# Challenging Migrant Cults

*A multidisciplinary approach to identity and religion in Imperial Ostia*

**Jeroen Huissoon**

*S1755420 Leiden University*

*Supervisor: L.E. Tacoma*

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# Introduction

At the height of Roman Imperialism, many cities in ancient Italy, as well as other towns and cities in the empire, had become increasingly cosmopolitan, with the quintessential cosmopolis being of course the eternal city. Since the Roman economy was heavily depended on migration, it is safe to say that a large part of Rome's population originated from elsewhere in the empire. Most came as slaves, but migrants also included foreign businessmen, merchants, teachers, local aristocrats, day laborers and priests. In contrast to more recent patterns of mobility, Roman migration was socially rather heterogeneous, with migrants originating from very rich to very poor segments of society. And unlike today, many cities in the Roman Empire were not dominated by one ethnic group, but consisted of a mosaic of different cultures and religions.[1] Similarly, migration seemed to be an integral part of Roman society, with even Romans themselves describing their own history as the continuous interplay between foreign and native influences.

However, for much of the twentieth century, the history of migration during the Roman Empire was largely ignored by those specialized in historic mobility. One of the reasons for this lack of interest is that many scholars assumed that migration was in essence a characteristic element of modernizing societies. This theory was first formulated in 1972 by Wilbur Zelinsky in what is called the 'Zelinsky Model of Migration Transition'[2], in

[1] L.E. Tacoma, 'Migrant Quarters at Rome?', G. de Kleijn and S. Benoist (eds.) *Integration in Rome and the Roman world (Proceedings of the tenth workshop of the international network Impact of Empire)* (Leiden and Boston: Brill 2014) 128 -129.

[2] W. Zelinksy, 'The Hypothesis of the mobility transition', Geographical Review, 61: 219 – 49.

which he claimed that pre-modern societies did not experience high rates of urbanization and migration was confined to pastoral nomadism. [3]

According to L.E Tacoma, historians interested in migration before the advent of modernity are also challenged by other problems. Most importantly, there is a scarcity of written sources concerning pre-modern migration, since the concept of quantifiable migration itself is largely an invention of the modern nation-state. Ancient Romans were not as concerned with the legal aspect of migration, nor were they very aware of borders. Secondly, Tacoma argues that defining the boundaries of the field has been very difficult. For much of its history, studies focusing on migration were very much confined to the modern history of Europe and North-America. Especially the Trans-Atlantic slave trade received much attention. More recently, the study has extended to other parts of the world and has become more of a world history. However, this does fade the boundaries between migration history and other field of study, such as global history. Thirdly, Tacoma argues that the absence of a research tradition and the rejection of the modernization theory has given the history of migration a lack of framework. Migration is now placed in a variety of contexts, sometimes focusing on acculturation, other times using theories about diaspora.[4]

One of the first scholars who thought it necessary to elaborate on pre-modern migration was T. Frank. In his work, 'Race mixture in the Roman Empire', which has become rather outdated in recent decades, Frank argued that the influx of foreign migrants in Rome had a large impact on the imperial moral and eventually led to the debasement of Roman culture.[5] After the Second World War it became evident that the work of Frank was hugely influenced by political ideology and it was not entirely free from value judgements, but his influence is still seen in later works.[6] More

[3] L.E. Tacoma, *Moving Romans: Migration to Rome in the Principate* (Oxford, 2016), 1-2.

[4] Tacoma (2016), 4-6.

[5] T. Frank, 'Race mixture in the Roman Empire', *American Historical Review*, 21: 689-708.

[6] Tacoma (2016) 11-12.

recently, the study of historic migration has become very popular again. Unlike seeing the phenomenon as characteristic for a modernizing society, historians are now able to show that migration is a structural aspect of human life since the very beginning. Now, studies show that the history of migration is very diverse, as well as the perception of migration, but that the scale of it has been very much the same.[7]

An example of such a new approach is given by Tacoma in his 'Migrant Quarters at Rome?' in which he challenges the idea that residential segregation is a timeless characteristic of immigrant societies. According to him, this idea is highly anachronistic and often is based on the structure of twenty-first century American cities. He furthermore argues that, with the exception of the Jewish community there is no good evidence to think that immigrants in Rome lived in separated clusters, where they had their own cultural community life. Ethnicity, according to Tacoma, did not seem the most important factor for migrants in constructing their identity.[8] Rather than appropriating their ethnicity as a chronic marker of their identity, migrants probably reaffirmed their ethnic identity only selectively and used a whole range of adaptable markers; one person for example could sometimes identify himself as Greek-speaking, sometimes as Jewish, sometimes as a citizen of Antioch and sometimes as Roman. These identities could all perfectly coexist as factors of one migrant's identity.

Nonetheless, this theory very much applies to the city of Rome and cannot automatically be applied to other societies within the Roman Empire. Alexandria in Egypt for example is one of the best known cases in the Roman world where the urban population was strictly segregated by ethnicity. Its three largest ethnic groups: Greeks, Jews and native Egyptians inhabited different parts of the city, took part in different religious cults and had different legal rights. Henceforward, it is quite clear that ethnic identity in

[7] J. Lucassen, L. Lucassen and P. Manning (eds.), *Migration History in world history: multidisciplinary approaches* (Leiden and Boston 2010) 3.

[8] Tacoma (2014) 128-130

the Roman Empire took vastly different shapes and cannot be explained in the simplifying terms of a monocausal model.

However, the idea that that ethnic groups are socially constructed and subjectively perceived is undeniably a recent hypothesis. Before the Second World War, most scholars thought that ethnicity was based on actual physical differences, such as race and that the element that was most frequently evoked to distinguish an ethnic group was genetics. This hypothesis, like most theories on racial differences, was largely discarded after the war and made place for a more cultural model of ethnicity. Ethnic groups are now thought of as groups with unclear and changing boundaries that sometimes invoke language, sometimes religion and sometimes other features as markers of their identity.[9] In *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, anthropologist F. Barth argued that the perception that someone is a member of a group is the most important element of defining membership.[10]

But what then makes an ethnic group different from any other group? In his book *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, A.D Smith has proposed a model that characterizes ethnic groups by six distinct features: A collective name, a common myth of descent, a shared history, a distinctive shared culture, an association with a specific territory and a sense of communal solidarity. [11] However, more than any other feature, a distinctive shared culture is most often used as marker of identity. This can be in the form of a culinary tradition, a shared story of origins, a shared language or a shared set of traditions. But the most important feature, scholars argue, seems to be the feature of religion, for religion often joins these traditions together. For example, the Jewish tradition has a very distinct food culture based on religious laws in the Thora, a shared story of origins from the book of Genesis and a set of traditions that are distinctive from other religions. In certain other religions, members can be identified by their form of praying,

[9] E.M. Orlin, *Foreign Cults in Rome: Creating a Roman Empire* (Oxford 2010) 13-14.

[10] F. Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Boston 1969) 14.

[11] A.D Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford 1986) 22-30.

by their religious calendars, by their religious dress, sacrifices or religious festivals.

So if most Roman immigrants did not continuously seek to express their local identity and there is hardly no evidence for residential segregation, did migrants identify themselves as followers of a specific religious cult? According to Simon Price, this was often the case. In 'Homogeneity and Diversity in the Religions of Rome' Price argues that Religion was not just one of a bundle of characteristics defining ethnic or civic identity, it was 'the' defining characteristic.[12] David Noy furthermore states that foreigners imported their gods as a way to maintain the traditions of their local religion. These cults offered religious identity to their members, just like going to church or to the mosque offer identity and belonging to twenty-first century immigrants. They provided foreigners with a network of fellow worshippers and gave them a sense of community.

Already in antiquity, some ancient writers have suggested that there was a link between the coming of immigrants and the popularity of 'foreign cults'. In his Roman Antiquities, Greek historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus writes:

> *'The most striking thing of all, in my view, is this: despite the influx into Rome of countless foreigners, who are under a firm obligation to worship their ancestral gods according to the customs of their homeland, the city has never officially emulated any of these foreign practices, as has been the case with many cities in the past; but even though the Romans introduced various rituals from abroad on the instructions of oracles, they have got rid of all the fabulous mumbo-jumbo and celebrate them according to their own customs. The rites of the Idaean mother are an example of this. (...) But by a law and decree of the senate no native Roman walks in procession through the city arrayed in a parti-coloured robe, begging alms or escorted by flute-players, or worships the god with the*

[12] S. Price, 'Homogeneity and Diversity in the Religions of Rome', J.A. North and S.R.F Price (eds), *The Religious History of the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews and Christians* (Oxford 2011), 256-257

> *Phrygian ceremonies. So cautious are they about admitting any foreign religious customs and so great is their aversion to all pompous display that is wanting in decorum.*[13]

Dionysius, himself an immigrant from Greece, not only argues here that foreigners in Rome felt obligated to keep worshipping their ancestral gods; he also states that Rome never officially incorporated these religious practices into their own traditions. Those rituals which were emulated by the Romans were, according to Dionysius, stripped of all the 'fabulous mumbo-jumbo' and celebrated according to the Roman customs. Romans were in fact so cautious about admitting foreign influences that it was a native Roman forbidden to walk in procession, wearing a parti-coloured robe, begging for alms or escorted by flute-players, or worship the gods with Phrygian ceremonies. More than just an observation, this passage presents us an ideal: namely that of the sober Roman citizen, who does not let himself be influenced by the corrupting traditions of the extravagant east. In this ideal, Romans worshipped the official gods sanctioned by the Roman state: Jupiter, Minerva, Juno and Apollo among others. Foreign cults are presented as the domain of immigrants and any Roman who worshipped according to their rituals was committing a crime.

Although the ideal that is presented by Dionysius of Halicarnassus offers the reader a clear and manageable image of Roman society, other sources point to a radically different, more complicated and therefore more interesting reality. Both literary and archeological evidence suggest that, from the late republican period onwards, traditional Graeco-Roman cults were accompanied by new foreign cults. Some of these cults were presumably brought to Italy by migrants and soldiers, but most of them were not exclusive to one ethnic group. Especially the cults of Isis, Serapis and Mithras had a large following among Roman citizens. It would therefore be too simplistic to describe them only as migrant cults. So, how exclusive were these new cults and were they really a way for migrants to define their

[13] Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities II*, 19. 3-5.

identity? If not, then is it still justifiable to link these cults to the presence and activity of foreign migrants?

To answer this question in reference to material found in Ostia Antica is tantalizing for several specific reason. First of all, the harbour-town of Ostia was Rome's major sea-port and was therefore home to a large variety of different ethnic groups, who had come to the city for trade or to do business. With the exception of Rome itself, Ostia was one the most ethnic diverse cities in the whole of Italy. That brings us also to our second reason, which is that archeological evidence from Ostia gives us a very good impression of the range of religious cults that existed in a Roman town during the first three centuries of our era. In the first and second century, the rise of the middle class and the growing cosmopolitanism was accompanied by the introduction of several foreign cults. [14] Not only does the city have the oldest mainstream synagogue uncovered outside of Israel, it is also home to several other sanctuaries, including those dedicated to Mithras, Serapis, Magna Mater, Hercules, Bellona, Attis and the Capitoline Triad.

For the sake of accuracy, it is necessary to address the distinction between the city of Ostia and the neighbouring city of Portus. When I speak of Ostia, this also includes Portus, which was constructed by Claudius as an extension of Ostia but gradually became a distinct entity. As naval activities became more and more focused on Portus, Ostia went into a lingering decline from the third century onwards, eventually getting abandoned in the ninth century after repetitive invasions by North-African pirates. For this reason, this study will only focus on the first three centuries A.D, since the literary and archeological evidence concerned with Ostia mostly reflects these three centuries of prosperity. Therefore, I will refer to both Ostia and Portus as 'Ostia'.

This brings us to the main purpose of this study, which is to answer the question: What conclusions can we draw from analyzing the cultic landscape in Ostia, from the first to the third century A.D, in the context of ethnic identity, and is it still justifiable to link these religious communities

[14] R. Meiggs, *Roman Ostia* (1973) 337.

to the presence and identity of foreign migrants? Answering this question will ultimately give us a more clear understanding of what being a migrant entailed and how migrants constructed their identities under the pressure of Romanization.

Due to the nature of this subject, this research required a number of different types of source material. Besides ancient literature, I have analyzed epigraphic, archeological and bioarchaeological sources This thesis is divided into three separate parts, each representing different parts of the puzzle. In the first part we will look at what factors played a role in the transformation of Ostia into a city where migration played a large role. I will also explain what types of migrants came to the city and how we can know where they are from. This evidence will form the base of the second part of this thesis, in which we will explore the sprawling religious landscape that can be observed in the ancient city. In this part, the variety of different cults will be discussed, as well as their origin, symbolism and visibility within the city. At last, in the third part we will further look at the membership of these cults, trying to uncover their initiation ritual and see if any of these cults can be classified as a 'migrant cult'.

# I.

## *The Ethnic Landscape of Ostia*

In this chapter, I will attempt to outline the ethnic landscape of ancient Ostia, mapping the communities of different foreigners, discussing how and why they came to the city and how Romans viewed them. The main aim of this is to exemplify that Ostia is before anything else a city of migrants. Due to the fragmentation of source material, demonstrating this requires a large set of different evidence, from epigraphy to isotope analysis. However, when combined, these sources present a bigger picture. The first part of this chapter will be mainly theoretic, establishing definitions and exploring the different types of migration to the city. After this, I will be focusing on the existing evidence and how to interpret it. But to do this I feel obliged to first discuss what I consider a foreigner, for answering this in the context of the Roman world is even harder than it is in ours.

## 1.1 Terminology

Much of the terminology that we use today surrounding ethnicity and migration is more or less based on our persistent notion of the 'nation-state'. Unlike most people today, the ancient Romans did not perceive the world as a mosaic of different countries and states that are protected by invisible borders. Their borders, with some exceptions in the north of the empire, were in the form of vast regions, sometimes with cities and villages in which it was unclear to people to which regime they belonged to. But also inside the empire, different cultures, languages and religions often overlapped each other. A good example is Italy itself; a province where Latin was spoken alongside Greek, Celtic and countless other languages.

It therefore comes as no surprise that Romans did not have a specific word that matches the full range of the English 'foreigner'. In the English language, a distinction is often made between permanent and temporary newcomers, the first one being called an 'immigrant' and the later one an 'expatriate' (also known as 'expat').[15] Romans did not make that distinction. In their minds, a seasonal worker had the same status as someone who lived there all his life. Strangely enough, a Latin-speaking Roman citizen from North Africa would only partially be considered a foreigner by people from Rome.[16] Both legal text and classic literature show us that our modern terminology cannot be automatically applied to the ancient world. We should therefore look at the terms Romans used themselves to describe the people they considered alien.

A term that is often seen in legal texts is *peregrinus*, which can be translated as 'foreigner', 'alien', and sometimes 'exotic'.[17] In legal texts, it was

[15] In the English language, these terms are often incorrectly applied; 'expatriate' principally being used to refer to white-skinned permanent settlers from Western countries and 'immigrant' being used to refer to temporary settlers from non-Western countries. As a result of this, these terms are under criticism for being subjective.

[16] D. Noy, *Foreigners at Rome: Citizens and Strangers* (London 2002) xi.

[17] After 212, when citizenship became almost universal for every free men in the empire, the word peregrinus lost its original meaning and from the third century onwards Romans began to apply the

primarily a term for someone who was free but not a Roman citizen. Therefore, a third-generation immigrant who was born in Rome, spoke only Latin and had no attachment to another place, could be called a *peregrinus*.[18] In the first two centuries *peregrini* formed the vast majority in the empire: however, their social status and security was sometimes fragile. Lacking the privileges of Roman citizens, groups of *peregrine* were occasionally expulsed from Rome in times of calamity and bad fortune. It also appears to have been harder for a *peregrinus* to obtain citizenship than for a slave. This could have to do with the fact that most slaves integrated more quickly into Roman society and culture due to the intensive contact with their owners. From the writing of Suetonius we know that emperor Claudius 'forbade men of foreign birth to use the Roman names so far as those of the clans were concerned'. He furthermore states that 'those who usurped the privileges of Roman citizenship he [Claudius] executed in the Esquiline fields'. Apparently, some peregrini illegally pretended to be Roman citizens by changing their names. [19]

Legal status beside, the Latin language also had several terms to describe someone who came from a place that was not Italy. Both *advenia* and *alienigus* were very general terms that were used for a newcomer or stranger, whereas *provincialis* and *transmarinus* were used for everyone who did not come from Italy, whether or not that person was a Roman citizen or not.[20] There are also countless other terms referring to specific peoples and tribes. Many migrants would probably have simplified their origin by using commonly known 'ethnic labels', such as *graecus* ('Greek') for somebody from the Eastern Mediterranean. The term *syrus* ('Syrian') was also frequently used as a general indication of where a person was from. Some of these ethnic labels could also have been initiated by the local

term to religious travelers. Therefore, the English word 'pilgrim' is derived from the Latin peregrinus.

[18] Noy, *Foreigners at Rome*, 1.

[19] Suetonius, Claudius 25:3.

[20] Ibidem, 2.

population, due to a lack of geographic knowledge or simply because they considered them a one ethnic group. It thus seems that there were several ways in which Romans defined 'the other' in their language: the most important of which appears to be by legal status and by place of birth. Naturally, in practice these terms were not as fixed as it appears in theory and people were identified differently throughout their lives.

This is also reflected in the economic and social status of those who migrated involuntary. There is a tendency among ancient historians to not study voluntary and involuntary migrants together, differentiating the two groups based on their legal status in society. However, according to Tacoma, many voluntary migrants were 'in fact enmeshed in a web of social and economic obligations.' Furthermore, voluntariness needs to be seen as more of a spectrum in which only a small group finds itself at one of the extremes.[21]

For the reason that this work is mainly concerned with religious identity, the definition of a foreigner that will be used here largely depends on religious activity. Focusing only on *provinciali* will close out the children of immigrants; persons who were born in Italy but considered themselves foreign to Roman culture. However, focusing on all *peregrini* does not take into account all the foreign slaves that practiced their religion in one of the mystery cults. Therefore, when I use the term 'foreigner' in this work it will apply to anyone who did not originate in Italy and still had a 'home' (in their own thinking or in that of others) someplace else. This will include *peregrini* migrants who settled in Italy from elsewhere in the empire, foreign slaves who moved involuntarily, Roman citizens who did not speak Latin and where native to a place outside of Italy, and second-generation immigrants who were born in Italy but identified themselves with the culture of their native people.

[21] Tacoma, Moving Romans, 33.

## 1.2. The development of Ostia into a commercial center.

As Rome's territory expanded into the East, its inhabitants came into contact with a world that previously had been shrouded in mystery. Due to the exploitation of Egypt, disposable income massively increased under Augustus and gave rise to a new generation of Romans that was wealthier and knew more about the world than their generation before.[22]

In a passage from Pro Lege Manilia, Cicero describes the East as 'indescribably wealthy, its harvests the stuff of legend, the variety of its produce incredible, and the size of its herds and flocks simply amazing'.[23] In this era of new internationalism, grain was imported from North-Africa, minerals from Western-India and, thanks to a large network of interconnected emporia, spices from as far as Vietnam and Java.[24] Imported goods from the east also included people, as slaves were bought and sold in every corner of the empire. Yet, not everyone was impressed with these foreign influences. In his 'Satires', Latin author Juvenal ridicules every aspect of Roman society that he finds corrupted by decadence and exoticism:

> *'That race I principally wish to flee, I'll swiftly reveal,*
> *And without embarrassment. My friends, I can't stand*
> *A Rome full of Greeks, yet few of the dregs are Greek!*
> *For the Syrian Orontes has long since polluted the Tiber,*
> *Bringing its language and customs, pipes and harp-strings,*
> *And even their native timbrels are dragged along too,*
> *And the girls forced to offer themselves in the Circus.*[25]

It is in this context that Ostia gradually became Rome's most important port and a major centre of Mediterranean commerce. According to Livy, the city was founded by the legendary fourth king of Rome, Ancus Martius, after the

[22] P. Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (London 2015) 14.

[23] Cicero, *Pro lege Manilia*, 6

[24] Frankopan, *The Silk Roads*, 14.

[25] Juvenal, *Satires III*, 58 – 65.

Mesian Forest was taken from Veii and Roman rule was advanced to the sea.[26] Florus also mentions Ancus Martius as the founder and states that the king evidently foresaw 'that it would form as it were the maritime store-house of the capital and would receive the wealth and supplies of the whole world.' [27] However, archaeological and ceramic evidence suggests that the town only became into existence in the fourth century B.C when it was founded as one of the earliest Roman colonies.[28] Besides its defensive function, Ostia's fourth-century *castrum* already functioned as an important harbour for the city of Rome.[29] In the second century B.C, the city expanded considerably due to the increasing demand for overseas corn after the Second Punic War. Initially, the islands of Sicily and Sardinia were the main sources of Rome's supply but their function as granary changed after Rome colonized the former territories of Carthage in North-Africa.[30]

However, until the first century AD Ostia was still overshadowed by the Campanian port city of Puteoli (modern Puzzuoli). Having one of the few natural harbours on the Italian peninsula, Puteoli had grown to a staggering size in the republican era. It had been the main hub for goods exported from Campania and had even provided a basis for the Alexandrian corn fleet. But as Rome economically expanded under the first emperors, Puteoli slowly declined because of its location far from the capital. Rome had never been an industrial center of importance and could not compete with the Campanian export market, but the sheer size of the imperial capital made it the largest center of import in the empire and Rome was therefore desperately in need for a harbour. Only a few hours travelling down the Tiber, Ostia was the most obvious choice.

Yet, Ostia had one major disadvantage; unless Puteoli in the south, the small town was infamous for being poorly suited for maritime traffic. It

[26] Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita I*, XXXIII.

[27] Florus, *Epitome of Roman History I*, 1, 4.

[28] Russel Meiggs, *Roman Ostia*, (Oxford 1973) 17-18.

[29] Ibidem, 23.

[30] Ibidem, 29.

lacked a natural harbour and silt from the Tiber had added to sandbars in the river mouth.[31] In 42 A.D. Claudius therefore initiated the construction of a new artificial harbor north of Ostia that would secure the grain trade with North-Africa and would make Rome economically independent from Puteoli.[32] According to Meiggs, Ostia was so intimately bound up with Rome and so vital to her economy, that it is not surprising to see imperial policy in the development of the city.[33] The new harbour, called *Portus Augusti* (meaning the harbour of Augustus'), was extended by Trajan with a second, hexagonal harbour that together with the Claudian one would now provide a basis for the large Alexandrian corn fleet, which had previously docked at Puteoli. Ostia now became not only the harbour of one of the largest consuming centres in the world, for the new harbour was connected by a canal with the Tiber, it also formed an important link between trade routes in the east and in the west. [34]

As a result of this transformation, people from all parts of the Mediterranean were pulled towards the city, allowing Ostia to become increasingly cosmopolitan in the process. This cosmopolitanism was not only confined to the poorer segments of society (the shipbuilders, traders and seasonal workers); it was also accompanied by the rise of a wealthy middle-class, for prosperous traders and businessmen now could compete in the city's government with old aristocratic families. A good example of this is found on one of the inscriptions that mentions the corn merchant P. Aufidius Fortis. According to the epigraphic evidence, Fortis was *duovir* in the later second century, at the same time being president of the corn measurers, patron of the corn merchants and councilor in Hippo Regius, Africa. [35] Another inscription states he was part of the Quirina tribe, one of the most widely distributed 'Roman tribes' in Africa.

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[31] A. Kaiser, *Roman Urban Street Networks* (New York City 2011), 107.

[32] S. Keay, M. Millet (eds), *Portus: An archeological survey of the port of Imperial Rome* (Oxford 2005) 1.

[33] Ibidem, 64.

[34] Meiggs, *Roman Ostia*, 61.

[35] CIL 14.303 and CIL 14.4621


*Image 1 Map of the excavations at Ostia Antica. Different functions are shown as different colours (see diagram).*

*Image 2. Reconstruction of Ostia in the second century AD., by Jean-Claude Golvin.*

From this information, we can assume that Fortis was a Roman citizen, native from North-Africa, who began his career as a successful corn merchant and was later rewarded with several functions within Ostian government. Perhaps it was because of his influence outside the city that Fortis was made patron of Ostia in 146 A.D., after which he organized celebratory games for three days to commemorate his dedications.[36] The story of Fortis is not the only known success-story of a migrant becoming influential in Ostian government. Countless other names suggest that the building of the imperial harbour had led to a wider representation in office of families that were not native to Ostia. [37]

After Hadrian, Ostia's fast expansion came slightly to a halt but still new temples, baths and apartments were being built. For example, the Julio-Augustan theatre was enlarged under Commodus and Septimius Severus, which suggests that the population did not shrink after the first century. Most temples and shrines dedicated to oriental deities, like Serapis, Mithras and Cybele also date from the second century.

Archeological evidence suggest a major transformation in the third century. As Portus became an important city on its own, Ostia gradually transformed from a lively port city into a more quiet, but relatively wealthy provincial town. Some buildings that had caught fire were not restored and *insulae* that had formerly served multiple households were now converted into *domus*, with slightly raised halls that functioned as receptions and (for security reasons) no windows on the outside.[38] Although some streets were being closed off for being to dirty, other parts of the city received new decorations. Several splendid nymphaea (marble water fountains), dating back to the third century, can be found throughout the city. Even during the sixth century, some small baths were built. However, in the course of the century, the aqueduct fell into disuse and people started to make wells (even in the middle of the street, like the one on the *decumanes*). After Arab

[36] Meiggs, Roman Ostia, 203.

[37] Ibidem, 203.

[38] L.B van der Meer, *Ostia Speaks*, 8.

pirates raided the city in the ninth century, and pope Gregory IV (827 – 844 AD) built a new fortress east of the city, called Gregoriopolis, the ancient city of Ostia became uninhabited. [39] [40]

### 1.3. Theorizing migration to Ostia

Quite understandably, historians have wondered with what number the population of Ostia grew in this period. However, literary evidence about the city is so scarce that classical demography often relies on intelligent guesswork. An estimation by Meiggs, based on the average area occupied per person within the Sullan Walls, gives us a number of 40.000 people in the first century, including those who lived outside the walls and at the seaside.[41] Considering the size of the Republican settlement, which constituted only a small area known as the old *castrum*, evidence suggest that Ostia underwent major population growth during the time of Augustus. In the first century BC new city walls were built which enclosed an area 30 times larger than the old walls of the *castrum*. The *castrum*'s central street (which came to be known as the *decumanus maximus*) was extended in north-west direction and large warehouses and apartment buildings were builded along the Tiber and the shore. According to Meiggs, Ostia's urban population in the early empire falls in between that of Carthage, which he estimates around 50.000 inhabitants, and that of Athens, with around 28.000 inhabitants.[42] Based on historical evidence, the mortality rate in this area of the empire was extremely high, with life expectancy from birth ranging from 20 to 25 years. High death rates were partly due to the presence of hyperendemic falciparian malaria.[43] Therefore, it is fair to say that city's growth was probably in a large part the result of migration.

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[39] Ibidem, 9.

[40] Kaiser, *Roman Urban Street Networks*, 110.

[41] Ibidem, 532-533.

[42] J.C. Russel, *Late Ancient and Medieval Population* (Philadelphia 1958) 65-83.

[43] T.L. Prowse, 'Isotopic Evidence for age-related migration to Imperial Rome', *American Journal of Physical Anthropology 132* (2007) 512.

But where did all these migrants come from and what could their motivation have been for moving to Ostia? From literary evidence we know that people chose to migrate for an array of different reasons. For example, we know that Plotinus went to Alexandria to study philosophy at the age of 27 in 232: joined the army against Persia a few years later, then came back to Antioch but went to Rome in 244/55 where he taught philosophy for 26 years. [44] But most migrant's lives are not as well documented as that of Plotinus.

One way to get a better understanding of what people motivated to migrate to Ostia is to make a comparison with Rome and look at why people moved to that city. In his Moving Romans Tacoma distinguishes different types of migration, each one characterized by another motivation.[45] Although these categorizations are primarily designed for migration to Rome, the following seven types of migration apply for Ostia and are worth mentioning here.

First of all there was migration that was motivated by trade and commerce. Although there is much evidence that suggests the place of origin of these foreign traders, it is hard to determine the extent to which they settled in the city. Because ships had to be stationed during the winter, many of these traders would only have moved temporarily. However, the mosaics at the Piazalle delle Corporazioni suggests that some settled in Ostia to act as local facilitators. These inscriptions will be discussed more thoroughly later.

Another type of migration was the forced migration of slaves. In Republican times and under Augustus wars had provided the slave market with prisoners, but in the centuries we are discussing the Roman Empire was relatively peaceful. So, where did these slaves come from? It is certain that many slaves in the first three centuries were born in captivity, because there was an active trade in the breeding of slaves for sale. The exposure of young children by their parents was also not uncommon, but there remained a part of the slave population that was imported from other areas

[44] Porphyry, *Vita Plotini*, 1-11.

[45] Tacoma, *Moving Romans*, 37.

in the empire. According to Meiggs, slave households in Ostia were probably not large. However, the largest households in Ostia still had room for more than twenty slaves.[46]

Then there were the unskilled workers who moved to Ostia to work on building sites and at the quays. Because in Italy slaves were such a big part of the labour force, there were fewer opportunities for free, unskilled people than in cities dependent on free labour. Because of this, large cities in Italy were probably less attractive for free migrants than they were in modern and medieval times.[47] Although there also seemed to be some manufactories, migrant workers mainly worked in the building and shipping industries.

There were people who moved to Ostia for educational reasons too. They were often young people, most of them in their final stage of their educational curriculum, who moved to one of the bigger cities in the empire to get educated by a house teacher or at a local school. Such stays would have normally taken about three years and considering the cost of such a trip it is not surprising that educational migrants were often part of the elite.[48] Closely intertwined with educational migrants were moving intellectuals. It seems unlikely at first sight that intellectuals would give preference to the busy port of Ostia, considering that Rome is only a few kilometers up the river Tiber. However, every reasonably sized city in the Roman Empire was home to a number of grammarians, rhetoricians, orators, writers, philosophers and lawyers, which served either as educators or could act as leading men in the administration. [49]

There were also groups of performers; actors, musicians, and poets, who earned their money by performing in the streets or in the amphitheater. Again, Rome may have been a more attractive destination for these groups of people. However, in the case of athletic competitions, Rome only formed

[46] Meiggs, *Roman Ostia*, 225-226.

[47] Noy, *Foreigners at Rome*, 88.

[48] Tacoma, *Moving Romans*, 38-39.

[49] Ibidem, 40.

a part of a four-year cycle, which makes it likely that groups of performers occasionally visited Ostia.

A more permanent type of migration was the immigration by the poor. This group likely included tax-evaders, fugitive slaves, former soldiers and prostitutes. In most cases, these urban proletarians probably migrated from the surrounding countryside, but passages in Juvenal show us that some not so reputable jobs, such as prostitution, were being done by Greek-speaking women from Syria.[50]

The last type of migration that is worth mentioning here is military migration. This category includes both soldiers that were stationed in the city and refugees fleeing from war violence. One of the best known examples of migration as a result of war are the Jews who migrated from Palestine after large parts of their ancestral land were ravaged by the Romans during the Jewish Revolt of 66.

Obviously, not every Roman migrant fell into one of these strict categorizations. In reality, some people shifted during their lifetime from one category to another migrated for a reason that is not mentioned here. Nonetheless, the scale of different reasons why people would have migrated to the city shows us that foreign immigrants must have been an important part of the urban composition.

Now that I have demonstrated that Ostia was in every sense a society of immigrants, we should return to the ancient sources and look at where these immigrants came from. There are two major types of sources that can give us a better understanding of Ostian immigrants: the first one being epigraphic material and the other one isotopic data. Both sources have been considered problematic for several reasons. Nonetheless, combing the evidence from different sources will hopefully give us more insight. I will start with discussing the evidence from the epigraphic material, after which I will proceed with discussing the possibilities and problems of isotopic research.

[50] Juvenal, *Satires III*, 58 – 65.

## 1.4. Epigraphic evidence

Used with caution, inscriptions can be used as a source of examining place of birth. However, because for Romans legal and social status seemed to be more important, ethnic identity is rarely mentioned on epitaphs. Most likely, people also wanted to claim a place in Roman social life and this often meant that they emphasized their Romanness at the expense of their local identities. But although inscriptions are often not representative of what is missing, they can exemplify or confirm an assumption which previously depended on theory, such as in the case of P. Aufidius Fortis which I mentioned earlier.[51]

Before I delve deeper into the Ostian inscriptions, we can first make a few broad statements about the origin of immigrants in the Roman Empire: Despite intercontinental trade, almost all immigrants in Rome and Ostia came from within the boundaries of the Roman Empire. The only exception here are people from client-states, such as Armenia and Nabataea, hostages and diplomats. There is, however, evidence for Parthians living in Rome, but evidence about them is scarce and almost never certain.[52] There also exists literary evidence about an Indian embassy visiting Athens during the reign of Augustus, which was accompanied by a group of monks, called *gymnosophists* (naked philosophers) by the Greeks.[53] It is therefore probable that embassies from as far as India would have visited Rome, but specific cases have not yet been found. The ivory statuette of the Indian goddess Laksmi, found in Pompeii, could point to the presence of Indian immigrants there, but these statements are ill-founded and the little idol could easily have been traded. It also seems that the majority of slaves was recruited internally, due to the high demand for slaves with a basic knowledge of Latin or Greek.

But if not from within others empires, where did Ostian immigrants originate? Tracking the paths of Ostian traders gives us more insight into

[51] Noy, *Foreigners at Rome*, 53.

[52] Tacoma, *Moving Romans*, 50.

[53] Cassius Dio, *Roman History: Book LIV*, 9.

that question. In the period of growing prosperity during the first two centuries, traders attracted the patronage of the wealthy and became part of the nouveau riches. They founded collegiae, or trading guilds: groups in which members shared a common interest and joined together for mutual benefit.[54] They cannot be confused with their medieval counterparts, because membership was not obligatory. Collegiae in Rome had a long history and were already active in Republican times, although they had come under suspicion when they were abused for political ends.[55] However, in Ostia they had never been any political danger and guilds were not confined to trades that were vital to the economy. In Ostia, collegiae almost covered every aspect of city life, from leather traders to traders in wild animals.

The most famous remnant of this tradition is the Piazzale delle Corporazioni: a large square surrounded by a peristilium, behind the Amphitheatre, in which wealthy guilds were represented by their own headquarters. In the period of Domitian, a temple was raised in the centre of the courtyard, which was probably dedicated to the god that was venerated by every group of people: the emperor. Along the walls of the peristilium are small cubicles, called *stationes*, which house the different *collegiae* (guilds), *navicularii* (shippers) and *negotiantes* (traders). Several elements of the Piazzale reflect the cosmopolitanism of the Ostian commercial trade. In the eastern porticus is a marble slab found with the inscription: '*NAVICULARI AFRICANI*', referring to the group of African shippers that was based in Ostia. A mosaic in front of *statio* 10 also shows a North-African connection, stating: *'NAVICVLARI MISVENSES HIC' (Misvenses referring to the city of Misua, near Carthage).*[56]

[54] Meiggs, *Roman Ostia*, 70.

[55] Ibidem, 311.

[56] CIL XIV, 4549, 10.

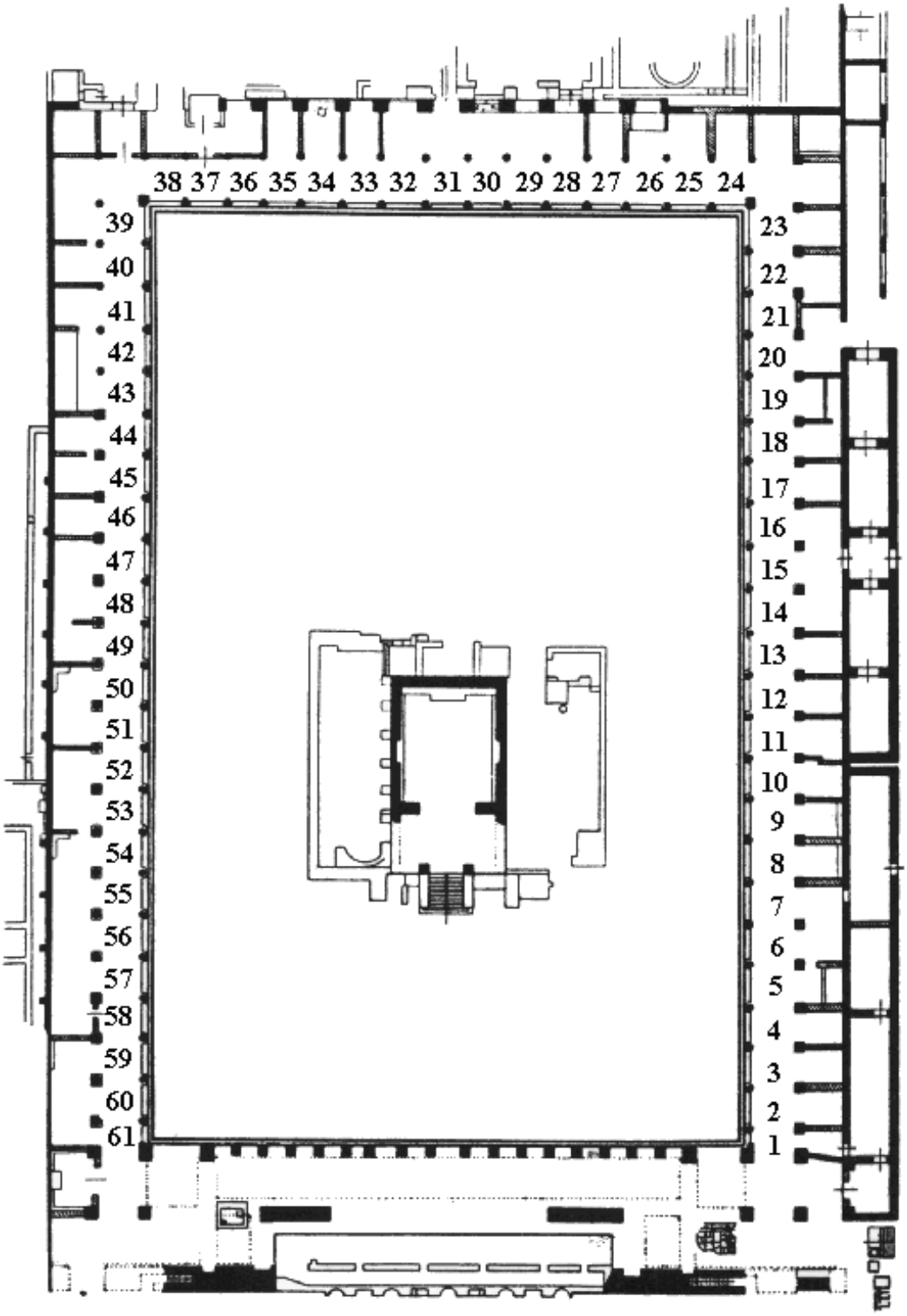


*Image 3. Plan of the Piazzale delle Corporazioni. Noticeable are the small cubicles surrounding the portico, where the various stationes were located.*

*Image 4. Photograph of one of the mosaics on the floor of a statio in the Piazzale delle Corporazioni. This specific mosaic represents the navicularii from the city of Karales in Sardinia. (CIL XIV, 4549, 21).*

The same goes for *statio* 14, dedicated to the shippers from Sabrata in Libya, who traded in wild-animals and ivory,[57] and for *statio* 17, which was the headquarters of the shippers from Gummi, also in Africa.[58] Also represented are shippers from Alexandria[59], Mauretania Caesariensis[60] and Gaul[61]. Most mosaics are dated between 190 and 200 AD and it is not impossible that many shippers belonged to Commodus' African grain fleet, which he created in 189 AD after a major food crisis. [62]

Another example of an inscription that mentions a specific geographic location was found in the underground *mithraeum* under the Baths of Mithras. At the far end of the underground temple there is a statue of the god Mithras killing a bull. On the neck of the bull is a Greek inscription that reads: *'KRITŌN ATHĒNAIOS EPOIEI' (Kriton the Athenian made [me]'*. Van der Meer suggests that Kriton may be identical to a certain Marcus Umbilius Criton, who is known from a votive marble basin found in the Mithraeum of Planta Pedis. This Criton became a freedman thanks to a senator, Marcus Umbilius Maximus, who was probably *patronus* of an Ostian guild in 192 AD. The statue of the bull is also dated to the second century AD.

One specifically memorable account of an Ostian immigrant can be found in the necropolis of Isola Sacra, which is located on the artificial island that connects Ostia with Portus:

> *'D(is) M(anibus) / C(ai) Annaei Attici Pict(ones) / Ex Aquitanica pro(vincia) def(uncti) / ann(orum) XXXVIII domestici / eius ponendum curarunt*

[57] CIL XIV, 4549, 14

[58] CIL XIV, 4549, 17

[59] CIL XIV, 4549, 40

[60] CIL XIV, 4549, 48

[61] CIL XIV, 4549, 32

[62] Van der Meer, *Ostia Speaks*, 28-31.

> *To the gods of the underworld of C. Annaeus Atticus, Pictone from the province Aquitania, who died when he was 37. His servants have taken care [that this monument] was erected.* [63]

This epitaph refers to a man, called C. Annaeus Atticus, who died when he was 37. According to his servants who erected the monument, he was a Pictone from the province of Aquitania. The Pictones were a Celtic tribe in the north of Aquitania, in the region that is now called Poitou-Charentes. Atticus could be a trader living in Ostia or Portus, but the fact that no family members are mentioned on the epitaphs and his servants erected the monument could also mean that he died while travelling. Also interesting is the tomb itself: which takes the form of a relatively small brick pyramid. More tombs with this particular form are found, but the fact that a migrant from Gaul has a tomb in the form of a pyramid shows that there is not an immediate connection between pyramid tombs and an Egyptian heritage. [64]

A rather more uncertain type of evidence can be obtained when studying the numerous graffiti that can be found across the city. Although often defaced or unreadable, the Ostian graffiti are extremely well-documented and provide scholars with an intimate and unpretentious image of what kept people busy. Of the 110 documented graffiti, 55 percent is textual, and 45 percent are drawings. Of the textual graffiti, 90 percent are in Latin and 10 percent are in Greek. Most drawings consist of images of ships, which is not surprising as Ostia was a harbour town. Although Greek graffiti most likely reflects a migrant background, there is only one case of graffiti which directly mentions the origin of an immigrant and it says: 'SVIIISAMIVS', which can be read as *Sum Samius* (I am from Samos).[65] Other graffiti mention Greek names: Hermadion, Nikephorus, Musice, Agathopus,

[63] ISIS 21 = IPOstie A.13 (tomb 1); with L.E. Tacoma, 'Bones, Stones, and Monica: Isola Sacra Revisited', Lo Cascio, E. and Tacoma, L.E. with assistance of Groen-Vallinga, M.J. (eds.), *The impact of mobility and migration in the Roman Empire* (Impact of Empire 12) (Leiden: Brill forthcoming) 141-142.

[64] Tacoma, 'Bones, Stones, and Monica: Isola Sacra Revisited', 141-142.

[65] G0371.

Epaphroditius. [66] Yet, Greek surnames, especially those who are named after characters from mythology, can also reflect freedman status. However, graffiti inscriptions are very difficult to date and scholars can only guess from what period these texts are from. They should therefore be studied with caution.

## 1.5 Isotopic evidence

Due to the problems that epigraphy entails, scholars have recently been supplementing evidence from inscriptions by findings from bio-archeological studies. In addition to historical and archeological evidence, the analysis of the oxygen and strontium isotope ratio from human tooth enamel gives historians a better understanding of human mobility. During the growth of human teeth, the diet that is consumed produces a chemical profile in the tooth enamel, which some scholars interpret as geographically specific. By comparing ratios of stable isotopes (mainly from tooth enamel) scholars argue it is possible to identify immigrants by their deviant chemical profile.[67] Besides identifying possible immigrants, isotopic studies can also analyze food consumption. Traditionally, the study of Roman diet was largely based on literary sources. Historical accounts often refer to grain as the base of the Roman diet. Yet scholars have argued that seafood and legumes must have played an equally important role. Because of isotopic research, these disputes can be clarified and we can look at what a person really ate.[68]

One of the studies that first connected isotopic research to the history of migration in the Roman Empire was the study by T.L. Prowse *et al.* In 'Isotopic evidence for age-related immigration to Imperial Rome', Prowse and her team have studied the forensic material found in Isola Sacra, which is the artificial island between the old city of Ostia and the new sea-harbour

[66] G0034, G0035, G0030.

[67] Tacoma, 'Bones, Stones, and Monica: Isola Sacra Revisited', 132-133.

[68] T.L. Prowse (ed.), 'Isotopic Paleodiet studies of skeletons from the Imperial Roman-age cemetery of Isola Sacra, Rome, Italy', *Journal of Archeological Science 31* (2004), 259.

of Portus where a necropolis is found. This necropolis was used both by people from Ostia and Portus between the first and the third century.[69] A principle conclusion in her study is that a large percentage of the population that is buried in Isola Sacra originated from somewhere else than Ostia-Portus. Of course, this has already been clear from epigraphic material, but the study of Prowse also hypothesizes that migrants most likely came from higher elevations in the east and in the north of Rome and that one of the teeth came from someone who might have come from North-Africa as a child.

Prowse and her team analyzed 61 pairs from a subsample used in their previous study. Approximately 20 milligram of tooth enamel was drilled off and then soaked in a dilution of acetic acid. According to them, roughly one third of the individuals in their sample was not born in the region around Rome where drinking water has a characteristic chemical ratio. Isotopic data also suggests that a significant minority of immigrants migrated as children. This opposes the idea that migration was predominantly confined to single adult males. Individuals with a very low value could have been from as close to 100 km from Rome, but it is also possible that some of them came from the transalpine provinces. Only one individual had a very high value, which can point to a North-African origin, such as the Nile delta. However, Prowse states that Southern Italy cannot be excluded from the list of possibilities. [70]

Although the study of Prowse opened a new discussion about using isotopic research to determine ethnic origins, some of the team's methods were criticized by other scholars. According to Christer Bruun, the evidence presented by Prowse does not automatically prove women and children migrated as part of the family. They could have come as slaves, and in some cases even as brides. He furthermore argues that isotopic studies can be useful for certain areas of study but that, when it comes to the origin of immigrants, it is almost negligible in comparison to the vivid accounts of literary sources. Without the associated inscriptions, he states, 'a study of

[69] Prowse, 'Isotopic Evidence for age-related migration to Imperial Rome', 512.

[70] Ibidem, 517-518.

skeletal materials can almost never produce firm conclusions about origin and social status'.[71] Tacoma additionally argues that determining 'foreignness' is not as straightforward as one would think. The sample produces a spectrum, in which some individuals are perceived as immigrants and some as locals. In between, however, is a group of individual of which it is uncertain in what geographic environment they grew up.[72]

## 1.6 Conclusions

This chapter has proven to be very much a cross section of Ostian society in the period of the Principate. Its main purpose was to exemplify that Ostia was above all a city that was heavily dependent on migration. Historical records tell us that port cities in the Roman Empire generally had a very mixed population. But records also reveal that Ostia was rather extraordinary in its nature. Not only was it the port of one of the largest consumer centers in the world, it also had a major position in the Mediterranean grain trade. Considering the immense diversity of people living in Ancient Rome, it must only be reasonable that Ostia as well was a place of intense cosmopolitanism.

However, because of the scattered nature of the evidence, demonstrating this cosmopolitanism required a combination of entirely different sources. Epigraphic records about migration to Ostia are in abundance, but epigraphy alone might give a distorted image. This is because epigraphy often gives you an incomplete picture of events: it only shows you what people wanted you to read. Inscriptions rarely mention ethnic identity or geographic locations, since they were a useful tool for outsiders to show their fondness with the imperial regime or the Latin culture. There are some exceptions of course that tell us about where immigrants came from. In Ostia some can be found on the floors of the Piazzale delle Corporazioni.

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[71] C. Bruun, 'Water, oxygen isotopes, and immigration to Ostia-Portus', *Journal of Roman Archeology 23* (2010), 131-132.

[72] Tacoma, 'Bones, Stones, and Monica', 135.

In recent years, isotopic studies have become increasingly popular in helping to know more about Roman migration. Among other reasons, they have been useful in analyzing the Roman diet and determining the cause of death. Some scholars argue that they can also help with identifying immigrants in a group. Analyzing the isotopic study of Prowse, I regard these type of studies as valuable contributions to the discussion, which nevertheless require very much caution when studying. However, identifying the place of origin of these skeletons is in my opinion still too difficult. To make conclusions on the basis of these studies alone would be counterproductive.

In the first paragraph of this chapter, I wrote about the Latin terms Roman used for modern day concepts of migration. It became evident that, because of the way Romans viewed migration, modern English terms do not cover the full spectrum of 'foreignness' that Romans considered real. Because of the difficulties involved with terminology, I decided to choose a very 'broad' definition of foreigner: Someone who originated from outside of Italy, but still had 'a home' somewhere else. Studying the evidence for migration to Ostia, it is now evident that, whichever definition I use, Ostia can still be considered as a major center of migration. It was home to a large spectrum of different migrants, from slaves to traders, to students, to refugees and to performers. And these only cover but a piece of the Ostian population. Combining these types of sources have showed us that migrants cannot be seen as only a segregated minority among an otherwise native population; they were in every way an integral part of the cosmopolitan society that was the city of Ostia.

# II.

## *The Cultic Landscape of Ostia*

The second chapter of this study will focus on the diverse cultic landscape of different religious communities in Ostia. Which cults can we observe in the city and how do they represent themselves symbolically? How visible are they to non-adherents and where are their temples and sanctuaries located? These questions are of key importance when finding out if religious communities played a major role in the self-identification of foreign immigrants.

## 2.1 Approaching religion in the Roman Empire

Traditionally, historians have often made the distinction between Graeco-Roman religion and – what they call – 'Oriental Cults'. This latter term was first coined in 1906 by Belgian historian Franz Cumont in his work *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*, after which it became widely used by scholars worldwide.[73] According to Giulia Sfameni Gasparro, oriental cults, within this perspective, are often defined as 'mythic-cultic systems, relating to a single deity, or, more often, to a group of interconnected deities, which arose in specific historical and cultural territories in the Mediterranean basin east of Greece as far as Iran, and which, especially from Hellenistic times, are to be found in Greece and further westward.[74] According to some scholars, these cults arose in Italy during a time in which traditional Roman religion lost its appeal. They are thought to have shared a number of characteristics, including place of origin, exclusivity and the initiation of members into 'secret mysteries', and have been seen as 'precursors of Christianity'.

More recently, it has become clear that the term 'Oriental cults' is not at all helpful for understanding the complex quantity of different religions in the Roman world. Rather than using anachronistic concepts such as an East-West axis, scholars of Roman religion should only differentiate between different cults when Romans did the same. The ancient Romans did not have a word for the religions of the east, nor did they have a word for religion in general. The Latin word *religio,* from which our modern 'religion' comes from, had a much disputed etymology but was first recorded by Cicero, where it was used to describe a strict observance of the traditional cult. It would be wrong to think that Romans saw their own beliefs as a regulated and homogeneous belief-system, such as we have today. Roman cults were

[73] M. Beard, J.A North and S.R.F Price, *Religions of Rome* (Cambridge 1998) 246.

[74] G. Sfameni Gasparro, 'Mysteries and Oriental Cults: A problem in the history of religions', J.A. North and S.R.F Price (eds), *The Religious History of the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews and Christians* (Oxford 2011), 277-278.

very much orthopraxic in nature.[75] For Romans, it was indisputable that the gods existed; the important thing was that they were worshipped in the right way. An incorrectly performed sacrifice could not only harm the person involved in the ritual, it could also endanger the state and the fortune of the Roman Empire. There were also no sacred scriptures, no priestly class, no coherent set of principles or beliefs and no moral code. In short, what we call 'the Graeco-Roman tradition' was only a loose set of related but distinct ways of thinking about interacting with the gods. [76]

However, Romans did sometimes differentiate between *sacra publica* (which we now translate as public religion) and *sacra privata* (private religion). *Sacra publica* was used for all the cults that were officially regulated by the state and that were funded by the populus from public funds. *Sacra publica* included both traditional Roman deities such as Jupiter and Minerva as well as non-Roman deities such as Magna Mater. *Sacra privata* was used for all the cults that were funded by individuals, families, clans or other groups and were not under the authority of the state. *Sacra privata* included household gods, mystery-cults and ethnic cults such as that of Jupiter Dolichenus. For Romans, there must have been little doubt whether a cult was public or private since there was a fixed number of gods in the Roman pantheon. Individuals or families were allowed to worship any other god, unless their god caused unrest in the community and the participants also recognized the divinity of the emperors. However, sacra publica and sacra private did not always function in complete separation; both were under the jurisdiction of the ius divinum, the part of Roman civil law that was concerned with religious practices. [77]

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[75] Orthopraxy is a term that is used by scholars of theology to describe the belief that correct actions are as (or more) important that correct religious beliefs. Roman religion, with its assertion on religious rituals and sacrifices, is often described as being typically orthopraxic. The antonym for orthopraxy is orthodoxy.

[76] J. B. Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire* (Oxford 2007), 52.

[77] J.T., Bakker, *Living and Working with the Gods: Studies of Evidence for Private Religion and its Material Environment in the city of Ostia* (Amsterdam 1994), 1-2

Thus, not unlike Latin terminology concerning migrants, Romans only differentiated religions based on their legal status in society, not on where they came from or how they presented themselves. Therefore, I shall try to refrain from modern terminology (such as 'oriental', 'graeco-roman' and 'pagan') when it comes to the analyzing the cults of Ostia, because I believe we should avoid thinking about them in terms of homogeneous groups of clear boundaries and - as Beard, North and Price put it so eloquently – 'think rather in terms of different religions as clusters of ideas, people and rituals, sharing some common identity across time and place, but at the same time inevitably invested with different meanings in their different contexts'. [78]

## 2.2 Origins and representation

According to Meiggs, Roman Ostia experienced a 'deep penetration by Oriental cults' from the second century forwards.[79] In the previous section, I already criticized the term 'Oriental cults'. But regardless of the terminology that is used, the idea that Ostia was heavily influenced from religions outside the cultural sphere of the Italian peninsula seems rather well-accepted. But where did these cults originate, how were they different from the cults already established in the city, and how did they represent themselves?

One of the most tantalizing – and for that, the most debated – of Ostian religion is the cult of Mithras. At least sixteen sanctuaries (or *mithraea*) for this god were discovered in Ostia alone, a few of which count as the most exquisitely decorated rooms that were unearthed in the city. Much about this mystery cult is unknown, for the source material is largely limited to archeological evidence and a few inscriptions, but we do know that members were initiated and that the cult was only practiced by men. Sanctuaries have been found all over the Roman World: in Rome and Ostia in Italy as well as in modern-day France, Germany, Switzerland Spain, Britain, Hungary, Bosnia, Romania, Israel and Syria. However, most mithraea were found along the Rhine and Danube. The cult of Mithras was probably

[78] M. Beard, J.A North and S.R.F Price, *Religions of Rome* (Cambridge 1998) 249.

[79] R. Meiggs, *Roman Ostia* (1973) 337.

first introduced in Italy by the early second century and evidence remains abundant until the third century. All sixteen of the Ostian mithraea are relatively secluded and probably resemble the cave where, according to myth, the god Mithras was born.

For many decades now, there has been a debate among ancient historians about the origins of Mithraism. Traditionally, it has been linked with the Aryan god Mithra, about which clay tablets have been found in Hattusa (modern-day Boğazkale), written in the Babylonic language. In a charter commemorating the peace between the Mittani and the Chatti, Mithra serves as one of the gods along Indra and Varuna.[80] Such charters have made historians believe that Mithra was probably the god of the truth and the covenant. In the Rigvedas, the oldest of the Vedic texts, Mithra is described to be young and wearing glistening garments. He is also believed to be lord of rivers and the sea and it is said he sends rain and refreshment from the sky. [81] However, with the spread of Hellenism and the advent of Zoroastrianism, Mithra probably lost its popularity in the east in favour of both Ahura Mazda and the traditional Greek gods.

It is only in the second century AD, that a god called Mithras makes its entrance in Italy. Its sanctuaries in Rome and Ostia all have the same lay-out; it contains a narrow (sometimes underground chamber) flanked by seats or steps on both sides. Some mithraea, such as the one in the *Terme del Mithra* include a statue of the god slaying a bull. This depiction can be seen in a large part of the mithraea worldwide and is probably a reference to its main ritual. What historians are left with is an uncertain relationship between the Roman Mithras and the Aryan Mithra. Some scholars belief that Roman legionaries brought the cult to Italy and the Limes region (perhaps from Armenia) and the Romans transformed the cult so radically that it no longer bore a relationship to its Persian predecessor at all. One thing appears to be overt, and that is that the Roman cult of Mithras can not in any

[80] M. J., Vermaseren, *De Mithrasdienst in Rome: the cult of Mithras in Rome with a summary in English* (Nijmegen 1951) 3-4, 8.

[81] A.A., MacDonell, A Vedic Reader (Oxford 1917) 78- 83, 118-199, 134.

way be regarded as Persian (or Aryan) in nature. According to Boin, this cultural hybridization is paramount for its success; in other words, Mithraism could flourish in Rome because it was practiced in a way that was familiar to Romans. [82] As a result of the lack of source material, it is unclear to us if Romans themselves considered Mithraism to be inherently foreign. Most likely, Romans who worshipped Mithras were practicing rituals that they considered to be exotic but were in reality more based on what Romans believed was Persian.

One of the cults which symbols are heavily influenced by Egyptian iconography is the cult of Serapis. Serapis had a long history of cultural hybridization; the god was originally introduced in Egypt by Ptolemy I, in order to unify the Greeks and the native Egyptians in Egypt. The name Serapis was a combination of the gods Osiris and Apis, but probably represented the god Osiris, god of the afterlife, in its full form, rather than only his *Ka*.[83] He was depicted as a typical Greek god (always with beard and sometimes with a herculanean club), but wore a headpiece that was traditional Egyptian. Much of what we know about the cult of Serapis in Italy is actually coming from Rome, where a major temple for both Isis (another Egyptian goddess where the god was associated with) and Serapis was located in the Campus Martius. Although Isis was also an inherently hybrid god (the Roman cult of Isis was much more a Greek version of the Egyptian goddess), her cult was associated with many expressions of foreignness. Her worshippers held processions, wearing – according to Romans – 'bizarre' costumes, playing Egyptian music and shaved their heads as part of a ritual.

At least one *Serapeum (*or Temple of Serapis) was found in Ostia's western quarter. Like its counterpart in Rome, it is full of symbols that represent Egypt. On the floor of the front courtyard a black and white mosaic

[82] D. Boin, *Ostia in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge 2013) 35.

[83] In Ancient Egyption mythology, the *Ka* is a life force, much like the modern concept of a soul, that differentiates the living and the dead. In Egyptian iconography, the *Ka* is often depicted as an identical image of one's self. Worshippers of Serapis believed that their god represented Osiris in its complete manifestation, including body and *Ka*.

can be found depicting a ibis. The ibis was a sacred bird in Egyptian culture and was most likely an important symbol in the cult of Serapis as well, for more approximately one and a half million mummies of the African bird are found in the Serapeum of Saqqara in Lower Egypt. It is accompanied by a mosaic of a bull, which was probably a reference to the bull-god Apis. However, despite these clear Egyptian symbols, the Serapeum in Ostia had very much the form of a traditional Graeco-Roman temple, including a naos, a pronaos and a cella. More importantly, the temple was dedicated to Jupiter Optimus Maximus Serapis and also contained a dedication to Hercules and Castor and Pollux. Hence, despite the cult's Egyptian appearance, it very much associated itself with Roman culture, equating Serapis with Jupiter and taking over Roman artistic formulas.

In the way that a foreign god such as Serapis could evoke the impression of Romanness, some indigenous cults were associated with foreignness. To illustrate this, we shall look at a specific example from during the reign of Septimius Severus. Septimius Severus was born in Leptis Magna (in modern-day Tunesia) and had both Roman as well as Libyan ancestors. Once settled in Rome, the emperor ordered the building of a massive temple on the Quirinal in honour of Liber Pater and Hercules, the second-largest ever built in Rome.[84] Both Liber Pater and Hercules had been worshipped in Rome and would not have seemed exotic or foreign by Romans. However, in this particular paring Liber Pater and Hercules were the ancestral gods of the emperor's birthplace Leptis Magna and thus must have evoked an association with Africa.

A cult that was brought to Italy neither by soldiers nor by trade, but of which its history in Ostia stretches out to much earlier times, is the cult of Magna Mater (and the cults of Attis and Bellona, with whom it is associated with). Known under many names (Magna Mater, the Great Mother, Cybele), this Phrygian mountain goddess was first introduced in Italy by the Romans themselves during the Second Punic War. Through the eyes of classical writers, the cult of Magna Mater comes across as the most exotic and bizarre

[84] M. Beard, J.A North and S.R.F Price, *Religions of Rome* (Cambridge 1998) 255.

of Roman religions. The cult was led by a caste of priests, the so-called *Galli*. These men had participated in voluntary castration – an act completely unthinkable within Roman gender-norms – which is thought to have happened once a year in March, on *Dies Sanguinis* ('Day of Blood'). Under Roman law, Roman citizens where forbidden to undergo castration, thus it is thought that the *Galli* were all *peregrini*. When having a procession the *Galli* would parade the streets in brightly coloured garments, begging for coins and dance on the music of tambourines and flutes. [85] For Romans, perhaps the most shocking aspect of the *Galli* was that they – being neither a man nor a woman – still participated in sexual activity. In doing so, the *Galli* did not only violate gender roles but also violated sexual categories; since they took the (male) active role, but used their tongue rather than their penis. For Romans, this kind of indulgence meant that you were not capable of being a full citizen. In a passage from *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia,* Valerius Maximus writes about a *Gallus* called Genucius, who was unable to inherit property because the law stated he was neither a man nor a woman.[86] According to Dionysius, the Roman state instated specific laws to prevent Romans from associating themselves with the *Galli*.

> *'But by a law and decree of the senate no native Roman walks in procession through the city arrayed in a parti-coloured robe, begging alms or escorted by flute-players, or worships the god with the Phrygian ceremonies.'* [87]

From these sources it is clear that Romans, by instating laws surrounding the cult of Magna Mater, tried to distance themselves of the Galli, who were thought of as strange. So, did the Romans know what they brought in when they personally introduced the cult in Italy? According to Orlin, the Roman state spend a year preparing the coming of the cult and considering the

[85] M. Orlin, *Foreign Cults in Rome: Creating a Roman Empire* (Oxford 2010) 102.

[86] Ibidem, 102-103.

[87] Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities II*, 19. 3-5.

effects. The goddess was furthermore incorporated into Roman religion as a public cult and, unless other foreign cults, her temple was located inside Rome's *pomerium*, or sacred border. This meant that the cult of Magna Mater was not only tolerated by the Romans, but incorporated deep into the heart of Roman religion. Thus, unless a Roman citizen aspired priesthood, the Phrygian ceremonies posed no danger to the Roman state and the cult itself was considered more or less a Roman practice. [88]

As is shown here, there was not a clear and well-defined boundary between Roman and foreign religion. Foreign cults represented themselves in diverse manners, sometimes invoking Roman and sometimes local elements. But if these clear divides – between what is Roman and what is not – are difficult to observe in Roman society, are there other ways in which roman cults were segregated? Could their location and their visibility in society say something about how their position within the religious landscape? These questions will be explored in the next section.

## 2.3 Topography and Visibility

From both literary and archeological evidence we know that the city of Ostia was home to a large variety of different cults. Yet, locating these places of worship has been immensely difficult, since many of the religious structures that were discovered are considered unidentifiable.

Even our knowledge of the most prominent cults is largely based on educated guesswork. One of such cults, and one that was worshipped continuously throughout the history of the city, was that of the god Vulcan (Latin: *Volcanus*). This god was associated with fire and metalworking, much like the Greek god Hephaestus. However, unlike Hephaestus Vulcan was much more associated with the destructive power of fire, which was maybe the reason he was so popular in the Ostia, for the city was known to have large quantities of stored grain. What we know from the cult comes mainly from literary evidence (ancient texts and inscriptions) about the festival of Vulcanalia, which was celebrated on August 23th and was often visited by

[88] Orlin, *Foreign Cults in Rome*, 102-103.

the Roman emperor. The festival must have been a very visible affair, because it is stated by Varro that 'that day the people, acting for themselves, drive their animals over a fire'.[89] This was probably a sacrificing ritual that was believed to prevent the burning of grain by the summer heat. But despite this customary festival, no temple inside the walls of Ostia was ever identified as a place of worship for Vulcan. This have led scholars to think that there was probably a temple east of the city, in an earlier settlement near the salt-beds. Historians face the same difficulties when locating a temple for the twin gods Castor and Pollux. From literary evidence, including Tertullian, we know that these patrons of sailors were an important element in the cities' religious landscape, but no temple could be identified as dedicated to Castor and Pollux. A fifth century writer states:

> *'The river dividing into two branches makes an island between the city harbour and the town of Ostia, where the Roman people with the city prefect or consul to honour the Castors with genial solemnity'.* [90]

This passage is often interpreted as evidence for the temple of Castor and Pollux being located at the opposing bank of the Tiber, on the island of Isola Sacra, making it the second prominent cult that could have been located outside the walls of the city.

From all the religious structures archeologists discovered in Ostia, the most visible places of worship in Ostia would have been the temples located at and in the vicinity of the forum. The temples dedicated to the Capitoline Triad (Jupiter, Juno and Minerva) and to Rome and the deified Augustus surround the epicenter of Ostian public life and symbolize the importance that the Roman state took in the lives of Ostian citizens. West of the forum, next to the basilica, stands an immense round building with a large forecourt, probably from the first half of the second century AD. Because of its resemblance to the pantheon in Rome, scholars have suggested this

[89] Marcus Terrentius Varro, *On the Latin Language*, VI: III.

[90] Meiggs, *Roman Ostia*, 345.

temple was dedicated to multiple gods. The scale of the building suggests a likelihood of imperial interference and it is therefore probable that the deified emperor was prominent among the worshipped gods. From the work of Minucius Felix, we know that at least one image of Serapis could be observed in the vicinity of the Marine Baths. In his Octavius, Felix describes the following scene:

> *'We agreed to go to that very pleasant city Ostia, that my body might have a soothing and appropriate remedy for drying its humours from the marine bathing, especially as the holidays of the courts at the vintage-time had released me from my cares. For at that time, after the summer days, the autumn season was tending to a milder temperature. And thus, when in the early morning we were going towards the sea along the shore (of the Tiber), that both the breathing air might gently refresh our limbs, and that the yielding sand might sink down under our easy footsteps with excessive pleasure; Caecilius, observing an image of Serapis, raised his hand to his mouth, as is the custom of the superstitious common people, and pressed a kiss on it with his lips.*[91]

Felix has made it not entirely clear what kind of image Caecilius observes while strolling along the Ostian shore. It could well have been a statue (or perhaps a statuette), seeing that Felix does not mention him going inside a temple. It is in any way apparent that, unlike the Serapeum, the image described in Octavia was located outside of Ostia's city walls.

Another cult that would have been very prominent, both topographically and in terms of visibility, was the cult of Magna Mater. Her temple was located at a large square (nowadays called Campo della Magna Mater), very close to the Porta Laurentina. It is accompanied by a chapel dedicated to her consort Attis and a small temple dedicated to Bellona, goddess of war. Furthermore there is a small guildhouse for the *dendrophori* (the tree-bearers of Cybele who carried the sacred pine-trees) and a *fossa suinguinis;* a 'trench of blood'. This Trench of Blood was a small pit that was

[91] Minucius Felix, *Octavia*, II.

built into the Porta Laurentina and that was used for the ritual blood-baptism, where a person was standing under a wooden platforms with holes where a bull was sacrificed. In doing-so, the strength of the bull was transferred to the worshipper.[92] The ritual has been described in a fourth-century text by the Christian poet Prudentius.

> *'(...) Over this they make a wooden floor with wide spaces, woven of planks with an open mesh; they then divide or bore the area and repeatedly pierce the wood with a pointed tool that it may appear full of small holes. Hither a huge bull, fierce and shaggy in appearance, is led, bound with flowery garlands about its flanks, and with its horns sheathed; Yea, the forehead of the victim sparkles with gold, and the flash of metal plates colours its hair. Here, as is ordained, the beast is to be slain, and they pierce its breast with a sacred spear; the gaping wound emits a wave of hot blood, and the smoking river flows into the woven structure beneath it and surges wide. Then by the many paths of the thousand openings in the lattice the falling shower rains down a foul dew, which the priest buried within catches, putting his shameful head under all the drops, defiled both in his clothing and in all his body. Yea, he throws back his face, he puts his cheeks in the way of the blood, he puts under it his ears and lips, he interposes his nostrils, he washes his very eyes with the fluid, nor does he even spare his throat but moistens his tongue, until he actually drinks the dark gore.*[93]

Recently scholars have criticized the use of this text to illustrate the ritual of *taurobolium*[94], because it was written with the purpose to criticize non-Christian religious practices. Therefore, Prudentius might have made his description of the sacrifice much eerier than it was in reality. Also, the text from Peristephanon was written in the fourth century, whereas texts from earlier centuries present us with a less extravagant ritual. However, the text

[92] Van der Meer, *Ostia Speaks*, 98-99.

[93] Prudentius, *Peristephanon X*, 101: 1-5.

[94] The term *taurobolium* refers to the ritual sacrifice of a bull. The practice originated in Asia Minor and was associated with multiple deities. However, from the second century forwards the *taurobolium* became connected with the worship of Magna Mater.

unmistakably corresponds with the archeological evidence from Campo della Magna Mater and, whether or not the ritual exactly resembles the ritual in earlier centuries, it had certainly been a spectacle that must have attracted many people. In terms of visibility, the ritual also adds up with the unhidden processions that were led by the *Galli*.

Like the cult of the Great Mother, the cult of Mithras can be considered a ubiquity in Ostian society. However, unlike worshippers of Magna Mater, the followers of this cult wished to stay secluded. As described previously, there have been discovered sixteen *mithraea* in Ostia, all of them from the period between 160 and 250 AD. According to Lauechli, the cult seemed to have spread from the south-western part of the city, from the same area as the Campo della Magna Mater.[95] There also seemed to be a complete lack of patterning when it comes to the *mithraea.*

This can be explained in two different ways; either the mithraea are distributed evenly throughout the city to make them harder to find – which would fit-in with its reputation of a mystery cult - or each mithraeum served as some sort of Mithraic parish, getting most of their members from people in the neighborhood. Striking arguments can be given for both explanations. For one, three mithraea are located in the eastern-end of the city, a neighbourhood where resident population appears to be small. The Porta Romana mithraeum is surrounded on three sides by warehouses, shops and baths. The mithraea might be placed here because the area would be largely deserted at the time of use. However, it could also be that these sanctuaries were used at the time when the area was most busy, directing the attention towards the labourers and dockworkers. [96] However, when studying the architectural form of the mithraea, one has to conclude that would only be space for twenty to fourty people at once. This has led scholars to believe

[95] S. Laeuchli, *Mithraism in Ostia: mystery religion and Christianity in the ancient port of Rome* (Evanston 1967) 10-11, 22.

[96] Laeuchli, *Mithraism in Ostia*, 23, 33.

that when a mithraic community grew too large, a new mithreum was founded in a different part of the city. [97]

Another strange aspect of the geography of mithraea is the fact that many sanctuaries were located in buildings that were originally set up for something else. The best example of this is the *Mitreo delle Terme del Mitra*; a sanctuary for Mithras underneath a prominent bathing complex. Another mithraeum, the *Mitreo delle Sette Porte,* is located inside a *horrea* (or warehouse). Whether this was because of economic reasons or to hide the cult's activities is difficult to say.

Many of the cult places that were used by Jews and Christians (in their earliest phase) seem to be secluded in a similar way. Like almost all major port cities in the Roman Empire, Ostia had a large number of Jewish residents among its population. A synagogue –the oldest discovered in the Europe – has been excavated on the outskirts of the town, near the ancient beach. According to A. Runesson, the location of the synagogue cannot be solely explained by a bad political relationship between the Romans and the Jews. There is no direct evidence for any such hostilities in Ostia. More likely, the location near the coast was linked to the cleansing ritual of the Ostian Jews. A number of sources, such as Philo, Josephus and the collective body of Jewish laws known as the halakha, we know that seawater was used with ritual cleansing. As a consequence, the synagogue would be built near the beach as a convenience. Furthermore, it was possible that some Jews did not want to worship their god within the Ostian city walls because they believed gentiles were 'unclean' because of their idol worship.[98] It is not impossible that there were more synagogues in Ostia, for epigraphic sources mention around eleven synagogues in Rome. Either the rest of the Ostian synagogues have been destroyed or buried under sand or most Jewish migrants directly

[97] J. T. Bakker, Living and Working with the Gods: Studies of Evidence and its Material Environment in the city of Ostia (Amsterdam 1994) 204-205.

[98] A. Runesson, 'The Synagogue of Ancient Ostia: the Building and its History from the First to the Fifth Century', B. Olsson, D. Mitternacht, O. Brandt (eds.), *The Synagogue of Ancient Ostia and the Jews of Rome: Interdisciplinary studies* (Uppsala 2011), 37.

moved to Rome, where there seems to have existed a more lively Jewish community.

Apart from important political disputes, many Romans carried a bias against Jews that had a very strong religious base. Contrary to all Roman customs, the god of the Jews was an iconic and transcendent: it was invisible and could not be compared to anything that existed. This transcendence made it extremely hard to understand for adherents of polytheism, for it was almost incomprehensible to the average Roman. If the Jewish god had no human form and did not intervene in their daily lives, it was apparent that it did not exist at all, their argumentation went. For this reason, the Jews were often accused of being atheists.[99] However, we have to be cautious to apply anachronisms about antisemitism since tensions between Romans and Jews were not based on racial superiority. Similar charges of atheism were also levelled against Stoics and Epicureans, whose views on divinity were equally unconventional for polytheist believers. Aversions against Jewish culture can rather be seen as part of a Roman feeling of cultural superiority, mixed with the ancient tendency towards xenophobia.

Like sanctuaries for Mithras, Christian churches could also have been located in buildings that were used for something else. The best example we have for this are the house-churches, simple meeting places in one of the member's apartments. These house-churching were most likely used to avoid persecution from the Roman authorities.[100] This may have been the reason for the fact that there is no evidence of a Christian community in Ostia before the fourth century. However, this secrecy, which had stemmed from persecution, again fueled more hostility to worshippers of the Christian faith. In Octavius, an early writing by Minucius Felix in defense of Christianity, one of the characters (a pagan by the name of Caecilius Natalis) accuses Christians of Christians 'lurking in hidden places' and 'shunning the light'. He furthermore argues that they '(...) are speechless in public but

[99] Bezalel Bar-Kochva, *The Image of the Jews in Greek Literature: The Hellenistic Period* (Berkeley 2010) 509.

[100] Beards (ed.), *Religions of Rome*, 267.

gabble away in corners'. Similar prejudices are also being articulated against the Jews.

Although more than half of the temples that were discovered in Ostia are still nameless, our current evidence suggests that the traditional Roman cults still dominated the religious landscape in the early empire. In the course of the first century, other (non-Roman) cults were becoming increasingly popular, but it seems improbable that these new cults ever posed a serious threat to the existence of traditional Roman religion.[101] These non-traditional cults were, however, extremely numerous in virtually every part of ancient Ostia and some of them, like the cult of Magna Mater and the cult of the Egyptian gods, must have been prominently visible to all residents of the city. Other cults, like that of Mithras, were less visible in the religious landscape and were more secluded in their activities. In the case of Mithraism, this seclusion seems consistent with their reputation as a mystery cult. In the case of Judaism and Christianity, it is very hard to determine whether or not they lived in relative isolation from the rest of the population. The geography of the discovered synagogue provides us with not enough evidence to suggest Jews in the city were in any way segregated. In the case of early Christianity; the complete lack of Christian evidence suggests that Christians were probably hesitant to publicly come forward as a worshipper of Christ. On the other hand, the fact that Roman authors wrote about them is proof that they were noticed.

## 2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I made an attempt to map the cultic landscape of Ostia, locating its major religious cults and exploring their origins. Additionally, I observed the way in which a cult represented itself and its degree of visibility to the rest of society.

I began with defining what I considered to be 'religion' and elaborated on the concept of 'oriental cults'. It became increasingly clear that using concepts such as the East-West axis would limit this study remarkably, for

[101] Meiggs, *Roman Ostia*, 337.

the reason that this concept is highly anachronistic. Hence, I have tried to analyze the cults that were previously grouped together under the umbrella of 'Oriental' and tried to find what they have in common. What I uncovered was that the cults that I have discussed all exemplify the enormous and unbounded fluidity of Roman religion. These religious groups were by no means the only newcomers, but are used here to demonstrate a much more important thought, namely; that cults that are often called 'Oriental cults' show in fact a substantial heterogeneity in terms of symbolism, Romanization and acknowledgement.

Oftentimes, religion in the Roman Empire is simplified, at the expense of a complex and nuanced explanation. As is shown here, there was not a clear and well-defined boundary between Roman and foreign religion. Foreign cults represented themselves in vastly different manners; sometimes invoking Roman and sometimes local elements. It has also become clear that these 'new cults' cannot be seen as part of a distinct subculture of Ostian society. As is apparent from studying the cults of Mithras, Magna Mater, Isis and Serapis, new cults had the power to equate traditional cults in terms of popularity and visibility.

# III.

## *Linking the two landscapes: Cult membership, exclusivity and migrant cults*

In the previous section of this study, I elucidated the complex landscape of different religious cults that existed in Imperial Ostia. But to further investigate if foreign immigrants in Ostia used their membership of a specific religious cult to construct their identity, we must ask ourselves the question: can we identify the people who followed these cults and may these cults have been acting as a community for its followers?

## 3.1 Membership and initiation

Since most of what we know about these cults comes from the writings of those who criticized them, it should not come as a surprise that answering this question is hugely challenging. Only from some of the cults in the Roman Empire, lists of names of the cult members have been discovered. And even when analyzing these forms of primary sources, scholars face many challenges.

When discussing Roman cults, scholars often make use of the term 'members' to refer to the ones that make dedications to a certain cult. Whereas the evidence indicates that participants of some cults, such as Christianity and Mithraism, likely saw themselves as a distinct member of a group, the term automatically implies that all people associating with which a cult were automatically active participants in a ritualistic organization. Correspondingly, scholars must be aware in what context they use such terms. Likewise, the term 'initiation' demands similar nuancing. The ritual of initiation, or conversion, can be observed in almost all cultures, although in different forms, and has been analyzed by many generations of scholars. Until recently, scholarly definitions of these terms were often based on the influential concept of religious conversion by the English classicist Arthur D. Nock. In his 'Conversion: The old and the new in religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo' Nock gives a clear definition of what he thinks conversion entails: '[Conversion is] a re-orientation of the soul, a deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right'. [102] Nock's definition applies both strict exclusivity ('that the old was wrong') as a radical change of mindset with the initiand ('re-orientation of the soul'). Due to the renewed interest in personal religious experiences, scholars have recently began to review this definition in favor of one that recognizes the inclusivity of ancient Roman mystery cults. Furthermore, there is a tendency to prefer the terms initiation

[102] A.D. Nock, *Conversion: The old and the new in religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford 1933) 7.

and adhesion when discussing mystery cults and conversion when discussing Christianity and Judaism. Unlike earlier scholars, such as Cumont, Nock saw a great difference between conversion to monotheistic religions of the empire and other Graeco-Roman cults.[103] New studies on religion in antiquity tend to recognize less of a distinction between conversion to Christianity and Judaism and to conversion to one of the so-called 'mystery cults'. Scholars are now exploring different facets of this phenomenon, approaching Christianity as one among other religions in Roman antiquity and seeing conversion with each religion in its own context. [104]

Of course, not even all Roman cults demanded initiation. There seems to be a degree in how accessible a cult appeared to its followers. Some cults demanded a complete moral shift, whereas with others (such as the gods within the traditional Roman pantheon), followers could simply associate themselves.

The third-century mithraeum of Felicissimus in the south-eastern part of the city can give us a glimpse of the social life within the cult of Mithras, for on the sanctuary's floor a mosaic can be seen, depicting the seven grades of initiation. The mosaics are presented as part of a ladder, which would likely have been used as a metaphor for reaching the divine. [105]From literary sources we know the names that were used for the different grades and the planet with which they were associated.

| | |
|---|---|
| *Corax* ('Raven'): | Depicted with a bird, a cup and a herald staff. Associated with the planet Mercury. |

[103] B. Secher Bøgh (ed.), *Conversion and Initiation in Antiquity: Shifting Identities – Creating Change* (Frankfurt Am Main 2014), 10.

[104] Bøgh (ed.), *Conversion and Initiation in Antiquity*, 9-10.

[105] Van der Meer, *Ostia Speaks*, 104.

| | |
|---|---|
| *Nymphus* ('Male bride'): | ('Male bride'): Depicted with a diadem, a lamp [and a missing symbol]. Associated with Venus |
| *Miles* ('Soldier'): | Depicted with a lance, helmet and soldier's dress. Associated with Mars. |
| *Leo* ('Lion'): | Depicted with a thunderbolt a *sistrum* (or Isis-rattle) and a fire-shovel. Associated with Jupiter. |
| *Perses* ('Persian'): | Depicted with a moon-sickle, a scythe and a star. Associated with the Moon. |
| *Heliodromus* ('Sun-runner'): | Depicted with a whip, a crown and a torch. Associated with the Sun. |
| *Pater* ('Father)': | Depicted with a sickle, a cap, a staff and a bowl. Associated with Saturn. [106] |

Apart from its metaphoric meaning, the ladder of initiatory grades also defined an individual's rank within the cult. The first three grades were probably preparatory and did not imply full membership. According to Beard, North and Price, the 'Lion' was the crucial grade in which an individual became a true member of the cult. [107] The most important member was the *pater* (or father). From inscriptions we know that the most important pater of the city was called the *pater partum*. The benches on which the members sit during rituals are also divided in two sections, probably dividing the first three grades from the 'full members'. It is therefore clear that the social structure of Mithras cults, from the lowest of the 'Ravens' to the most important *pater partum,* was to a large extent based on authority. However, according to some scholars, this was by no means a radical withdrawal from the reality of Roman social life.

[106] Van der Meer, *Ostia Speaks*, 104-105.

[107] Beard (ed.), *Religions of Rome*, 288.

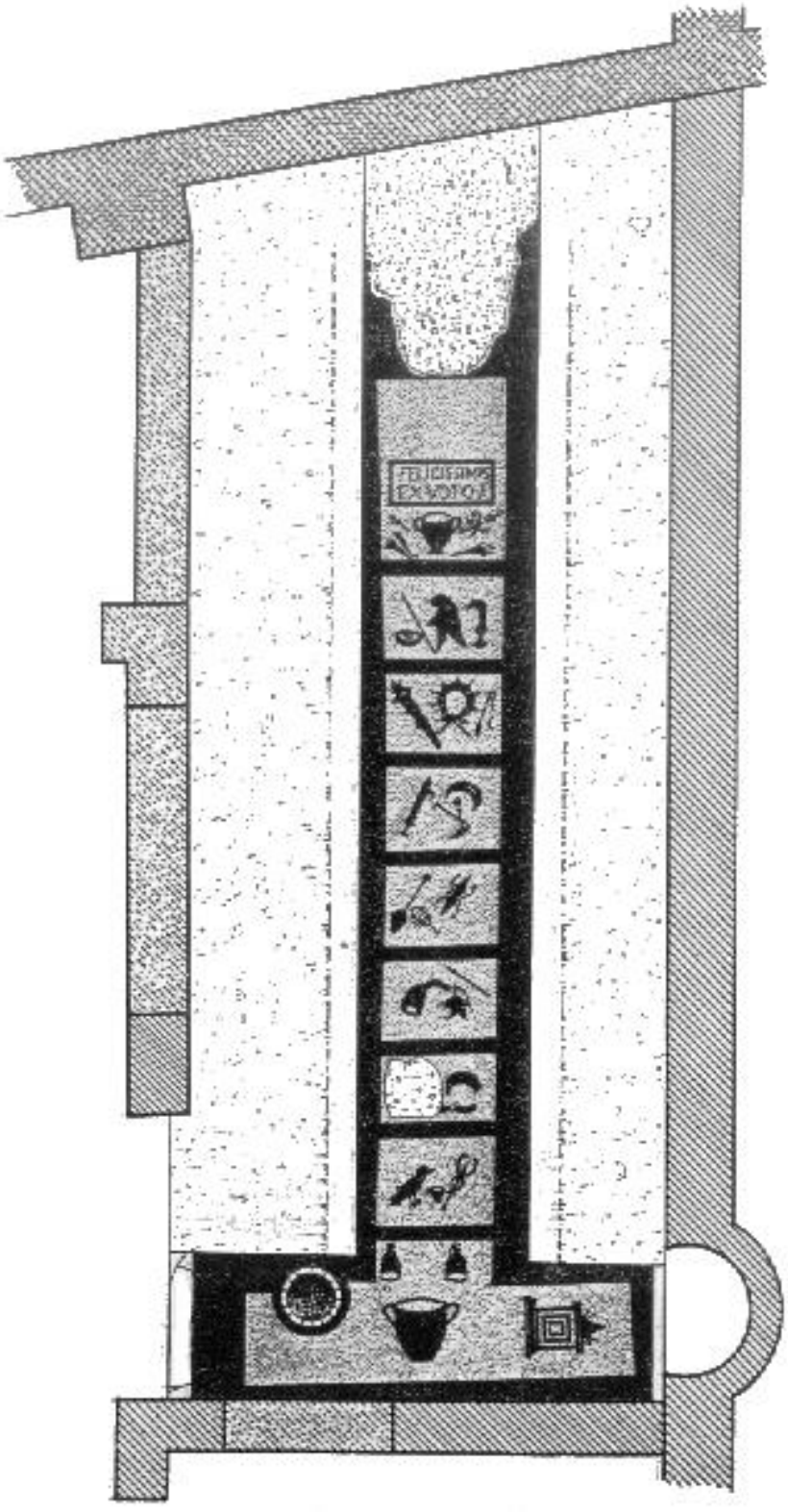

*Image 5. Plan of the Mitreo di Felicissimus, located in Insula IX, Regio V, Ostia. Notice the mosaic floor with every mosaic representing one grade of the Mithraic hierarchy. In the back, an inscription mentions the name of the person who financed the shrine. 'FELICISSIMUS EX VOTO F(ecit)'.*

*Image 6. Photograph of the mosaics at the Mitreo di Felicissimus. Clearly visible is the mosaic of the raven, which references the grade of corax. Photograph by Jan Theo Bakker.*

Bakker theorizes that many members would never reach the top of the hierarchical pyramid and that important figures of society outside the mithraeum were likely to be important figures inside. To quote Bakker: 'It was the genius of this urbanized, Roman Mithraism to offer a man a new life by leaving him right where he was'. [108]

When analyzing the social framework of this cult, it is not difficult to make comparisons with some fraternity organizations in modern-day Europe and America, many of which share a component of secrecy, single-sex membership, hierarchy and initiation, with the ancient cult of Mithras. And when comparing these two types of associations, it becomes increasingly clear that the specific characteristics of the Mithraic community might have allowed their members to share a deep connection with each other and with the cult. However, surprisingly some of the excavated *mithraea* has led scholars to believe that the cult of Mithras too, occasionally allowed the worship of other deities. For example, in the *mithraeum* under the church of S. Prisca, the heads of Serapis, Venus and (perhaps) Mars were discovered. In addition, many dedications to the god Mithras mention the well-being of the emperor.

But who were these men who chose initiation into the cult? It has been suggested that most of the members were drawn the lower strata of Ostian society; namely the dock and warehouse workers, but this is largely based on the location of the *mithraea*. Epigraphic evidence does now mention any members from the senatorial class. Typical slave names are mentioned in sources from both elsewhere in Italy and in the Danube region, but in Ostia not enough 'slave names' are documented to regard the cult as a 'slave cult'. [109] There is also no evidence that membership was mainly drawn from migrants. Typical Greek and other Eastern-Mediterranean names were recorded, but are not a majority. Consequently, all the available evidence suggests that the bulk of people that worshipped

[108] Bakker, *Living and Working with the Gods*, 205-206.

[109] Ibidem, 117.

Mithras were Roman men from different social classes – free, freedmen and slave – and from various different backgrounds.

Another cult that is often described as having been alluring to the lower stratum of Roman society is the Egyptian cult of Isis. A sanctuary for Isis (or *Isaeum*) has not yet been found in Ostia, but on the basis of epigraphic evidence scholars believe there may have been one on Isola Sacra, where multiple inscriptions concerning the goddess were found. According to Takacs, the idea that only underprivileged Romans worshipped Isis is a misconception, which is based on the false idea that, like the cult of Bacchus, the cult of Isis provided people who lacked 'the prized Hellenized mind' with a uncomplicated, but exotic belief-system. [110] Previously, the scholars have credited traders and custom officials (mainly slaves and freedmen) as the earliest members of the Isis cult. This is largely because most of the sanctuaries for Isis were found along the trade-routes. More recently, epigraphic and literary sources have provided us with a new image; that of a broader membership, including all kinds of people - women, children, slaves, freedmen, traders, veterans, soldiers and even members of the imperial family.

And despite its diverse group of worshippers, religious identity was much more commonly paraded than for instance with Mithraism. From Plutarch's Moralia we know that some Isaic worshippers shaved their heads and wore linen clothing, presumably for religious reasons and to show the world their connection to the cult. [111]It is also thought that worshippers of Isis would have followed a strict set of rules or restrictions, which prevented them from eating certain types of food and engage in certain activities. Plutarch states that:

> *'He [Typhon, the enemy of Isis] tears to pieces and scatters to the winds the sacred writings, which the goddess collects and puts together and gives into the keeping of those that are initiated into the holy rites, since this*

[110] S.A Takacs, *Isis and Serapis in the Roman World* (Leiden 1995) 1-4.

[111] Plutarch, *Moralia*, 352b-e.

> *consecration, by a strict regimen and by abstinence from many kinds of food and from the lusts of the flesh, curtails licentiousness and the love of pleasure, and induces a habit of patient submission to the stern and rigorous services in shrines (...)'*[112]

From this passage it becomes clear that the cult of Isis consisted of much more than only bring offerings to the goddess' statue. According to Plutarch, it is accompanied with 'a strict regimen', which even restricts 'the lusts of the flesh'. From the works of Apuleius we can learn more about these rules of behaviour. In *Metamorphoses* (which is the only Latin novel to have survived intact from Ancient Rome), an experiment with magic transforms the protagonist Lucius into a donkey. This leads him on a journey, ultimately finding the cult of Isis, where after he becomes a worshipper.

> *And I should, as the priests did, abstain from unholy and forbidden foods, so as to enter more deeply into the secret mysteries of the purest of faiths.*[113]

Later in the story, Lucius stays at the Temple of Isis:

> *'I stayed at the temple a few days longer, enjoying the ineffable pleasure of gazing on the Goddess's sacred image, bound to her by an act of beneficence I could never repay. But finally, as instructed by her, for it was only with immense difficulty that I could sever the ties born of my fervent longing for her, I paid my debts of gratitude at last, in accordance with my small means if not in full, and began to prepare for my journey home. I ended my stay by prostrating myself before her, washing the Goddess' feet with my welling tears, as I prayed to her, gulping my words, my voice broken by repeated sobbing.'*[114]

[112] Ibidem, 352b-e.

[113] Apuleius, *Metamorphoses IX*, 20-23.

[114] Ibidem, 24-27.

Despite *Metamorphoses* being a work of fiction, these passages provide us with a beautiful illustration of how the cult was viewed in the Roman world. Together with the passage from Plutarch, these texts make us believe that Isiac initiates were supposed to devote their whole life to the Egyptian goddess.[115]

Despite that, the cult of Isis also incorporated other deities in their rituals and the Isiac hymns that are preserved on inscriptions praised her as responsible for the whole Graeco-Roman pantheon. According to the worshippers of Isis, the goddess had many other names and was essentially the same deity as Venus, Minerva and Magna Mater. Furthermore, many Isiac temples (such as the one in Pompeii) included images of other deities, in the case of Pompeii statues of Dionysius and Venus. Rather than having worshipped these deities with equal devotion, Isiac worshippers probably placed the goddess Isis above the rest of the pantheon, parading her as superior.[116]

Most Christian communities too had a specific procedure for initiates. Before a new member was to be baptized, he or she first had to go through a transitional phase, which could last for up to three years. People in this position were called *catechumeni* (or 'the ones being instructed'). Christianity in particular had a strong sense of group identity. It was the only religious group (apart from the Jews) that practiced charity towards their own members and only Christians and Jews had their own, secluded cemeteries. From the fourth century onwards, Christians even had their own term to designate non-believers. The word 'pagan' comes from Latin *paganus* and carries pejorative associations with country-dwellers; a reminder that Christians were overwhelmingly concentrated in towns.[117] Far more than other cults in Ostia, the Christian cult laid far greater stress on its internal organization. Like other towns, the Christian community in Ostia would have been administered by a bishop. Although, in the first to third

[115] Beard (ed.), *Religions of Rome*, 289.

[116] Ibidem, 281.

[117] Beard (ed.), Religions of Rome, 302.

century the Roman episcopate did not yet have strong authority over other towns in the Roman Empire, the bishop of Rome would in some cases have acted as adviser to other churches, as well as arbiter in matter of church discipline.

But to what degree where Jews and Christians socially separated in the time of the Principate? According to Shaye J.D. Cohen, the available evidence supports the view of two separated communities (of Christian gentiles and non-Christian Jews) by the early second century AD. From that time onwards, literary texts from both Christian and Jewish sources point to a separation in identity, rituals, institutions, authority figures and literature. However, this seems to have been more of a process than a swift transformation. It is thought that Christians adopted a variety of different positions towards the Jewish way of life. Come Christians underwent circumcision and adhered other Jewish laws. The ones who rejected Judaism were nonetheless were much indebted to Jewish thought. [118] Marcion of Sinope, who taught in Rome in the early second century, argued that there were in fact two gods: a good but distant god and an inferior, creator god. Marcion identified the latter god with the god of the Old Testament and stated this god was subject to passions and was perhaps partly evil. Therefore, the Old Testament could not be reconciled with the New Testament and had to be rejected completely. Although Marcion was a very controversial figure with the Christian church, his teachings exemplify the theological diversity within the early Christian communities. Apart from the discussion whether Christians should embrace the laws of the New Testament, some Christians were concerned about how much they should borrow from traditional Roman thought. There were some who argued that philosophical logic should be applied to the interpretation of the Bible. Others incorporated more specific Roman rituals: there were Christians who held that they could eat sacrificial meat without being corrupted. A Christian group called the 'Naassenes' went further and argued that the mysteries of Attis contained part of the divine

[118] Ibidem,, 310.

message. Without castrating themselves, they attended the rituals of Magna Mater. [119]

### 3.2 Migrant cults

In the previous sections of this study, I have elucidated that many scholars believe that Roman migrants, as by some natural law, perpetually brought their own religious cults from their homeland and set up new religious communities in the towns they arrived in. Although I have shown that indeed many cults in Ostia were in fact brought to the city by means of migration (port cities such as Ostia and Puteoli do show a staggering amount of different foreign cults), this does not mean that there existed such a thing as 'migrant cults': meaning cults that were only followed by migrants, and in which the origin of the god overlapped with the ethnic identity of the members. [120] According to Tacoma the 'idea of a prominent presence of migrant cults is based on a modern model of the way ethnically strongly segregated churches function in some present-day societies, often forming the main institutional gateway into the host society.' Thus, this might be an anachronistic concept and might not be automatically applicable to ancient Roman society. [121]

Although it appears that there was no prominent cult in Ostia that can be described as a predominant migrant cult, the idea of the existence of such a cult is not entirely unthinkable. In Portus, a dedication to Jupiter Dolichenus was found that was made by the crew of a ship. The name of the god reveals both its origin (the town of Doliche in Northern-Syria) as well as the Roman god which it was associated with (Jupiter, or the Syrian Ba'al).[122] But although the cult is often described as the quintessential migrant cult, this type of exclusivity proofs to be controversial when analyzing epigraphic

[119] Ibidem, 309-311.

[120] L.E Tacoma, *Moving Romans*, 223-224.

[121] Ibidem, 224.

[122] CIL 14,00110

material.[123] While tracing someone's place of birth is very difficult on the basis of their name, the lists of worshippers that were discovered do not include only Greek and Aramaic names among the members of this cult. Some names, such as Aturmarurius, can even be considered Celtic in origin. It thus seems that people with a non-Italic background played a large role in the cult. Some cults even identified with one specific geographic location, with some participants, such as the *Galli* or the Isaic worshippers, actively showcasing foreign manners and rituals. Could any of these Roman cults, whether they congregated in Ostia or in Rome, can be defined strictly as a migrant cult?

One of the best candidates for this concept is a cult that historians have encountered in the imperial capital. Just across the Tiber in the district of Trans Tiberim (what is now Trastevere), historians have found Aramaic dedications to the gods of Palmyra. This district of Rome was most likely home to a large group of Syrian migrants, who spoke a Palmyrene dialect of the Aramaic language and worked chiefly in the warehouses along the river, where they were involved with trade. Interestingly, many of the inscriptions that were found – mainly dedications to the gods of Palmyra – are written in both Latin as well as Aramaic.

> *Latin:*
> (This monument) is consecrated to the most holy sun. Tiberius Claudius Felix, Claudia Helpis and their son, Tiberius Claudius Alypus, who live in the third courtyard of the apartment house in the Galbian complex, gratefully (offer this) in fulfillment of a vow to (the Sun) who has earned it. [124]

> *Aramaic:*
> This is the altar (which) Tiberius Claudius Felix and the Palmyrenes offered to Malakbel and the gods of Palmyra. To the gods. Peace! [125]

[123] L.E Tacoma, *Moving Romans*, 230.

[124] CIL IV 710

[125] CIS II 3903

Where the first, Latin, inscription mentions the whole family of the dedicator, the Aramaic inscription only mentions Tiberius Claudius Felix himself. And where the second, Aramaic, inscription mentions the god Malakbel as well as 'the gods of Palmyra', the Latin inscription translates the names of these gods simply to 'the Sun'. In Bilingualism and the Latin Language J.N Adams gives an exquisite interpretation of this dedication:

> *The drafter gave different types of information to the different categories of readers. There is no other bilingual inscription discussed in the present book in which this is more clearly the case. He presented the participants in the dedication as Palmyrenes only in the Palmyrene version, and did not complicate the Latin version with a reference to 'Palmyrene gods' which might have been lost on local readers. On the other hand the reference to local topography (Calbiensesdecoh.III), which will have been immediately comprehensible to Roman readers from the quarter, and which no doubt had the effect of giving the referents a local identity and roots, is found only in the Latin version. They are locals in the Latin version, outsiders in the Palmyrene, and of mixed identity to those bilinguals who could read both versions. The absence of any attempt to render a formula of one language into the other displays an awareness that idioms or formulae of one language are not necessarily translatable word for word into another language. It goes without saying that the main dedicator was bilingual. He shows an attachment to his roots, but also clear signs of acculturation (notably his complete Aramaic adoption of a Latin name). It is possible that the Palmyrene language had some role in the cult.* [126]

Unfortunately, not much is known about the members of this particular cult. Yet, the reference to local topography ('Calbiensesdecoh.III') indicates that more than only ethnic identity played a role in the formation of this cult. It is believed that *Calbienses* referred to the imperial warehouses along the river (called *horrea Galbana*) but is unknown what the rest of the term

[126] J.N Adams, *Bilingualism and the Latin Language* (Cambridge 2003), 250.

stands for. Either the place refers to the living quarters of the local warehouse, or to a common workplace. To quote MacMullen on this:

> *'They were all workers in one or another courtyard of the warehouse. Where the altar was found, thirty odd dedications define the place as a shrine to eastern worships; Syrian, Arabian, Lebanese. The texts are in Latin, Greek, and Palmyrene, the latter suiting the district's community of that language. The whole of this vast Regio of the city was largely from the eastern Mediterranean.'*

The place where these dedications were found is thus defined by the worship of all kinds of gods (Syrian, Arabian and Lebanese). Furthermore, they are written in multiple languages, which contain different pieces of information. Besides appealing to people who identify as ethnic Palmyrenes, the dedication might also affirm a local identity; that of residents (or workers) of the *horrea Galbana*. Taking this in account, it is not unthinkable that religious cults in which foreign symbols played a major role attracted not only people from one ethnic group, but also drew their members from their neighbourhood or district.

This approach is also represented in a study by Philip A. Harland. In *Dynamics of Identity in the World of Early Christians* Harland explores concepts of identity and association in the light of early Christians in the Roman Empire. Much like the cult of the Palmyrenes, the communities of Jews and early Christians are often seen by scholars as sects that only drew their members from one ethnic group, in their case ethnic Jews. According to Harland, early Christian communities, as well as other cults in the Roman Empire, can best be understood in the context of voluntary associations. The term voluntary association describes 'social groupings in antiquity that shared certain characteristics and (...) were often recognized as analogous groups by people and by governmental institutions'. [127] Associations

[127] P.A. Harland, *Dynamics of Identity in the World of Early Christians* (New York City 2009), 25-26.

participated in a range of activities and almost all of them were in a sense religious. Most of them honoured the gods through ritual, such as sacrifice and the accompanying meal.

When analyzing the formation and growth of such associations, several social networks can be noticeable. These networks were often overlapping, but some associations drew their membership particularly from one of the other. First, family networks could play a major role in membership of associations. In Roman antiquity, this network encompassed far greater set of relations than it does today. One's *familia* could consist of both biological family members, as well as servants, freedmen and servile dependents. Another important network that could play a role in the formation of associations was the web of neighborhood relations. There are several examples of associations in Asia Minor that drew their members from one neighborhood or district. The reference to the *horrea Galbana* in the dedication of Tiberius Claudius Felix and his family could be a sign that worshippers of this gods might wanted to appeal to all residents of this neighborhood. Third, occupation could also lead to the formation or growth of an association or occupational guild. For example, many scholars have argued that the cult of Mithras was largely followed by soldiers. Fourth, connections made by regular attendance of a temple or sanctuary could become the basis of a voluntary association. And lastly, and perhaps most centrally to this research, there were associations who drew their members from one particular ethnic group or from a group with common geographical origins. [128] The best example of associations that drew their members from these types of networks are the Judaic diaspora communities living in Rome and in other cities of the Roman Empire.

Yet, according to Harland many Jewish communities happen to illustrate the interplay of many of the overlapping networks described above. At Rome, the names of three Jewish associations were derived from the neighbourhood the association drew its members from Calcaresians,

[128] Harland, *Dynamics of Identity*, 32-35.

Campesians and Siburesian.[129] This interplay between various networks meant that it was possible for people who did not share the cultural background or ethnic identity of a specific group to become involved, in the case of Judaism it meant that gentiles could sometimes participate in Jewish rituals. This overlap in social networks can also clearly be observed within the early Christian community, which eventually came to incorporate members of various ethnic groups.

So can we observe this kind of interplay between different networks in any of the cults in ancient Ostia? Unfortunately, the information found in Ostia does not provide a whole lot of evidence that these networks played a large role in the process of drawing members to a particular religious cult. As I discussed previously, it is not unthinkable that the various local temples dedicated to Mithras actively tried to engage people from the local neighbourhood, but these statements should be considered mere speculation.

In conclusion, neither of these networks, whether it is extended family, occupation. neighbourhood or ethnic group, are overtly recognizable within the religious landscape of Ostia. For the first three networks, there is simply not enough evidence to come up with a coherent narrative. Although it would be certainly possible that religious life was shared by family members and co-workers, we can only imagine what it was like for a migrant from Mauretania Tingitana who in his first week of living in Ostia encountered an Mithraic worshipper in the bathhouse of his local neighbourhood. There are very little testaments for these kinds of interactions, therefore we can not exclude them in our research. However, we do have some evidence concerning the last of Harland's networks, which is the ethnic group. As I discussed, many of the names we find that are associated with these 'new cults' imply a foreign origin. As Beard, North and Price state, many of Italy's Isaic priesthoods remained in the hands of immigrants from Egypt and about half of the worshippers of Isis and Serapis that are epigraphically attested in Rome have Greek names. Does this automatically mean that they

[129] Ibidem, 35.

are immigrants? No, it is much more likely that a large part of them had very little connections to some place other than Italy. Of course, Greek language or a Greek name can indicate a Greek origin, but Greek names were also given to slaves and these names were inherited by that person's - sometimes free - family. [130] However, that there is no cult in Ostia that we can describe as a typical migrant cult does not mean that there was none. Naturally, immigrants brought with them all kinds of religious traditions, but we must not forget that religion in the ancient world was enormously diversified and that every region, every town sometimes, had their own set of local deities. It is thus likely that these traditions were mainly practiced in the private of the home, in company of close family members who favoured the same local deity.

[130] Beard (ed.), Religions of Rome, 294.

# Conclusion

I have started this research on the basis of a theory that has long been debated among historians of Ancient Roman history, namely that the history of migration is diverse, but that the scale of it has been quite the same over the course of human history. It only requires a brief glance at the ancient world to see the scale on which people migrated throughout the Roman empire. You can find it literally everywhere - from the languages they spoke, to the gods they venerated. It is fair to say that migration was very much imprinted in the Roman cultural DNA. Even Roman writers themselves claimed Rome was built upon migration, sometimes celebrating this fact, sometimes resenting it.

With the exception of Rome, Ostia was the most ethnically diverse city in the whole of Italy. Considering that there was no concept of a nation-state nor a conviction that people who spoke the same language or dialect were part of a monolithic tribe with a fixed set of customs and beliefs, it is hard to belief that newcomers were part of a community that was solely based on what we now call 'ethnicity'. The notion that migrants from the same region flocked together is also not supported by the evidence in Rome. However, it has been suggested that there is a strong connection between the number of migrants and the spread of religious cults. In this study I have explored the multitude of religious cults in the city of Ostia, finding out their origins and analyzing their membership. What arose from this was a sharply outlined cultic landscape, from which I could draw conclusions about how migrants in Ostia defined their identity and if it is still justifiable to link these religious communities to the presence and identity of newcomers.

I started this journey by proving that the city of Ostia was indeed a city of migrants. It became clear that Ostia was rather extraordinary in its nature. Historical records tell us that port cities in the Roman Empire generally had a very mixed population, but due to Ostia's close proximity to Rome, its major position in the Mediterranean grain trade and the port's function as one of the largest consumer centers in the word, the city became even more a place of intense cosmopolitanism in the course of the second century AD. As one would expect, this is reflected in multiple ways in the epigraphical evidence found in Ostia. Especially the mosaics on the floor of the Piazzale delle Corporazioni give us an amazing insight in the cities with which Ostia traded. Although T.L. Prowse's isotopic research of the samples found in Isola Sacra provides us with the conclusion that one-third of the individuals that were buried outside of Ostia came from somewhere outside of the region around Rome, it requires a cautious approach when expecting to extract the person's place of birth. In the words of Christopher Bruun: 'Without the associated inscriptions, a study of skeletal materials can almost never produce firm conclusions about origin and social status.' [131] However, the study of Prowse has provided us with the evidence that the migrant population not only consisted of adult males, but that a significant minority of immigrants migrated as children. This does not automatically prove that children always migrated as part of the family. They could also have come as slaves, and in some cases even as brides. Nevertheless, when isotopic and epigraphical evidence are combined, it becomes unequivocal that migrants cannot be seen as only a segregated minority in an otherwise native population.

When studying the religious landscape of any ancient Roman city, one is inevitably confronted by the term 'Oriental cults'. This subcategory of ancient religions was initially created by Belgian historian Franz Cumont in 1906 and has proven to be increasingly problematic in recent years of study. More recently, it has become clear that the term 'Oriental cults' is not at all

[131] C. Bruun, 'Water, oxygen isotopes, and immigrants to Ostia-Portus', *Journal of Roman Archeology 23* (2010), 131-132.

helpful for understanding the complex quantity of different religions in the Roman world. First of all, this term implies a common heritage that does not exist. The religions that are most often identified as 'oriental', namely the cults of Mithras, Isis, Serapis and Cybele, originate from vastly different regions (Iran, Egypt, Greece, Anatolia) which cannot be grouped together as one homogenous place. Secondly, the study of these religions has proven that they hardly share any common characteristics, such as a salvation myth or exclusive membership. Furthermore, the distinction between East and West is now increasingly recognized as culturally determined and can therefore not form the basis on which we should study the cultic landscape of Ostia. Nor should we try to explain the popularity of these cults with a spiritual crisis among worshippers of the 'traditional cults'. Rather than using anachronistic concepts, scholars should take account the way in which Romans viewed their religious practice when theorizing ancient Roman religion. As I stated in chapter two, it would be wrong to think that Romans saw their own beliefs as a homogenous belief-system, such as we have today. What we call 'the Graeco-Roman tradition' was only a loose set of related but distinct ways of thinking about interacting with the gods.

Although I reject Meiggs' statement that Ostia was 'penetrated by oriental cults', I think it is fair to say that from the first century BC onwards the cultic landscape of Ostia was heavily influenced by people from outside of Italy. However, the cults that are often described as Oriental show so many hybrid features that they are hardly identifiable as foreign traditions. For instance, the cult of Mithras, with its secret underground temples sprawling around the ancient city, incorporated many symbolic references to ancient Persia, but seems also fundamentally rooted in Roman religiosity. It is often theorized that Mithraism was so successful in the Roman Empire because it was so familiar to Romans. Many of references are clear evidence of how Romans viewed Persian religion. The cult of Serapis shows more characteristics of a foreign cult and its Serapeum in western Ostia is full of symbols representing Egypt (such as depictions of Ibises and bulls). However, the main temple was incredibly Graeco-Roman in its form; its

architecture incorporating a *naos* and *pronaos.* Moreover, worshippers clearly romanized the spelling of the god, calling him Jupiter Optimus Maximus Serapis in their dedications. The most exotic of the Ostian cults is represented by the Phrygian cult of Magna Mater, whose dedicated priests, the Galli, performed bizarre rituals that were deeply disturbing in the eyes of local Romans. However, its temples seem to be the most visible of them all, being constructed almost in the heart of the city surrounding an almost exclusive square, like an alternative forum. Summarily, these cults all exemplify the enormous and unbound fluidity of Roman religion. What was previously described as oriental cults, now shows a substantial heterogeneity in terms of symbolism, Romanization and acknowledgment. This proves again that Roman religion was never a static affair, and that cults were subject to hybridization and the flexibility of worshippers.

When examining what kinds of people were attracted to these hybrid set of religious cults, scholars are faced with several challenges. The term membership is often coined in lack of a more efficient term, but scholars must be aware in what context they use the term, since it indicates that every dedicator to a particular god of cult identified as a member of that specific group. We must remind ourselves that Roman religion generally was very orthopraxic in nature. The term initiation demands similar nuancing, for it implicates that a person undergoing initiation underwent a radical change of mindset and would be entirely exclusive in its beliefs. From the available evidence in Ostia it seems that there seems a degree of how accessible a cult appeared to its followers. Some demanded a complete moral shift, whereas with other cults followers could simply associate themselves.

As for migrant cults, it does not appear that any of the cults of which we have evidence in Ostia can be fundamentally describe
ed as a cult that was exclusively adhered to by foreign migrants, and was in some way a source of community for one particular ethnic group. In the case of Mithraism, literary and epigraphic evidence suggest that a large part of the Ostian members had a name that was of Greek origin. However, as mentioned earlier this cannot be seen as conclusive proof that these people

were migrants, since the Greek language was used extensively by both the Roman aristocratic elite as well as many slaves. Even when a cult appears to be directly linked to one specific geographic location, such as in the case of Jupiter Dolichenus, the cult following proves to be very diverse, both in the language of cult members their names, as well as in social status. The best example of an imperial cult that combines a strong sense of religious community with one ethnic identity remains Judaism. We know that Jews had different burial grounds that were separated from the graves of other Ostians. They also had purification rituals and distinguished themselves from others with their practice of circumcision. Another important factor that in the first century increasingly started to play a large role in how Jews shaped their identity was the fact that as an ethnic and religious group they were bound by discrimination, both because of their religion as well as the stigma the Jews carried as a result of the Roman-Jewish wars. Lastly, and above all, Jewish ethnic identity was embedded in religion, since the Torah stresses the special position of the Jewish people. Because of this strong sense of community, the Jewish synagogue would most likely be a safe haven for more recent Jewish migrants. Nevertheless, this does not mean Jews were any less Roman  than their polytheistic fellow citizens. Still, most of them would have carried out the rituals surrounding the imperial cult and some of them even would have worshipped other Roman gods

For the rest of the cults, of which evidence can be found in Ostia, it holds that they were probably followed by a very diverse group of people with various ethnic, occupational and socio-economic background. However, these statements should be viewed as assumptions rather than facts, since only few literary and epigraphic evidence has survived which give us crucial information about the members of a specific cult. As I have stated in the last part of the previous chapter, we can assume that there were in fact small migrant cults in Ostia, but that they were confined to one of the member's house and were most likely practiced by one or two families. We should not forget that religion in the Roman Empire cannot be grouped into well-defined and recognizable religious traditions with their

own dogma's and religious practices. Rather, every town, every neighbourhood and even every family, had their own god(s) or patron(s), for which they probably held daily rituals in the confinement of their own homes. Hence, an Ostian migrant from the town of Palmyra (in the province of Syria) would probably have very little in common with one from Antioch (in the same province), even though they might both be merchants. The merchant from Palmyra might be a Latin speaking worshipper of Jupiter Dolichenus who was also heavily invested in the cult of Minerva, whereas the merchant from Antioch could easily have been a Greek and Aramaic speaking worshipper of Serapis, who also worshipped his own ancestral gods, as well as the gods from his local neighbourhood in Antioch. Nonetheless, both these cults belonged to one pan-Mediterranean pantheon, in which deities and traditions continuously influenced and got influenced by each other. It seems likely that the majority of the cults that were present in Ostia was already known by many migrants when they came to live inside the city. When we take these differences in account, the image of the Roman world that arises is one that it is much more nuanced and much more interesting for that matter.

So what does this say about the way in which migrants to Ostia defined their identity? It is fair to say that there is hardly any evidence that suggests that they customarily imported their own local traditions and used their local religion as a source of community and identity in their new city. Although many of the religious traditions in Ostia have their roots in an overseas tradition, the cults are overwhelmingly Roman in their rituals, mythology and overall appearance. Of course, these cults would have been followed by large groups of migrants, but that can also be attributed to the fact that many of them, such as the cult of Mithras, were rather universal in their beliefs and were also well-dispersed throughout the whole Roman Empire, which probably made them popular with people outside of Italy. Yet, these cults do not seem to provide the strong social communities with which migrants could have identified themselves. As we have seen, not any of the religious cults in Ostia, not even Judaism, was strictly exclusive in their

religious beliefs. All of them seem to have allowed, and sometimes even promoted, the worship of other deities. Thus, it appears far-fetched to assume that migrants used the membership of a specific religious cult as the main marker of their identity. Alternatively, historians should stress the importance of socio-economic barriers when discussing migration and identity. Status remained the biggest factor in the identity of a Roman. Therefore, it is reasonable that migrants felt most connected with members of their own social class. This is also apparent from what we know about the existing Mediterranean networks between aristocratic families and the occupational societies that sprung up in major trade hubs. It is still to be discovered what other factors may have an influence on the way migrants constructed their identity in second-century Ostia, such as language and occupation. However, on the grounds that this study is only concerned with the role of religion in the construction of identity, there will be no concluding answers on these questions. In some way this study can be viewed as an attempt to nuance and make an end to anachronistic interpretations of religion in the ancient world, but it has also shed light on our twenty first-century way of looking at migration and ethnicity. Admittedly, the history of Roman migration should be described by historians within the context of the ancient world, and with consciousness of the enormous diversity and otherness of Roman society and culture.

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# LIST OF FIGURES

Image 5.
Plan of the Mitreo di Felicissimus, located in Insula IX, Regio V, Ostia. Notice the mosaic floor with every mosaic representing one grade of the Mithraic hierarchy. In the back, an inscription mentions the name of the person who financed the shrine. 'FELICISSIMUS EX VOTO F(ecit)'.
(https://www.ostia-antica.org/regio5/9/9-1.gif)
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Image 6.
Photograph of the mosaics at the Mitreo di Felicissimus. Clearly visible is the mosaic of the raven, which references the grade of corax. Photograph by Jan Theo Bakker.
(https://www.ostia-antica.org/regio5/9/9-1_1.jpg)
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