenistic Delos, for example, the merchants, ship owners, and warehousemen from Berytos, styled themselves as Poseidoniastae (worshippers of Poseidon; *IDelos* 1772–96). A group of doctors (*medici*) from Roman Taurini

(modern Turin) called themselves worshippers of Asclepius and Hygia, both deities of health (*CIL* V 6970). In addition, regardless of the membership base or the title of the association, the convivial, religious, and funerary activities were common features among all type of associations. The surviving meeting places of associations often included spaces for convivial and cultic activities (Bollmann 1998). All the extant bylaws of the associations contained brief or elaborate regulations in relation to eating and drinking. Some included detailed rules concerning the distribution of food according to rank within the association (*ILS* 7213). Conduct at communal banquets was often carefully regulated, and fines could be imposed for failure to comply with the regulations (*P.Lond.* 2710; *ILS* 7212). Exclusion from banquets was used by some associations – the Iobacchoi of Athens, for example (*IG* II.² 1368) – as a means of punishment for members. In some associations, especially the Egyptian associations, participation in banquets and funerary activities was made compulsory, subject to a fine (*P.Mich.* V 244; 43 CE).

Associations in the Greco-Roman world were usually local organizations. In the Hellenistic and Roman periods, however, the Dionysiac artists (*technitai*) of theatrical performance, as well as athletes, formed translocal organizations. Because of their importance for festivals and games, members of these associations enjoyed a wide range of protections and privileges, such as personal inviolability (*asylia*), exemption from taxes (*ateleia*), and immunity from compulsory public services.

According to a clause in the TWELVE TABLES, which survives only as an excerpt in Justinian's *Digest* and was reportedly derived from Solon's legislation, associations could make internal agreements (*pactio*) as they wished, provided they did not violate public law (*Dig.* 47.22.4, Gaius). The formation and the activities of the associations seem to have been increasingly subject to governmental regulations after the

turbulence of the Late Roman Republic, when associations of all kinds were reportedly involved in seditious activities and violence (see *COLLEGIA*). Recent research, however, has called into question the depth and width of these restrictive regulations and their actual implementation in the Roman Empire. Not only regional variations in the governmental attitude towards the associative phenomenon have been noted, but scholars have also suggested that there did not seem to have been any general ban of associations (Ausbüttel 1982; Harland 2003). The relationship between associations and the state was more complex than conflict and control. The legal regulations may have had a positive impact on the development of associations, especially those that were considered to be of general good to the public interest (*Dig.* 50.6.6.12 Callistratus). Such associations were usually occupationally-based organizations such as the *collegia fabrum* (association of craftsmen, builders, and carpenters). Some of the occupational associations shouldered specific public services, which varied from supplying requisitioned goods to fire-fighting. At least in Roman Egypt, the associations were also used as convenient units for tax-collection. Legal privileges, such as the exemptions from compulsory public services that were granted to these associations, allowed some association members to accumulate their patrimony, which could facilitate the social ascent of both themselves and their descendants (Tran 2006).

The proliferation of associations in the Hellenistic and Roman periods used to be interpreted as a symptom of the decline of the *polis*. More recently, however, scholarly discussions have brought to the fore the positive interactions between associations and existing social and cultural structures, especially the participation of associations within civic life and networks of benefaction, patronage, and reciprocal honors, as well as the ruler cults (van Nijf 1997; Arnaoutoglou 1998; Harland 2003). Associations put up inscriptions to the reigning kings or emperors, to their benefactors or patrons, and to the

magistrates in the city, and feasted on the emperor's birthdays, the anniversaries of imperial ascension, and birthdays of patrons. Associations, especially in the Roman times, were frequently recipients of gifts from either members, outside benefactors, or formally elected patrons. The gifts could take the form of one-time distributions of goods or cash, donations of buildings (meeting places, graveyards, or burial slots) and building decorations, or perpetual endowments, in exchange for which association members were expected to feast and perform annual celebratory/commemorative services for the donors out of the incomes of either cash foundations or revenue-generating properties. The patrons of associations usually came from below the senatorial or equestrian ranks. They were formally elected by members; the guardian spirit (*Genius*) of the patron could be an object of worship within the association; patrons could be (symbolically) considered part of the association; their names would be written into the by-laws of the association, and could head its membership list (*album*); the birthdays of patrons were customarily occasions for community feasts (e.g., *CIL* XIV 2112=*ILS* 7212); and finally, the title of "patron of associations" was included in the list of accomplishments inscribed on one's tombstone. An association may have multiple patrons and benefactors, and a patron or benefactor may be associated with multiple associations. Associations, therefore, were incorporated into a nexus of dynamic social interactions characterized by multiplicity, cooperation, and competition.

Not only did associations have a recognized place in civic life, but the membership and magistracies within the associations also constituted an acceptable source of social identity. It has often been noted that associations imitated the organization of the cities, and that the members of associations were heterogeneous in terms of their legal and socioeconomic status. As such, many scholars have approached associations as mechanisms to integrate non-citizens such as freedmen, slaves, and

foreigners (van Nijf 1997; Tran 2006; Patterson 2006; Gabrielsen 2007). Some scholars, however, have cautioned against equating imitation with conformity or integration: rather than simply conform to the elite value systems and paradigms of representation and actions, the associations provided an alternative space for political, social, and religious networking (e.g., Verboven 2007). Regardless of the approach, the study of associations has been established as an important way of understanding the roles, experiences, aspirations, and expectations of the sub-elite in Greco-Roman society.

Theories – especially Social Capital theory and the New Institutional economics – have also recently been introduced to provide insight into the functions of the ancient associations. Association rules such as high fines for insults and violence are interpreted as mechanisms to push out or deter rule-breakers and free-riders. Associations can be seen as trust networks or private-order enforcement networks, where the heightened level of trust among members lowered the costs of transaction and facilitated cooperation among members (e.g., Monson 2006). Such a theoretically informed approach sheds new light on the question concerning the comparability between Medieval/Early Modern guilds and ancient associations. Scholars used to draw a clear line between these phenomena, seeing the former as economic agents and the latter as social and convivial bodies (Waltzing 1895–1900). In light of the new analyses, which have amply illustrated the interactions between social and economic dimensions, the dichotomy between economic and social bodies seems over-simplistic and problematic. Activities that we tend to label as “social” may have had significant economic consequences.

SEE ALSO: Freedmen and freedwomen; Patron, patronage, Roman.

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