

Social Organisations within the Roman Army

by Andrew Pegler

Cults and *collegia* have been popular themes for academics over the last one hundred years. Waltzing's 'Etude Historique sur les Corporation Professionnelles chez les Romains' (1895-1900) and Domaszewski's 'Die Religion des römischen Heeres' (1895) are notable examples from a range of exhaustively researched works examining either *collegia* or cults, civil and-or military. Only recently have the two topics been combined, a practice that enables similarities of purpose and content to be recognised. The most seminal of these has been Kloppenborg and Wilson's 'Voluntary Associations of the Graeco-Roman World' (1996), which grouped papers on associations and cults beneath their advocated umbrella term of 'voluntary associations'. This paper also intends to study both these subjects, but to focus on their military guise and an aspect of their character that justifies joining them both beneath a unifying title; for this I choose 'social organisations'. 'Association' is quite acceptable, though I choose 'organisation' to imply a greater sense of regimentation. Both are fairly interchangeable, as both are structures determined by an adherence to either an officially sanctioned charter or an unofficially enforced code of practice. These instruments give them features such as an internal hierarchy, initiation rites and an independent treasury which stand them apart from the wider environment that they exist within.

I use the word 'Social' to replace 'voluntary' as in the military context I hope to advocate that this term is as valid as 'voluntary' is for the civil. As Kloppenborg and Wilson themselves acknowledged (Wilson 1996:1), the use of the adjective 'voluntary' was not entirely accurate. Several religious cults and trade associations had compulsory, hereditary or obligatory membership. As these exceptions were in the minority, 'voluntary associations' remained a workable general term. For the military environment, however, the voluntary option is almost certainly absent in the case of the *collegia*. No direct evidence survives, but considering that these associations played an integral part in rank and military efficiency then it is most unlikely that they relied on voluntary membership. Thus for the purposes of accuracy, 'voluntary' must be dropped from the umbrella term. 'Social' instead stresses the aspect of their existence that this paper seeks to focus on and which can be seen as a base motive for their existence.

The extent to which social motives are the unifying agent of both cults and *collegia* is an important question as it is a facet of their character that has received little attention. This is partly because the social element was deliberately masked. Cults clearly had a religious intent, and *collegia* existed for a variety of official purposes - religion, economics, industry and politics usually being the most frequent reasons. However, what both cults and *collegia* have in common is that somewhere within their organisation and daily practice they contain features which are designed to promote the group to the exclusion of those outside. Exclusion is a means of enhancement when those included are allowed to partake in unique events that serve only to strengthen the social bonds within that group. Exclusive meeting places focus the group, exclusive initiation targets promote the sense of commitment to the group and exclusive positions of influence obtainable only within the group enhance the notions of loyalty. This social element, though rarely their public *raison de être*, provides the force that unifies the

organisation into a coherent and self-perpetuating entity. The significance of this social aspect is the basis of discussion in this paper. To what extent did these institutions fulfil a social function within the Roman army?

The biggest problem is that military *collegia* are fairly enigmatic. Sources of information are both brief and scarce, consisting primarily of epigraphic material supported by only three literary references. The earliest dateable inscription comes from AD 159 (CIL X.3344), with the majority dating from the reign of Septimius Severus and the last to AD 229 (ILS 2353). Therefore the sources are restricted to a relatively short time period and have been found in only a relatively small number of sites. The greatest contribution made so far was in the 1890s during the excavation of the fortress of the Third Legion Augusta at Lambaesis, Algeria. Almost a dozen military *collegia* inscriptions were recovered, providing a range of details and information. Many were found *in situ* within their respective assembly room (the *schola*), thus identifying these features conclusively.

In contrast the civilian *collegia* are much better represented. They existed for longer, at least from the early first century BC, and in an infinitely wider range of locations and situations. This ubiquity is reflected in all the sources. Epigraphically they number in the hundreds rather than in the dozens, and archaeologically a far greater number and variety of *scholae* have been positively identified. This evidence amounts to complete constitutions containing detailed information on internal organisation, financial arrangements and member services. From this wealth of evidence it is much easier to interpret their social basis and to recognise their social elements. *Collegia* had quite a market in the civil sphere. Paul Petit observed that they attracted citizens who wished 'to escape from the isolation which the individual felt in a hierarchical world... and (from) a city life in which influence was a preserve of the great' (1976:100). In a *collegium* the individual could find a social circle, attain a position of dignity within its organisation and through the support of his new associates find assurance against an anonymous life and an anonymous death (Macmullen 1966:174).

Those *collegia* that existed to provide the services of burial clubs (*collegia tenuiorum*), for example, were a natural extension of the support ethic. They provided the member with the guarantee of a decent burial and the promise of mourners who may genuinely be mourning him. Despite being concerned with death, these organisations instead made life the focus of their existence as they not only provided funerals, but also gave their members regular meetings and feasts. A feast was one of the main attractions of the *collegia* and they held them at any opportunity. The constitution of the *Collegium* of Antinous and Diana at Lanuvium (CIL XIV.2112) from AD 136, for example, lists all their communal feasts and states that new members not only pay their entrance fee but that they give an amphora of good wine as well. Eating and drinking together is one of the most fundamental social binds; it is positive, assuring and the best opportunity to make social contact. Thus it was at these events that the member lost his anonymity and gained a place within a social circle. When he died he would be missed by people who had had the opportunity to know him.

That *collegia* were originally mostly concerned with social matters can be argued from their troublesome history (Macmullen 1966:175-178). Too much feasting coupled with an ambitious president and a treasury overflowing with subscription fees created a potentially explosive situation for the state. During the Republic the *collegia* were frequently used as political tools, a situation that provoked much legislation to control them (Ascon *Pis* 4; Cicero *Pro Sext* 25; Dio 38.13; Suetonius *Caesar* 42). Under the Empire the suspicion remained and numerous steps to control the *collegia* and their membership are recorded (Suetonius *Augustus* 32; Dio 60.7; *Digest* 47.22.1-3). Two notable examples are the dissolution of the *collegia* of Pompeii as

punishment following the amphitheatre riot (Tacitus *Annals* 14.17) and Trajan's rejection of Pliny's request for an association of firemen (*collegium centonarum*) at Nicomedia (*Epp* 10.33). Both were measures to ensure public order, being based on both real and potential fears.

Civil *collegia* performed a social function in that they gave their members a social circle other than that which they could nominally obtain. This circle was strengthened by practices that had a positive effect in promoting a conscious unity within that group. The *collegium centonarum* at Aquincum entertained itself with a *hydraulis* organ (Nagy 1934), an instrument that had no practical role to play within their official duties. Its presence demonstrates that social activity was important, regardless of the professional façade. Such licence inspired Tertullian to remark that official veneers to *collegia* were simply excuses to disguise drunken behaviour (*Apol.* 38.1). As Ginsburg observed, 'an institution founded for one purpose, by reason of the leeway it offered in practice, was readily adapted to other purposes, often very remote from the original function' (1940:149). These were the attractions that raised *collegia* above any alternative, as they were legally constituted to provide them. Not just meetings, but feasts were important events within the group. Again, these feasts occur regardless of the official purpose of the *collegium*. Whether they are a burial, industrial or religious association, their practice includes events that have only a nominal impact on their funerary, industrial or religious concerns. This is the basis of the analogy. The military *collegia*, for which so much information is lacking, should theoretically also have this social side beneath their official exterior.

Considering the potentially dangerous nature of *collegia*, it is at first surprising that these threats to public order appear within the very instrument that was intended to control it – the army. It may at first appear a paradox, but their introduction into the military can be seen as a natural extension to the role that they served in the civil world. A lot of the motives that Petit saw as attracting members to civilian *collegia* can be argued as appropriate for the army. Soldiers would naturally wish to escape from the anonymity of their place within such a vast organisation, to try and gain a social identity. On joining the army, the new recruit was given a rank that gave him a professional and functional position within that organisation. For the common legionary the potential social circle was large – he had his *contubernium*, century, cohort, legion and provincial garrison within which he could move at any one time. He was of equal status to several thousand other individuals, with little to prevent him from making social contact with them.

There were others, however, for whom the sphere of social interaction was much more limited. The centurion, for example, was restricted by his high rank and status. Others such as the *tubicine* (trumpeter) had small circles of colleagues, while others such as the *speculator* were posted away from their legionary headquarters. It is for servicemen in these situations that the benefits of organised social contact could be most appreciated. At least twenty-three different ranks and trades are known to have belonged to *collegia* within the army, sixteen from the legions (*armatures, armorum custodes, beneficiarii, cornicines, cornicularii, discentes capsariorum, equites legionis, exacti, fabricienses, librarii, optiones, optiones valetudinarii, duplarii, pequarii, speculatores, signiferi, tesserarii, tubicines*) and seven from the *auxilia* (*armatures, centuriones, curatores, decuriones, duplicarii, imaginiferi* and *vexilliferi*). All of the above held positions of either clerical or military responsibility and belonged to the status groups known as *immunes* and *principales*. A reference to a *scholae cohortibus primus* by Hyginus (20) appears to confirm that it was the soldiers of higher status and the non-commissioned officers who were permitted to form associations.

Why the military *collegia* were limited to this particular group can be best explained if we remember the civilian precedents that they followed. The dangers that they posed were far more acute in an associated body of men who were not only over-feasted, over-ambitious and overflowing with subscription fees, but who were also armed and armoured. Therefore the existence of these organisations had to be even more tightly controlled than in the civilian environment. The relatively late introduction of *collegia* into the army may have been the direct result of such fears. Certainly the most significant bar to their introduction was the problem of how to deal with the common soldier. Their numbers were too large to risk letting them get together for no good reason. A law was therefore issued that prohibited them from forming or joining *collegia* (*Digest* 47.22.1). The baths and amphitheatres of the fortress and the charms of the *canabae* instead provided their social satisfaction, in what little free time they were permitted. However, there were legionaries who already existed in small groups with a legitimate reason to be together, performing specialist and administrative functions. Distinguished by a higher status that was the result of good service, good education or good background there was no reason why these men should not have an official social bonding agent.

This central focus was provided by the *collegia*. By guaranteeing the social circle it improved the morale of the individual, who was now no longer feeling anonymous within the system. By giving it official recognition the common tie between the members was given an added prestige. The social and spiritual advantages that a *collegium* offered its members would also appear attractive to those outside. These individuals would then be encouraged to gain entry, which would require them to seek promotion to those ranks or volunteer for those trades. The immediate benefits for that position would be a higher prestige value, certainty of recruitment and an increase in morale. These were effects that the emperor could feel justified any risks he was taking in allowing these organisations to exist. Allocating each *collegium* space within the fort provided further enhancement. These meeting rooms (*scholae*) provided the focal point of the group. At Lambaesis (Algeria) those of the Third Legion Augusta were situated within the premium location of the *principia* (Besnier 1899:225-258), and a similar arrangement seems to have existed in the auxiliary fort of Niederbieber. If such a situation was the norm (Fellman 1958) then it is a tangible enhancement to this prestige. This was a place for their exclusive use, a place where they were united and a place where their social behaviour could be made manifest. It was in these rooms that the feasts would be held, as well as dedications made to that most important of deities – the *genius*.

The *Genii* were patron spirits who ‘held in their care every action and event, every person and every place’ (Gilliam 1986:353). They also presided over communities and groups, which in the army translated to patronage of a wide range of divisions, ranks, building staff and task groups (ibid.: 355–361). As in the civil world, the military *collegia* also received a guardian *genius* at their conception. This spirit took on the role of both protector of the community and also the place where they congregated (ibid.: 359), the *scholae*. The depiction of the god as a youthful, well fed, muscular male with flowing locks (Alcock 1986:114) projects an image of health and vitality. This impression, coupled with the *cornucopia* he carries implies vividly an active interest in the health and welfare of the membership. He is also commonly depicted in the act of pouring a libation, suggesting again that his interests are as much on behalf of his devotees as they are in him. Dedications to the *Genius* of the *collegium* could therefore be construed as actions taken to enhance the unity and ties of those included within the association. It would also appear from the epigraphic evidence that under the emperors Septimius Severus and Severus Alexander, the religious nature of the *collegia* was formalised

to encompass the worship of the imperial cult (Fishwick 1988), a more direct means of ensuring loyalty and promoting a new dynasty.

While *collegia* were treated with suspicion and fear by the state, cults escaped largely untroubled. They were religious, something which should, theoretically, bring out the best in people. They also had self-imposed limits created by their novel belief set and demanding initiation rites, something which kept the number of adherents relatively small. They were not suited to mass worship, by their secretive and insular behaviour. Therefore there was no prohibition on the common soldiers joining them. For both the legionaries and the auxiliaries, cults became the legal alternative to *collegia* and it was here that they gained the social organisation that only the lucky few could get elsewhere. In many ways, cults provided a far more intensive social experience. Initiation rites were a bond of commitment far stronger than the simple payment of a membership fee. In the Mithraic cult the rites involved symbolic and physical ordeals - suffering extremes of fear, cold, heat and hunger (Turcan 1996:235-239). At the Mithraeum at Carrawburgh an area within the shrine provided at various times the means to carry out such tests, including the facility to inter someone alive (Richmond and Gillam 1951:19, 21). The rituals contained a religious significance – they probably emulated the suffering of Mithras during his labours on primeval earth – but they had the added commitment value. Members were all united by a mutual demonstration of their interest in the group. Once initiated they were all members of a select and exclusive fraternity, both in spiritual and real terms.

They could also pursue a career path that was unique to their new association. Within the civil *collegia*, and most likely the military, members could aspire to a number of positions of authority; such as the president (*quinquenalis*), the treasurer (*quaestor*) or a master of the feast (*magister*) (Meiggs 1960:314–318). Within the cults members could travel on a career path that brought with it spiritual prestige as well as responsibility within the community. Mithraism, for example, had a ladder of seven grades, the *corax*, *nymphus*, *miles*, *leo*, *persus*, *helidromus* and *pater* (Jerome *Ep* CVII. *ad Laetan*; Cumont 1956:152-154). Each progressive level had an attributed set of duties to perform and their own symbolic initiation rites (Cumont 1956:152-154). It is a lot easier to understand what these were as drawing analogies between civil and military versions of a cult is generally universally acceptable. The wealth of evidence on both sides shows that ritual practices and internal organisation were almost always the same.

Their contribution to social practice is that, like the *collegia*, several cults held feasts as an integral part of their doctrine. This is clearly evident in Mithraism where the defining archaeological feature of the cult building is the presence of benches down either side of the principal sacred area where the initiates could recline to dine (Turcan 1996:218). The ritual feast that was held in this shrine recreated that that was held between Mithras and Sol at the culmination of Mithras' triumph (*ibid.*). This holy event meant that the initiates had a ready-made excuse to hold feasts whenever they wanted (Turcan 1996:234). Within the noted constitution of the *collegium* of Antinous and Diana at Lanuvium, feasts were worked in under a religious guise as often as possible. These were, however, restricted by law to only one a month. In contrast the religious cults could make the sacred feast a part of their routine that is repeated as often as desired. These communal social events gain strength when, in several cases (for example in the worship of Mithras, Jupiter Dolichenis, the Syrian Baals and Magna Mater) the cult building was designed specifically to insulate the community from the outside world. This exclusion was greater than that the *scholae* could achieve, with the effect that the emphasis on social practice could become much more significant. The use of special effects such as atmospheric lights and incense makes the idea of feasting while reclined on couches as part of

your religious duty an extremely attractive proposition. These traits served not only to please the initiated, but also made it a much more alluring prospect for the uninitiated. Cults after all lacked the greater certainty of recruitment that the military *collegia* held. They needed gimmicks and adverts that would keep attracting new members and keep the cell going.

Their lack of a guaranteed recruitment could become an advantage, for by lacking the exclusivity of the *collegia*, the pool of initiates in the army was unrestricted. The communities could therefore encompass a variety of military backgrounds. It is conceivable that a common soldier could belong to the same congregation as his military superior, and achieve a higher spiritual rank. Whether this actually worked in practice is difficult to recover from the evidence, as the epigraphic record is notoriously difficult to interpret. The statistical study made by Manfred Clauss demonstrated that the majority of initiates were from the lower ranks, mainly the *centurions*, *principales* and the common soldiers (*miles*) (Beck 1996:177-179). Officers dominate the evidence for certain cells (e.g. Carrawburgh), but with greater disposable incomes and a high value as a patron or guest of honour it is to be expected. The numerical superiority of the lower ranks, however, is of the greatest interest as it suggests that cults became an alternative for those who were excluded from the official military *collegia*. It was here that they could gain the intimate and viable experience that an exclusive social organisation could provide. This is not an absolute rule, however, as many servicemen who could join the official associations also joined cults. Perhaps this was because of religious motives, but it also may have been because the cults gave a better social experience.

It must be reiterated that both cults and *collegia* existed on an official level for a variety of suitable purposes. The contribution that they made to the spiritual welfare of the Roman empire and to the morale and discipline of the Roman army was recognised at the time of their existence. The means in which they functioned and performed their role has been the subject of much scholarly study since. While their practical and functional advantages have long been recognised, those aspects of both cults and *collegia* that suggest a social nature have received less attention. It has been the intention of this paper to stress the social dimension of these organisations, and the extent to which they were responsible for making these institutions viable and vibrant. It is my hypothesis that social factors were major influences, with *collegia* in particular gaining only a veneer of purpose to provide the satisfaction of respectability. It is a universal fact that people like to socialise and that through social contact a wide variety of improvements to the well being of the individual is made possible. It was through cults and *collegia* that the members of the army could realise these intentions on a superior level. *Collegia* were restricted to a select few, while cults were open to all in the army. They both served similar functions in that they provided the member or the initiate with an exclusive social union. These social bonds were further strengthened by a variety of unique features that served no other recognisable purpose other than enhancing the groups exclusivity and unity. Initi-ation demonstrated membership equality and commitment, communal feasting provided it with social interaction, an exclusive property reinforced its identity and a mutually encompassing deity bonded the group together. It is hoped that the social nature of these organisations will gain greater recognition and that the unique sense of involvement and inclusion they provided within the Roman army will be further explored.

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