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The Role of Texts in Processes of Religious Grouping during the Principate

Abstract

Textual communities – a concept imported from medieval studies – have been accorded much importance in the formation of religious groups throughout the imperial period, operationalising the concept of 'religions of the book'. Every text seemed to betray a community behind it. From the perspective of 'lived ancient religion' the article will critically review the evidence and suggest different dimensions of the communication, continuation, and diffusion of texts. As a result, the importance of 'textual communities' for the imperial period is seriously questioned.

Keywords: grouping, textual community, circulation of texts, translation, reading

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1 Introduction*

Starting from the concept of 'textual communities' and a growing awareness of the complex role of literary communication in religion,[1] this article will sketch different relationships of practices of writing and reading for processes of 'grouping together'. It is evident that a large number of texts and textual polemics were written during the second and third centuries CE which were used in specifically religious communication, that is, communication referring to not unquestionably plausible superhuman agents.[2] To some degree this image is distorted by the fact that for some of these texts the conditions of survival improved, as they were later classified as 'Christian'.

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1 See Rüpke and Spickermann 2009 and the whole volume of *ARG* as well as Bendlin and Rüpke 2005 and Elm, Rüpke and Waldner 2006.

2 For this definition Rüpke 2015b.

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Some also became foundational texts for the history of religion in Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean. But apart from the texts which ultimately formed the Mishna and the New Testament, also Plutarch's middle-Platonic texts, Lucian's critique of traditional religion, and authors from the Second Sophistic like Pausanias and Apuleius were copied time and again, too. The aim of this article is to replace an undifferentiated notion of 'textual communities' or even 'religions' by the perspectives of communication afforded by continuation, and transferring of, texts, and textual authority.

My argument questions a widespread perspective regarding religious groups. The history of religion of the imperial period has been interpreted as the history of religious groups, that is, 'cults' and 'religions' supplementing and succeeding earlier civic religion.[3] Such social formations, however, are the very result of the transformation in this period, as has been shown by the research programme on Roman Imperial and Provincial Religion.[4] Daniel Boyarin has argued that the concept of religion had been developed within a process of mutual boundary drawing by those who at the end of the process thought of themselves as Jews and Christians. During this process the need arose to develop a generic concept of 'religion' in order to reintegrate the plurality of those newly distinguished groups.[5] However, the process delineated by Boyarin is only an element of a larger range of phenomena that reach far beyond Christianity and Judaism.

The perspective of 'lived ancient religion'[6] focuses on such processes of grouping rather than a taxonomy of smaller and larger groups. We have to imagine numerous agents who reacted to the political and cultural context. This context was changed by the establishment of the empire, which had repercussions in particular in the field of religious practices and communication. The formation of religious groups and networks seems to have been part of this reaction to the reduced importance, the 'mediatisation', of local political power and the ensuing innovations,[7] frequently falling back on models and metaphors of the city.[8] Religious identities became important as a compensation for the loss of importance of local or regional identities, which in itself was caused by the establishment and intensification of the empire as superstructure.[9] And yet, the growing presence of communication

3 See Rüpke 2012a.
4 Rüpke 2009a; Rüpke 2009b; Rüpke 2010a; Rüpke 2011a; Rüpke 2011b; Rüpke 2012c.
5 Boyarin 2001; Boyarin 2004; Boyarin 2006.
6 See Rüpke 2012a; Raja and Rüpke 2015; Rüpke 2016.
7 See the sketch in Rüpke 2015a.
8 For the dominance of the model of the city state in conceptualisations of the new religious developments see Ando 2015; case studies: Nigdelis 2010; Rüpke 2013c.
9 Rüpke 2011a; Rüpke 2014.

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about religious 'identities' must not be read as evidence for a process of the formation of alternative, religious 'polities'.

But how could we read texts *not* as indicators of communities that had produced these very texts? The bias in scholarship is strong, as Stanley Stowers has shown. The identification of stable groups as generators and contexts of all the individual texts has been driven by a whole lot of factors. First must be named a romantic concept of authorship that thought of individuals as being embedded in groups and those groups' *Geist*, or 'spirit'. Secondly, presuppositions about form-historical developments from the oral to the written were important.[10] Thirdly, the sociological theorising of religion as a collective phenomenon following Émile Durkheim accrued. Finally, the interests in social history of the last third of the twentieth century have helped to combine these factors and to harden the resulting 'communities'. Contrasting present day individualism and pre-modern collectivity, the formation of such communities has been seen as a highly normative process, which required the individual to be a member of such a group to the exclusion of membership in any other group.[11] One man, one religion.

All this leads to an important methodological consequence. Our analysis cannot start from the discourse about heresy, as evident above all in Jewish-Christian texts of the period, seemingly offering evidence for dozens, if not hundreds, of neatly differentiated groups built around texts. This discourse is part of an attempt to construe religious otherness, that is, to draw boundary lines with regard to others and strengthen bonds within what is presupposed as one's own group. It is also part of an attempt by its producers to claim authority by exerting such judgments. Hence, this discourse does not attest the existence of different groups as a socio-historical fact. Closeness rather than ideological distance might have been an important stimulus for the fiction of decisive differences.[12] 'Cultural exaggeration' is a strategy relevant here.[13] This is not to say that rhetorical exclusion and the development of speech norms never did have social consequences. Karen King has shown that this is simply not true for instance for Montanism; here, the discourse of exclusion finally led to separation and persecution.[14] I will however start from less extreme cases and inquire more generally into the role of religious texts in grouping together.

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10 Stowers 2011, here 240–242.
11 Stowers 2011, 245.
12 See Iricinschi and Zellentin 2008.
13 Iricinschi and Zellentin 2008, 19 with reference to the anthropologist James Boon.
14 King 2008, here 35. I am grateful for discussion with Maria Dell'Isola, Modena, who has finished a PhD thesis on this.

It is the concept of 'textual communities', developed by Brian Stock for the (high) medieval period, which offers a useful tool to reflect about the rather complex relationship of texts and groups. Stock's detailed analysis of reading practices was not primarily interested in the formation of new groups. His interest was in the stabilisation and development of existing ones. According to him, the effect of shared reading or recitation (Stock supposes the members to be regularly present) on the formation of groups and identities is not only due to content, but also to the form of reception and hermeneutical practices. 'What was essential to a textual community was not a written version of a text, although that was sometimes present, but an individual, who, having mastered it, then utilized it for reforming a group's thought and action.'[15] In the medieval context, this could mean applying text-based interpretation to age-old rituals, but also criticising such rituals: 'Heretics in particular provided a cutting edge for literacy.'[16] In any case, texts became important even for groups that participated in oral religion only, and the same texts instigated new forms of orality in such groups.[17]

Comparable 'textual communities' had undeniably been established in the form of philosophical schools before the imperial period. The Epicureans and their practice of reading and re-interpreting Epicurus (342/1–271/0 BCE) on the basis of his own treatises offer an example. They interacted locally at the *kepos*. But reading and interpretation included also transmission in time and space up to the publication of the monumental inscription at Oenoanda. Both locally as well as in the distance, the activities took place under the medial (as bust or herm or statue) or imagined visual presence (and control) of Epicurus himself.[18] Methodologically, however, such a group bedevils the very interest of my approach, that is, sketching the diverse roles of texts in stimulating religious grouping, and analysing group boundaries as a result, rather than precondition, of such roles. Thus, my starting point is the affordance or even agency of texts for establishing communication.[19]

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15 Stock 1983, 90; on whom see Brakke 2012, in particular 267.
16 Stock 1983, 90.
17 Stock 1983, 90–91.
18 On the latter see Sen. *epist.* 25.5: *Sic fac omnia … tamquam spectet Epicurus.* Texts and diffusion: Usener 1887; Bailey 1926; Arrighetti 1973; Gigante 1987; Castner 1988; Smith 1993.
19 For the concept of affordance see Knappett 2005; Silver 2011; agency of objects: Raja and Weiss 2015.

2 Circulation of books and letters

Within the limits of this article I can neither offer a medial history of imperial religion nor in-depth analyses of several corpora. Instead, the following paragraphs bring together significant examples, mapping out the breadth of variations within the different perspectives. The analysis has to start with a reminder of the fundamentally different technical and social conditions of literary communication.

2.1 'Books'

How are texts multiplied in a scriptographic culture before the advent of printing techniques of woodblocks or even movable letters? Multiplication is achieved by manual copying. Every resulting roll or codex is, in a certain sense, a unique text. From the early empire onwards production and distribution was partly commercialised by creating workshops, in which several slaves wrote out texts dictated to them. Yet only a limited range of texts was part of this system of distribution: probably a small number of fashionable authors and treatises.[20] Much more important was the distribution by dedication to specific addressees and patrons, who felt obliged to forward copies (or the autograph for copying) to their respective friends.[21] Such a system included the complete libraries of the persons involved; the beneficiaries could participate in such library resources regardless of whether they lived nearby or were communicating by means of letters and messengers only.[22] People did not only know about each other, but also about each other's libraries. Correspondingly, the people participating in this system were members of the elite. The costs for copying and transport were forbidding, even if the employment of codices instead of book rolls could lower costs and improve the manageability of even larger text collections.[23] The use of *scriptio continua* demanded long training even for the adequate reading of simple texts and helped to preserve social exclusivity.[24]

A book could reach a larger audience, if it was re-oralised in established settings. Recitation was the most important method, but it had its limits. A dramatic performance, staged in architecture built for that purpose, aimed

20 See Quinn 1982, esp. 79–93.
21 On which Starr 1987.
22 For late antiquity see Mratschek 2010; for the second and third century in a literary circle at Oxyrhynchos, Johnson 2012, 180–182; also Johnson 2013.
23 See Wallraff 2013, in part. 11–17.
24 Johnson 2012, esp. ch. 2.

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at a large audience and it was probably by such means that narrative plots reached the citizenry. The same, but to a lesser degree, must have been true for declamations in market-places or auditoria. In contrast, recitations of books were normally staged in smaller, private rather than public spaces. At times, an anonymous audience might have been addressed.[25] Normally, a circle of invited people, of friends or family, took part in such recitations and the ensuing rather intermittent critique and commenting, thus forming a 'reading community' protected by high social barriers.[26] This sort of control of who could participate was as much valid for the audience as it was for the producers of texts. Similar to theatrical performances, it was the task of the relevant organiser or the author's financer, the *patronus* or *matrona,* to make such a selection. The first century poet Juvenal describes such an invitation into the house of a self-appointed star poet and the latter's pre-arrangement of the audience and its applause.[27] The result was not at all comparable to the dense networks of the circles of Maecenas, Messalla, or the otherwise unknown Diodorus at Oxyrhynchos[28] – or comparable benefactors. In contrast, if a network resulted at all from occasional invitations, it was one of 'weak ties'.[29]

Strong and frequent interaction based on the extended arguments of a 'book' needed to be based on shared convictions. In the intellectual centres of the Empire – Rome, Athens, Antioch, or Alexandria – the protagonists of religious debates addressed each other directly in personal co-presence. At least, their literary exchange is of high intensity. Their texts betray a high degree of intertextuality.[30] This is not only true for philosophical, but also for theological debate (focusing philosophical argument on matters religious) as is shown by Tatian's pupil Rhodon, whose extensive report of a debate with Apelles in a text from the late second century is quoted by Eusebius in the early fourth century.[31] Such a culture of debate provided the framework for utterances of experts, who canvassed for assent, but not for members and defections.

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25 Schmidt 2001, here 940.
26 Johnson 2012, 42–56.
27 Iuv. *Sat.* 7.36–47.
28 Johnson 2012, 180–183, starting his analysis from *POxy* 2192 of the second century CE.
29 For the occasional power of weak ties in networks see Granovetter 1973. For an application see Collar 2014.
30 See Vinzent 2011.
31 Euseb. *hist. eccl.* 5.13.5–7; I owe the reference to Vinzent 2011, 126.

2.2 Letters

The letter was an important medium for many of the forms of communication implied so far. It was the letter – taken here as text usually (but not always!) much shorter than a book – from one person to another that allowed for the establishment of wider and more explicit networks. The carefully arranged corpus of letters of Pliny the Younger demonstrates the potentials of a network of aristocrats, which is continued through the exchange of letters.[32] Cicero's letters of the first century BCE, posthumously edited, and the letters of Paulinus of Nola or Symmachus of the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth century, offer parallels. The corpora transmitted demonstrate the differences within intensive exchanges of letters as between Cicero and Atticus, or Fronto and Marcus Aurelius. It was the difference between a vast network and a dyad, between occasional correspondence and regular questions and answers, even if the text of the letters would have been supplemented by oral messages and evaluations transmitted by the messengers.[33] Given the lack of a clear separation of administrative and personal correspondence beyond imperial administration, even in religious matters private individual and organisational letter writing tended to overlap.

Letter-writing did not need to be strictly dyadic. The two poles of letter-writing might be identified as the 'literary letter', aimed at publication and an anonymous audience, and 'personal letters', intended to be read by a single addressee and constituting a risk already in the hands of a paid, but untrustworthy carrier, but also at the full disposition of the addressee. In between the two poles, numerous forms of reception might be imagined. To be read out in front of multiple addressees might be the most important. Here, recitation and communication by letter are identical. The second and third letter ascribed to 'John' in the later collection of the New Testament address the problem of control of and exclusion from spaces of recitation by simply not admitting the re-oralisation. Taken as a pair, 2 John describes a community that is functioning in communicative terms, whereas 3 John, formally addressed to a single member, Gaius, describes the perverted community: 'I have written a letter to your community, but Diotrephes, who likes to be the head of the community, does not take any instruction from me. If I come to you in person, I will tell you a few things about him, for he is telling bad stories in bad words about me.'[34] This is composed as a discourse on the

32 Hoffer 1999, 10–13; Johnson 2012, 32–62; Gibson and Morello 2012, 136–138; for the indirect inclusion of women see Shelton 2013. For the prosopography of the network Sherwin-White 1966 (and re-printings) remains indispensable.

33 See Mratschek 2011.

34 3 John 9–10, free translation inspired by the rendering into German by Klaus Berger.

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problems of epistolography rather than a chance testimony to problems in a well-established group.

Books could legitimately be read alone, even if they might frequently have been a matter of recitation and discussion in a small group. Here, in order to be efficient, literary communication relied on repeated coming together. Letters could not only simulate this (or, as 3 John reminds us, try to simulate this), but could also consciously avoid the risk of controversy originating in common debate. This is shown by the emperor in his communication with the priestly colleges, of which he was a member. By persistently sending letters, he avoided debate, forcing the colleges to accept his letters as though they were directives.[35] As in the case of Epicurus, literary communication was embedded in the context of visual presence, for instance in the form of an imperial portrait, attested for the sanctuary of Dea Dia run by one of these priesthoods, the Arval brethren. These are only special cases of a much larger intermediality. The collection of ethical (and occasionally outright religious) sayings *(Sententiae)* of Publilius Syrus, widely used by the mid-first century CE, is to be seen against the background of his success as a mime in the second half of the first century BCE, that is, the performance in the public space of theatres.[36] Interpretations of myths such as those offered by the Greek philosopher Cornutus, writing under Nero at Rome,[37] could work only on a foundation of widely known narratives. These were widely known as they themselves were frequently remembered by the myriad of images on display in public and private spaces. Michael Squire thus speaks of 'iconotexts'.[38] Any analysis of the agency of specific texts must be done against the background of shared images, narratives, rituals – or the lack of them – and the boundaries for successful communication or grouping beyond pre-existing social formations. It is these external factors that would limit or enhance the power of a text to draw boundaries with regard to the wider world of merely potential recipients, or to strengthen bonds within a seemingly fortuitous grouping.

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3 Supplementation of texts

With regard to more lasting social formation related to texts, we need to turn to texts that witness an extended period of production and enlargement, if

35 Rüpke 2011c, here 267.
36 See Giancotti 1967 and more generally Cicu 1988; cf. Sinclair 1995.
37 On Cornutus see Nesselrath 2009; Busch and Zangenberg 2010.
38 Squire 2009, 192.

we do not simply presuppose the existence of a group but keep the perspective of the texts' agency. In what follows I will briefly review four cases.

3.1 The Caesarian corpus

Stretching the temporal limits of Empire the review starts with the *Corpus Caesarianum*. Aulus Hirtius, supporter of Gaius Julius Caesar and consul by the time of his death in 43 BCE, combined his own and further texts with Caesar's *commentarii* of the Gallic and civil wars of the years 58–52 and 49–47 BCE in order to achieve a continuous narrative of Caesar's wars from 58 to 45 BCE.[39] The later texts – the War in Alexandria, the *bellum Africanum* and the *bellum Hispaniense* – were not pseudepigraphical, but continue without explicitly marking the change of authorship. That was helped by the fact that the narrator of Caesar's own *commentarii* had reported the deeds of Caesar in a third person narrative. The audience of that *Corpus Caesarianum* created by these texts after the death of the protagonist were probably those senators and officers who regarded themselves as political (and also military) heirs of Caesar, who had already been venerated as a god and was very soon due to be formally consecrated. These were people who defined their shared identity by going back to the Caesarian past rather than to a contemporary political leadership like the one of Mark Antony. Aiming at some form of religious identity (even if basically following the soberness of the earlier texts), religious elements were introduced, as is shown by the last sentence of this collection: 'Don't you see that the Roman people will have ten legions after my death, who could not only resist you, but could even storm heaven?' (*Bell. Hisp*. 42.7).

My description does not postulate a new, previously not recorded, religious group. Given the rapid political and military developments of the period, any group or network effected by the collection would have been very transient. And yet, despite the obscure authorship the large collection was carefully transmitted[40] and reached into the Middle Ages, even if in a thin line of manuscripts. Weaving together undeniably Roman triumph and civil war, sharp boundary drawing was combined with bonding by the extension of a shared memory. The speech norms established by the supplements were so powerful as to render individual authorship no longer important.

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39 Rüpke 2012b, 74–78.
40 See Suet. *Iul.* 56.1.

3.2 The Sibylline books

In terms of contents, the *Oracula Sibyllina* aimed above all at boundary drawing and political polemics. The collection of texts grew slowly; the process of accretion and reworking ended only with the prose prologue of the fifth or sixth century CE. Basically, the texts were part of a tradition of 'resistance oracles', known from Hellenistic times onwards: for instance the Egyptian Potter's oracle from the Ptolemaic period or the Oracle of Hystaspes, related to the conflicts of Persia and Asia Minor with Rome.[41] To simplify matters, the kernels of books 3 to 5 of the Sibylline Oracles should be dated to the late first century BCE (bk. 3), the Flavian (bk. 4) and the Hadrianic period (bk. 5). The other books are of widely different character and, with the probable exception of book 11, of later dates. Despite all differences in their contents, starting in 1.1–4 the books claim to offer 'prophecies' for 'all mankind' or the whole world.[42] Thus, in criticising Rome and Greco-Roman religious practices a claim to universal significance is raised. The heterogeneity of the text, which finally encompassed the gods of classical epics as well as a hymn to Christ, and the wide distribution attested by the numerous quotations in Christian texts and even Latin authors (Lactantius in particular), suggest a broad geographical reception not hindered by religious differences. The very concept of the Sibylline points to a lack of interest in actual bonding and a vaguely distant (and thus imitable) language rather than shared speech norms.

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3.3 The Pauline letters

A fairly broad intertextuality is also characteristic of the corpus of authentic and posthumous Pauline letters, a continuity of text production covering the second half of the first century CE and possibly later decades. 'Paul' argues against the background of Stoic and Platonic philosophy and presupposes an intensive knowledge of Septuagint writings even among non-circumcised readers.[43] Such a context of audience is shared with other authors, the gospel author 'Luke' for instance.[44] Any socio-historical reading of the *Corpus Paulinum* has to be done very carefully. If the authentic letters (which might themselves be the result of later redactional combinations) are seen as an ex-

41 See Lightfoot 2007; also Momigliano 1992; Potter 1990; Potter 1994; Gauger 1998, 412–418.

42 E.g. *Orac. Sib.* 1.2 *prophêteúsô*; 3.163 *prophêteûsai*; cf. 4.1 and 5.1: *klûthi* resp. *klúe*), men / world: (*kosmos*; s. 1.4; 2.21; 3.7; 8.1.3; cf. the announcements of suffering: 4.1: Asia and Europe; 5.1: Latins; 6.21: Sodom; 7.1: Rhodes).

43 E.g. in Romans; for the consequences see Rüpke 2010b.

44 Rajak 2009, 247.

ample of the formation of a network among like-minded persons in Jewish diaspora communities in Asia Minor and the Greek mainland, we could expect hundreds of letters – and we cannot exclude that they were in existence. The published corpus, however, is characterised not by the documentation of a network, but by a pseudepigraphical supplementation, which partially even theologically reflected on pseudepigraphy.[45] The different agents of this continuation had heterogeneous interests. They were engaged in the prolongation of Paul and contested others' interpretations; they venerated and instrumentalised Paul. These conflicting views were certainly connected to the interest in and critique of the specific Pauline practices and beliefs which we find even more prominently outside of the corpus, in Lukan Acts for instance. All this indicates that we are not dealing with archives of communities and local identities, but with professional exegesis and philosophical schools (and with Marcion, even historical research). These intellectuals were working within the shared spatial, administrative, and cultural framework of the Roman Empire,[46] and tried to establish a shared intellectual framework in the form of 'Pauline' speech norms. The intellectual exchange is sufficiently distant to allow for pseudepigraphy and thus marks a contrast to the history of institutions[47] offered by Acts in the first half of the second century and the use of canonical Acts as a blueprint for the notionally, but not physically collective biography provided by the corpus of apostolic Acts. The exegetical strategy of the Corpus Paulinum is attested and radicalised in the so-called letter of Barnabas, where all the details of a Christ-centred doctrine are deduced from traditional Septuagint texts.[48] On the whole, the corpus operated within a culturally and textually well-defined horizon and probably neither generated local groups nor strong trans-local networks.

Networks are based on reciprocity of the connections between the nodes.[49] In the Roman Empire correspondence by letter certainly offered the possibility for such reciprocity even across long distances. Published collections of letters, however, do not offer an authentic glimpse into such networks, but are more realistically to be interpreted as part of a meta-communication about such networks, offering models for others. They are stylised by the author himself, in the case of Pliny the Younger, posthumously edited in the case of Cicero or fully construed after death in the case of the letters ascribed to Paul. It is hard not to believe that the letters of the first person

45 See Henderson 2012.
46 On the thematisation of which see Maier 2013.
47 Thus Cancik 2011.
48 Cf. Vielhauer 1975, 602: without concrete audience.
49 See for religion in the Roman Empire Collar 2007.

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narrator Ignatius were not likewise a construction rather than being a lens into an authentic network.[50]

3.4 The Shepherd of Hermas

It is not intertextuality and references to authoritative texts, but visionary authority and autobiographical plausibility that stamp the *Pastor Hermae,* the 'Shepherd of Hermas', of about the second quarter of the second century. Starting from a book of visions, several continuations accrued, varying the same basic topics in old and new metaphors and a rich language of images, thus creating a complex, but unified landscape of metaphors, only slowly modifying established 'speech norms' and aiming at bond-building. The oldest layer hints at recitation in local meetings. The continuations offer time and again new material for recitation and reading, engaging in, and at the same time problematising, boundary drawing. They most probably stem from the same author but clearly reflect exchange with an audience that quickly grew beyond the original one. Numerous translations, into Latin before the end of the second century, but even into the languages of the Eastern Mediterranean, attest to this. Their imagery might have been drawn upon in a wall painting in a catacomb at Naples (San Gennaro), a fact that also suggests large popularity and wide reception. For the individual recipient, the reading and even more the copying offered occasions for religious reflection and – the main concern of the text – *metanoia*, repentance.

The text seems to have found listeners, readers, copyists, and translators without any explicit reference to contemporary theological debates and without any visible institutional support (except perhaps, as the text claims, at the very beginning). The text is to be found in the fourth-century *Codex Sinaiticus* despite the warning of the *Canon Muratori* against any liturgical reading. Even if such a norm suggests that the practices criticised were widespread, the heterogeneous audience nowhere seems to have been part of processes of clustering, of forming anything more than transitory groups of listeners. Fairly soon the growth had stopped, but not the distribution of the text. The fragmentary book *Elchesai* of the early Trajanic period, a text similar in some respects, accomplished a comparable geographical distribution, even if moving in the other direction, from the East to the West. The more radical way of life described here and the ritualisation of its doctrine, however, elicited sharper conflicts.[51]

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50 For the problem of authenticity see Hartmann 2013; Waldner 2015.
51 Briefly Berger and Nord 2001, 770. In detail: Luttikhuizen 1985 (non vidi).

To sum up: Religious texts could be sufficiently attractive to an audience to oblige their producers to reproduce a common speech norm for any continuation of the original text. Such texts could play roles in very different processes of grouping. Apart from an initial impetus of a responsive local audience, the later audience was diverse in space and time. Even the producers, if we disregard repeated production by the self-same author, may not have belonged to a local group or even dense personal network, but might have relied entirely on intertextuality based on secondary media, on books or letters.

4 Translations and transpositions

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After looking into processes of grouping on the axes of space and time, we need to address a further dimension of spreading. The relevant observations are made not so much from the Italic and West or central European point of view, but from the cultural centres in the bridging regions between Asia, Europe and Africa, from Alexandria and Antioch rather than Athens and Rome. Within the multi-layered literary cultures of the Levant, translations were everyday practice, including religious texts as is exemplified by the Septuagint and the Rosetta stone. Interesting texts were quickly translated. Perhaps, in scriptographic cultures relying on individual copying, the labour involved in the manual replication of a text in a foreign language is not so different from a paraphrase in one's own language. In her analysis of the Septuagint, Tessa Rajak has stressed that such a process of translation need not imply loss of identity of the tradition of origin and the source language. The production of a new, individual text in the target language does not only accommodate cultural assimilation but could also establish a language variety of its own that includes peculiarities in syntax, semantics, and vocabulary.[52] A translation might even be a 'foreignising translation', that is, resulting in a text that deliberately displayed its distant origin. That said, the extent of the process of change into a whole new web of associations and significations of the world constituted by the new language should not be underrated. This holds true not only for the Septuagint, but also for the so-called 'Christian' Latin and the Nag Hammadi texts.

The library of Nag Hammadi, found in 1945, is a collection of earlier texts in thirteen codices of the first half of the fourth century.[53] Its classification

52 Rajak 2009, 152–175; foreignising: 153.

53 Scopello 2010, in particular 253 (see also 270); Schenke in Schenke, Bethge and Kaiser 2007, 2.

has been found to be very difficult. Different parts of the texts, distributed over all the volumes, have been labelled as 'gnostic', 'Valentinian', 'Sethian', 'hermetic' or 'sapiential' or 'non-gnostic Christian'. The genres extend from ritual texts and prayers to apocalypses. Thus, the identification of religious groups that might have produced or employed these texts is highly problematic; it has recently been suggested that the deposit might be characterised as a library buried on the occasion of its owner's death.[54] All these texts are probably translations of Greek texts into different Coptic dialects. This denotes the extension of the reception as well as its lack of control. The texts betray an intensive local assimilation, conducted by a massive embedding into Egypt. Ilaria Ramelli has observed this process in a comparison between the texts of Codex VI referring to Hermes Trismegistos and the writings of the texts we know as the *Corpus Hermeticum*.[55] This observation could be generalised for the whole cluster. Surely, these are texts for intellectuals, who think in categories of Greek, and in particular Platonic, philosophy. Nevertheless they are translated into (most often) Sahidic and they associate progress of insight and understanding with initiatory rituals and progressive revelations, even if in the form of interiorised cognition and books, which serve appropriation rather than distinction.[56]

Multilingualism is in need of repeated care. This is proven by the large number of further translations of biblical texts into Greek by Jews far down into the imperial period. At the same time the lack of linguistic barriers made identifications of religious belonging difficult, as is demonstrated by the repeated identification of the producers of Greek translations of biblical texts like Aquila, Symmachus or Theodotion or of exegetical texts like Philo as Christians – or again as 'Jews' in unfounded polemics.[57] Evidently, translations indicated a loss of control of religious as well as political organisations. The Celtic adaptation of the Roman calendar in the form of the calendar of Coligny and its implicit polemics offers a Western example.[58] Processes of translation need not imply the emergence of transcultural groups.

And yet, interest in translation was not universal. In a fine analysis of different narratives, Judith Perkins has demonstrated the lack of interest in broadening the appeal of the normative culture identified as Greek *paideia* on the part of its cultural protagonists.[59] The lack or even suppression of

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54 Denzey Lewis and Ariel Blount 2014.
55 Thus Ramelli 2005, 1358–1359.
56 Cf. Ramelli 2005, 1344 and 1362–1364.
57 See Rajak 2009, 311. For the ongoing movement see e.g. Karrer 2012.
58 On which Stern 2012, 303–313.
59 Perkins 2015; see also Perkins 2012. Cf. Eshleman 2012.

translations in the rabbinic movement might have been responsible for the loss of contact with diaspora communities in the central and Western part of the Mediterranean until the Islamic period and possibly even of a far-reaching Latin-Christian assimilation, if we follow the thesis of a 'split diaspora'.[60] Evidently, linguistic openness or closure is not an inherited cultural trait, but a situational aspect of processes of grouping. As a consequence, the spread of the imperial language of Latin deep into provincial populations or rather institutional settings and genres (like Testaments)[61] was very different from the interests of Syriac or Palestinian migrants to Rome and Latin citizens in Northern Africa or Gaul.[62] Texts written by non-Palestinian Hellenised Jews and the Christ-followers among them evidently tended to more easily invite bond-building across social echelons and to drop the basic speech norm of using the 'original' language.

As lack of data on actual readers (rather than membership in predefined groups) is standard, social transfers could be inferred from transferrals into other genres.[63] This phenomenon has been discussed (even if not under the perspective suggested here) by using a term coined in 1959 by Geza Vermes, that is, 'rewritten bible'. For the biblical tradition the tragedy 'Exodus' by the Hellenistic writer Ezekhiel is included: likewise the reformulation of the biblical narrative in ten of the twenty volumes of Flavius Josephus' *Antiquitates,* or in the history written by Pseudo-Philo.[64] The concept is easily extended as 'rewritten gospel' to many Gospels of the second to third centuries.[65]

Other genres and media augment the tendency observed. Myths continued to be important in poetry read or sung and performed on stage contrary to the claims of philosophy and historiography, which saw themselves as the former's critics and heirs.[66] Given the spread of literacy, the power of narration extended in different forms onto the field of religion, for instance as historiography of institutions,[67] acts of apostles and martyrs, but also as biographies of recent persons like Jesus or of more distant figures like Moses

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60 Edrei and Mendels 2007; Edrei and Mendels 2008; Edrei and Mendels 2012. Both authors are reluctant to come to conclusions regarding the assimilation of Jewish communities in the West. They do not deal with the problem of a Greek speaking minority in Latin speaking surroundings.

61 See the contributions in Cotton 2009.

62 I am grateful to Annette Weissenrieder for introducing me to the discussions in the *Vetus Latina* research.

63 Or the lack of that, cf. Dohrmann 2013, 66.

64 Rajak 2009, 223–224.

65 Henderson 2011.

66 On which see Rüpke 2013b.

67 See Cancik 2011; Rüpke 2012b; cf. Becker 2005.

(Philo) and perhaps Abraham (Pseudo-Hecataeus).[68] Since the third century BCE at the latest, people like Aristarchos of Samos and his contemporary Aristoboulos of Alexandria transferred techniques developed for the exegesis of Homeric texts to texts of Jewish tradition. Beginning with Philo at the beginning of the first century CE and Origen at the end of the second, comparable quality is reached for the exegesis of central texts of the 'biblical' tradition.[69]

All of this is a form of intensification of the belonging to a certain tradition, strengthening a collective identity that is above all imagined and need not be matched by an interacting social group.[70] At the same time it is a form of localisation or even individualisation and innovation. But the 're' in re-written still takes the existence of a stable proto-type for granted. The complex growth, the repeated and precarious acts even of 'copying', the long process of selection and ongoing redaction into new collections and the late and at most partially and locally successful attempts at canonisation bring the rewriting into perspective. It was rather an ongoing writing of an open textual tradition,[71] persistently allowing for the drawing of new boundaries or bonds (for instance in terms of gender[72]) by only carefully modifying norms of speech.

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5 Conclusion: Invisible authors, diffuse identity, and the lack of textual communities

As I stated in the beginning, this article has been focused on the role of texts in processes of grouping together. Such processes answered to changes of the cultural and political contexts of religious practices. As I have shown, the producers and audiences of religious texts of the period were highly diverse. They cannot usefully be covered by an undifferentiated notion of 'textual communities' or even 'religions'. The perspectives reviewed so far of communication extended by texts, of supplementation of texts, and their social and linguistic transposition, have indicated very different forms of grouping. Contrary to a trend in ancient heresiography and modern research, the existence of a text is hardly sufficient evidence for postulating the existence of a corresponding group.

68 For the latter see Rajak 2009.
69 On Philo, see Niehoff 2011, part. 133–151.
70 See Rüpke 2015b.
71 See for Qumran, White Crawford 2014.
72 Cf. Haines-Eitzen 2012.

I will conclude my plea for a much more nuanced analysis in the terms suggested by Nina Eliasoph and Paul Lichterman for the research in contemporary processes of grouping. For the replacement of the static notion of group by the procedural notion of grouping, they offer a scheme of three fields of analysis:

1. 'Group boundaries' put into practice a group's assumptions about what the group's relationship (imagined and real) to the wider world should be while in the group context.
2. 'Group bonds' put into practice a group's assumptions about what members' mutual responsibilities should be while in the group context.
3. 'Speech norms' put into practice a group's assumptions about what appropriate speech is in the group context.[73]

Groups could be built by establishing reciprocal relationships, but reciprocity need not be reciprocity in kind. Generalised reciprocity might bind together persons of highly asymmetrical social standing such as patrons and clients. But how were texts involved? While many of the instances reviewed so far imply a high local visibility or translocal remembrance of the authors (usually male), a strategy of invisible authorship might also be followed, well exemplified in the case studies. Apocalyptic typically went hand in hand with pseudepigraphy. In terms of content, these texts combined innovation and polemical attack. We have to assume that this type of communication was widespread. Given the fierce counter-critique, the surviving texts must have been just the tip of the iceberg, above all in the case of letters. The attractiveness could have consisted in the association with a minority, but diffuse and easily shared, political positioning, on the basis of which individual recipients could develop a collective identity and become informed observers. They did not actually group together. From the first century CE onwards it was above all the individual whom these texts invited to respond and react.[74] The fear of conspiracy and repressive reactions by those in power, as time and again described in historiography, for instance by Cassius Dio, appear paranoid against such a background.

Heresiography might likewise be judged paranoid. It was not. If, as Brian Stock claims, literacy was the cutting edge of heresy, it was above all literacy itself that produced heresy as the most radical form of literary boundary-drawing. Heresies were not so much religious groups, but intellectual arguments framed as sociological observations. Heresiography, then, was the art of group definition within a highly complex space of literary communica-

73 Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003, 739.

74 For processes of religious individualisation during the Empire see Rüpke and Spickermann 2012; Rüpke 2013d; Rüpke 2013a; Rüpke and Woolf 2013; in general Joas and Rüpke 2013 and Fuchs 2015.

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tion. As such, it could provide useful tools for later constructions of foes and forerunners. For example, the second-order observation of Irenaeus, his *Adversus haereses (Élenchos kaì anatropé tês pseudônúmou gnóseôs)* – the 'testing and rejection of what is wrongly called gnosis' –, has informed, in its Latin translation, classification of religious practices far into early modern Europe.

If texts could hardly build stable groups, they could certainly further them. Given the limits of reading competence and affordable copies, at least the recitation of texts within groups could have played a role. From the first century CE (at the latest) onwards, certainly before the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem, there existed a widespread Jewish practice of such recitations,[75] which was not grounded in above average literacy. Control of such communicative spaces was local. This implied potential for conflicts and innovations. The formation of canons, on the other hand, was possible only by excluding local peculiarities and hence would have developed together with the rise of trans-local hierarchy and control. Thus, it could not serve to strengthen local identities. The latter would have to be formed by other means, performative in particular. Ritual texts are lacking from this period; prayers and hymns were, wherever they appear, elaborate and highly individual products.[76]

This scenario can be checked when we direct attention to the destruction of books.[77] Such occurrences are widely attested – from Augustus' burning of two thousand Sibylline oracles, through the suppression of individual texts during the early Principate, to the deliberate search for texts in order to destroy proto-Christian infrastructure – by the late third century and comparable late ancient practices.[78] Before this late stage, destruction always aimed at individual possessors or authors respectively for their versions of past or future events. There is no evidence that they were seen as potential founders of groups.

Architecture likewise offers corroborating evidence. Whereas theatres as spaces to optimise acoustic (verbal and musical) communication were among the most popular 'export items' of first Greek and then Roman culture, religious buildings of the same potentiality (even if not capacity) spread only slowly, of which synagogues were the earliest. Private meeting rooms

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75 Rajak 2009, 234–235.
76 E. g. Furley and Bremer 2001; Hickson Hahn 2007; Leonhard and Löhr 2014.
77 I am grateful to Martin Wallraff for this reference.
78 Suet. *Aug.* 31.1; Teja Casuso and Marcos 2012.

were only from the end of the third century onwards transformed or supplanted by 'churches'.[79]

Recent empirical research among members of contemporary Western societies has suggested that group formation within a heterogeneous population is above all based on two factors: reciprocity and the expectation of reciprocity on the one hand, and transitivity on the other.[80] The latter denotes the extension of bonds through one's immediate contacts, that is, my friend's friends become my friends and vice versa. It is shared acting rather than shared listening that enables one to develop transitivity. Without doubt, practices of common reading and interpreting could strengthen existing groups by these actions' performative character, as Brian Stock has shown for medieval 'textual communities'. It might have been as much by such practices as by textual wording that speech norms were furthered. The growth and continuation of the text assemblages analysed above, preserving traits of style and semantics even across changing authorship, could point to such a mechanism.

The processes analysed here developed within an empire in which general literacy and the competence to read surely expanded, even if comprehensive textual competence remained a preserve of elites. Among these developments was a 'textualisation of religion'.[81] Religious rituals, but of course also religious texts, became subjects of texts. We do not have any reliable chronological data or quantifiable serial findings. It is, however, indicative that by the second century CE a writer like Plutarch, who is characterised by his encyclopaedic breadth, dedicates a fifth of the *Moralia* to religious topics in a narrow sense, and likewise Lucian, no less than a quarter of his surviving oeuvre.[82] For writers of the first century BCE such as Varro or Cicero, religion was not of comparable importance.

And yet, textual communities as analysed by Stock are hardly detectable in the evidence available. If networks were formed around the reading and interpreting of such texts, they seem to have been local and temporary. In some instances we should imagine very small and elite spaces of communication for written texts, in others the extension in space, time, and across social and cultural boundaries. Here, texts could move quickly through weak ties established by other mechanisms, offering the basis for further communication. Religious groups that formed bonds on the basis of shared text

79 White 1990; Balch 2008; Hahn 2008; Hunter 2013; Rajak 2002; Levine 2004.
80 Gray et al. 2014.
81 Schaper 2009, dealing with the seventh to fifth century BCE.
82 20 out of 70 transmitted texts by Lucian dealt with what I would call 'religion'; in the case of Plutarch around 15 of the 78 essays in the *Moralia*.

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experiences and that drew boundary lines on the basis of textual differences do not, however, seem to have been a significant trait of the imperial period.

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Conceptualizing the role of religion and religious actors in peacebuilding. Religious beliefs as intangible components supporting peacebuilding processes. Social functions traditionally performed by religious actors. Religious actors as key members of local civil societies. The specificity and evolution of the role of religious actors in peacebuilding. In the post-9/11 world, religions and religious actors are more commonly associated with extremism and conflict between religious communities than before, in particular in the popular mind.1 The many other dimensions and contributions of religio... Religious conversion can be seen as the achievement of a new (religious) self.Â Some of the dissident, reform or pietist movements which emerged during the transition to Capitalist modernity have been called â€œreligions of the heartâ€ which focused on inner spiritual apotheosis and repudiated conventional selves unconcerned with radical salvation (Campbell, 1991).Â As noted in an influential social-psychology text, in brainwashing, â€œthe subject is assumed to be passive, withoutÂ Dr. Schein also downplays the role of hypnotic trance disorientation and dissociative states in coercive persuasion, which is really intended â€œto produce ideological and behavioral changes in a fully conscious, intact individualâ€ (Schein, 1959; Anthony, 1990, 316). 1 abandoned during the eruption of 79.2 The remains of seven pistrina in Ostia have been analysed by Jan Theo Bakker, who focused similarly on the technological processes of bread production in the town.3 More recently, the archaeologist Nicolas Monteix has revisited the material from Pompeii and Herculaneum, where two bakeries are known; new discoveries of milling equipment, kneading-troughsÂ There remains a lacuna in our understanding of the baking trade during the Principate, and it cannot be filled without proper consideration of the cultural and social context of bread production in the Roman world. Though often marginalized by scholars, the testimonies of Roman authors provide an important framework for interpreting the material record.