November 2019

Competition without Groups: Maintaining a Flat Methodology

Daniel Ullucci
dullucci@stonehill.edu

Competition Without Groups: Maintaining a Flat Methodology[1]

Daniel Ullucci

Stonehill College

This essay seeks to consider some of the theoretical opportunities and challenges of a thematic focus on 'competition' in the study of ancient Mediterranean religion. It was spurred by witnessing the success of this theme in the Society of Biblical Literature section on "religious competition," which led to the formation of this journal. The success of this SBL group shows that 'competition' is a useful category and heuristic for critical, redescriptive work on a variety of different aspects of ancient Mediterranean religion from food, to ritual, to textual production.[2] The paper is not a critique of this past work, some of which I have happily had the opportunity to participate in and contribute to. Rather, I hope to raise a series of potential problems that a scholarly focus on competition can produce and point to some ways to avoid these. Fortuitously, avoiding these potential dangers may direct scholarship on competition in new directions that are not only more theoretical and historically sound, but also beneficial to a broader goal of critically redescribing and explaining various aspects of ancient Mediterranean religion.

Since its founding in 2009, the SBL section on religious competition (originally named "Religious Competition in the Third Century" but broadened to "Religious Competition in the Ancient Mediterranean" in 2012), has brought together an exceptionally broad range of scholars. The group has kept its definition of competition broad and encouraged scholars to seek out ways in which the concept might better focus and direct their analysis. The group's continued success is proof of the utility of this original framing. The present, then, may be a good time to step back and consider some potential negatives of this approach and how they may be avoided. The dangers

I will raise come from the insights of network theory, particularly from the ways in which network theory has been adapted by Bruno Latour.[3] The goal is not to question the usefulness of "competition" as a scholarly heuristic. Instead, the start of this new journal provides an opportunity to deliberately refine the concept of competition. As an innate, fundamental, and transhuman phenomenon, "competition" provides an excellent locus for theoretically informed intra- and inter-disciplinary scholarship.

The Potential Dangers of Framing things as "Competition"

Throughout the work of the group, the term "competition" has been intentionally underdefined, leaving room for a wide variety of data to be considered competition. Rarely have scholars in this group been discussing instances of overt or direct competition such as formal debates, athletic events, personal combat, etc.—that is, formalized and/or ritualized interactions in which competitors act according to set rules and people observe winners and losers. Rather, much of what has been analyzed is what we often refer to as "social competition," that is, competition involving a bewildering and difficult to disentangle web of ideas, hierarchies, practices, rituals, truth claims, and authority claims.

Analyzing data, textual or archaeological, as evidence of competition usually means conceptualizing at least two different positions. These may be ideologies, practices, or power structures, that are in tension. At its root, analyzing data as competition usually assumes that there are at least two distinct positions being negotiated by the parties involved. The parties may be people in conflict with each other (e.g. Paul vs. Cephas, Augustine vs. Pelagius). More often, however, the parties involved are conceptualized as groups, not just individuals, and the competition involves a broad array of ideas and power structures as opposed to a single point of disagreement (e.g. Beit Hillel vs. Beit Shammai, Roman philosophers vs. Christian theologians). The term "social competition" is often used here. The term appears frequently in broader Religious Studies scholarship, but its usage is extremely vague. What exactly constitutes "social competition" is rarely defined, but the usage of the term suggests two possibilities, both of which bear scrutiny and clarification.

"Social" may here serve as a modifier of competition. In this usage, "social" seems to do more to obfuscate "competition" than clarify it. A "poetry competition" would be a very specific type of competition, but "social" competition would involve the extremely broad range of things

---

[3] The paper particularly focuses on Latour's points in Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social an Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

scholars often label "social," that is, almost *anything*. Since we are social animals, a fair argument could be made that everything humans do is "social." "Social competition," therefore, appears to function as a term for any competition that cannot be more narrowly defined (sailing competition, spelling competition, etc.) These more specific types of competition are, of course, inherently "social" too. (What human competition is not "social?") Instead of a useful scholarly category, "social competition" appears to be the set of all human competition ({social competition} = {human competition}).

An alternative interpretation of the term "social competition" might be to imagine that "the social" is the medium through which the competition is affected. Here, "social" is standing for all of the very complex ways in which humans interact with each other and the wider world, any one of which could be used for competitive purposes. But again, all human interactions are social, so *any* other medium through which competition might take place (poetry, singing, card playing, academic writing, etc.) would simply be subset of the social. As above, the term "social" here is doing little or nothing to limit, clarify, or describe the noun competition. This may all seem pedantic (we all know that these terms are being used in broad and notional ways as expedients in communication). The vague way in which social competition is often used, however, may pose significant potential for confusion in analysis.[4]

The Problem with "Social Competition"

In his 2005 book *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, Bruno Latour mounts a scathing attack on the way the concept of "the social" is frequently used by scholars. Although Latour does not address "social competition" directly, his points are relevant here. In short, Latour argues that scholars have unwittingly imbued "the social" with a sort of magical agency such that events in the real world are often ascribed to "social" causes.[5] Latour is quite aware that when most scholars talk of "social causes" they are not imaging "society" as some giant, voluntary agent. Rather, "the social" is being used as a shorthand for a massive and hugely complex set of things (people, objects, power structures, ideologies, norms, practices, etc.), which are imbued, as a whole, with agency but which are left unanalyzed because their workings are assumed to be clear or obvious. For example, a historical context shot through with racist people, racist

---

4 Latour gets close to this point in discussing "social explanations." He points out that appeals to "social explanations" are often superfluous additions that do more to obfuscate the real human interactions at hand. Latour, *Reassembling*, 49–50.
5 Latour, *Reassembling*, 1–17.

structures, racist books and movies, racist practices, and racist ideologies will tend to reproduce racism. We would commonly simplify this by saying that racism has "social" causes.

Latour, as a sociologist, argues that this kind of simplified shorthand may be fine in everyday circumstances, but not in sociological analysis. The massive and hugely complex set of things covered under the term "social" is exactly what sociologists are supposed to be analyzing. Latour accuses the field of frequently using "the social" as an explanation when it is, in fact, the very thing that itself needs to be explained.[6] How do ideas and norms get transmitted to individual persons such that those ideas and norms shape that person's actions? How do comparatively stable concepts like group claims and identity claims maintain whatever ephemeral stability they might have, to the point where some people actually imagine themselves as part of a group or as having a specific identity? The answer cannot be society. No one interacts with "the social" nor learns things from "society." We interact, learn, and are influenced by specific persons and things. Untangling how, exactly, ideas pass from person to person—who you learned your ideas about groups, identity, race, religion, etc. from—is, Latour argues, the goal of sociological analysis.[7] Attributing these to society, or social context, may work for broad, macro-level models, but it short-circuits exactly the analysis necessary to understand how ideas spread and develop.

The main argument of *Reassembling the Social* is that sociologists must not let "the social" stand as a shorthand any longer; more specifically, "society" or "the social" must not be treated as an explanation of anything but rather as the thing that needs explaining.[8] For Latour, human networks are constantly in flux with connections incessantly being created and dissolved. Constant change is the norm; it is *stability* of any kind (stability of groups, identity claims, ideologies, practices, etc.) that desperately needs explanation by tracing the immense work required to achieve such stability. Sociologists must do the very difficult work of tracing the actions of persons, the creation of ideologies, the communication and mediation of norms and practices—in short, all the things that make up the shorthand "the social." Failure to do this kind of extremely fine-grained analysis risks what a Religious Studies scholar might call *insufficient redescription*, where the scholar simply repeats the positions and ideology of the dominant data.[9]

---

6 Latour, *Reassembling*, 5–9.

7 To do this, Latour focuses on tracing what he calls "associations," the connections between people and objects. Latour, *Reassembling*, 172–190. On objects as agents, see 63–86. Latour's emphasis on objects and site has a strong affinity with the work of Theodore Schatzki, as does his discussion of action. See Theodore R. Schatzki, *The Site of the Social: A Philosophical Account of the Constitution of Social Life and Change* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002).

8 Latour, *Reassembling*, 1–17.

9 On the concept of redescription, see Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

I am not advocating a full scale "Latourian" approach, what Latour refers to as Actor-Network Theory (ANT).[10] First, there are potential problems with Latour's assumptions which are being debated actively by sociologists, but most importantly, for the ancient Mediterranean, the evidence simply does not exist to follow all the lines of analysis necessary to produce even a fraction of an Actor-Network Theory analysis.[11] That said, there are a number of clear insights from Latour's work that cannot be gainsaid, and which can aid analysis of religious competition.

If we agree with Latour that "the social" is a problem, "social competition" is doubly so. "Social competition" often stands as a catch-all for insufficiently analyzed and theorized data. Determining exactly what kind of competition is going on is a first step in analysis, but it may never happen if the vague label "social competition" is allowed to stand. A series of potential problems for viewing data as competition flows from here. Framing data as competition may invite a series of assumptions that Latour's work calls into question.

The Challenges of Imagining "Competition"

As discussed above, analyzing ancient competition usually involves conceptualizing at least two entities in conflict, but this frequently expands into imagining broader "social" competition between multiple people or groups interacting in a variety of ways. This creates a series of potential problems in precisely identifying the parties involved, which is greatly exacerbated by our frequent reliance on texts as our only evidence for ancient competition.

First, we have very little information on the dissemination of texts in the ancient Mediterranean and very little information on the realities of groups.[12] Our texts frequently present groups in competition, but we rarely have clear evidence that the "groups" presented in the texts actually existed or that they existed in the ways presented in the texts.

Second, we often have very limited evidence of actual interaction between entities (people or groups) in the ancient Mediterranean. Texts often imagine themselves in competition with other

---

10 Latour, *Reassembling*, 10–11.

11 For an analysis of critiques of Latour's Actor-Network Theory, see Tom Mills, "What has Become of Critique? Reassembling Sociology After Latour," *British Journal of Sociology* 69.2 (2018): 286–305.

12 For a discussion of the realia of ancient 'publication' see, William A. Johnson, *Readers and Reading Culture in the High Roman Empire: A Study of Elite Communities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). See also Tom Standage, *Writing on the Wall: Social Media- the First 2,000 Years* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

groups, but we rarely have evidence to prove real interactions.[13] For example, Lucian of Samosata presents a competition between his ideal intellectual readers and the comically ignorant masses.[14] The illiterate "masses," however, were not reading Lucian's satires, and even if they did, they would surely not recognize themselves in Lucian' offensive caricatures. They are not actual participants in the competition that Lucian has defined.

Many examples of competition in our texts are likely to be one-sided creations of our authors in which the other side is simply a caricature. However, the problem is deeper than simply the issue of inaccurate descriptions or polemical caricatures. Even if a caricature references real people or a real group (however inaccurately), it is possible that the "other side" never read the text and was, in fact, completely unaware of—or uninterested in—the supposed competition. Is there a competition going on if one side does not know about it? Moreover, is there a competition going on if one side does not even conceive of themselves as constituting a 'side?'

A scholarly focus on competition, combined with a general dependence on texts as data, threatens to produce a situation where it is all too easy to project ancient groups that never existed and to conceptualize ancient competition where there was no actual interaction and no actual "other side." In such a situation, framing data as competition for the purpose of analysis immediately reinscribes the views of those voices the scholar has privileged as their source. Specifically, it reinscribes the sources' claim that a competition was going on and that another "side" existed which cared about the outcome of the competition.

I cite Lucian as an obvious example of a situation in which the "other side" in a competition is clearly a polemical creation. Scholars are rarely guilty of such egregious misconstrual of competition. Indeed, it could be argued that basic attention to historical and literary *context* is sufficient to avoid such pitfalls. This is true in many cases, and the ongoing work of the Religious Competition in the Ancient Mediterranean group and this journal is replete with examples of careful attention to context informing nuanced analysis of competition. Scholarly historical models, however, quickly become very complex and are informed by an array of analyzed and unanalyzed macro-level assumptions about the ancient world. It is in these cases that, I think, Latour's points can help, even if we consider them simply refined ways of stressing that context matters. The stakes are high because models based on insufficiently analyzed notions of groups in

---

13 This is a significant challenge for employing insights from network theory in the ancient Mediterranean. For examples that illustrate the challenges, see *Semeia: An Experimental Journal of Biblical Criticism* 56 (1992); Cavan W. Concannon, *Assembling Early Christianity: Trade, Networks, and the Letters of Dionysios of Corinth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); István Czachesz, *Cognitive Science and the New Testament: A New Approach to Early Christian Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

14 See, among many possible examples, Lucian, *On Sacrifices* and *The Ignorant Book Collector*.

competition can significantly impact the field, sometimes for decades. Indeed, this has frequently happened as the examples below show.

Example: The Case of Disappearing Groups

A prime, and now very well-known, example of this problem is case of the so-called Gnostics. Several important early Christian writers speak of the Gnostics as a rival group with a distinct set of beliefs and texts. Earlier scholarship tended to accept this portrayal and imagine conflict and competition between these distinct groups as a formative element of early Christianity. In the late 1900s however, scholars began to question this model, largely by stressing that "the Gnostics" appeared to not actually exist as a defined group except in the heads of certain Christian polemicists. There undoubtedly was a competition going on within early Christianity of the second and third centuries around beliefs and texts, but as several scholars have shown, conceptualizing this competition as a set of interactions between self-identifying Gnostics and non-Gnostics is unhelpful and misleading.[15] We could still say that "gnostic" is indeed a competitive term, but it is part of one set of Christian writers' attempt to stabilize and articulate *their own* group identity. The point here is not that there was no competition happening; real people who supported different Christian ideologies and different Christian texts were certainly in competition in the first through fourth centuries. The insight of scholars such as Karen King and others was that this competition did not take the "Christians vs. Gnostics" form that scholars had traditionally imagined. *In toto*, the "Christians vs. Gnostics" model of competition was detrimental to our understanding of the development of Christianity.

We could give many more examples of scholarship that made assumptions about groups, the existence of which (or at least the characteristics of which) were later called into question. It was once common to take the description of the Pharisees in the New Testament gospels as descriptive of a real group. This misidentified "competition" led to models of early Christianity which assumed that a real competition with the Pharisees was a fundamental part of the life of the historical Jesus and thus of earliest Christianity.[16] Scholarship on the Dead Sea Scrolls includes

---

15 For a critique of scholarly uses of the term, see Karen L. King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 2003). For an alternate, second order, use of the term in scholarly analysis see, April DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age: How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized Religion from Antiquity to Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); April DeConick, "Gnostic Theology: The One God is No Simple Matter," (Paper presented at il Centro Italiano di Studi Superiori sulle Religioni, Bertinoro, Italy, September 26, 2019).

16 A formative competition between Jesus and Jewish authorities such as the Pharisees is characteristic of the so-called "Second Quest" for the historical Jesus. For a summary of scholarship on the Pharisees, see E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE-66 CE* (Philadelphia: Trinity

many similar and now defunct hypotheses on the group responsible for the text and the site of Qumran as well as the competition that spawned the group.[17] In Pauline scholarship, the nature of the "Judaizers" and the "Super Apostles" and their competition with Paul has been repeatedly reconceptualized.[18] More recently "Jewish-Christianity" has become an area of scholarship where the existence of actual groups and competition is debated.[19] How can we ensure that, in our current focus on competition, we are not projecting groups in competition that will later be proven as incorrect as the Gnostics? Latour's points on "flatness" can help.

Theorizing 'Flat' Human Interactions

Latour uses the metaphor of "flatness" to refer to an approach that attempts to follow actual paths that connect people, things, and ideas in a network. For Latour, a flat ontology refuses the tendency to constantly jump to higher levels of social organization and to use these higher levels as explanation.[20] For example, in attempting to account for America's rampant gun violence, one frequently sees entities such as "society" or "gun culture" evoked as explanations. No human, however, has ever interacted with the entity "society" nor even the more specific entity "gun culture." Rather they interacted with specific people and things: gun promoting friends and family; texts, movies, and television shows espousing toxic ideologies; and retailers advertising gun sales. Accounting for how and why a mass-shooter came to do what he did should involve the very hard work of tracing all of these connections. Jumping to higher order abstractions such as "society" or "gun culture" is unlikely to provide useful answers in specific cases.

Maintaining flatness is not easy precisely because jumping to higher order abstractions seems so natural and so effective.[21] The creation of categories and taxonomies is, after all, often what scholars do, and it is certainly true that such organization can be fruitful. Latour's point,

---

Press International, 1994), 380–451. For a critical appraisal of the role of ideas about Pharisees in historical Jesus scholarship, see Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 103–110.

17 For an overview, see James VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010). For an example of an approach which stresses groups, see Robert H. Eisenman, *James the Brother of Jesus: The Key to Unlocking the Secrets of Early Christianity and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998).

18 For a summary and critical appraisal of this scholarship, see John Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

19 See Matt Jackson-McCabe, *Jewish Christianity Reconsidered: Rethinking Ancient Groups and Texts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2007); Annette Yoshiko Reed, *Jewish-Christianity and the History of Judaism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).

20 Latour, *Reassembling*, 165–172.

21 Latour, *Reassembling*, 141–156.

however, is quite valid. Assumptions about groups and other higher order "social" entities quickly become an explanation when in fact, the supposed existence of such entities is the very thing we need to prove and explain. Keeping things flat is particularly difficult in analyzing ancient data because higher order abstractions often stand in for unavailable data.

For example, in analyzing a Pauline letter like 1 Thessalonians, it is tempting to jump to a higher order abstraction like the "Thessalonian *ekklesia*." Paul himself encourages us to make this jump since this is precisely how he portrays the situation in Thessalonica.[22] Keeping things flat here is difficult since we do not know any of the people in Thessalonica to whom Paul is writing. Does Paul know each and every one of them personally or is he making assumptions about what the group is like? How group-ish is this group? Is being part of the Thessalonian *ekklesia* the most important thing going on in their lives or is it one set of relationships among many? Do all of them even think of themselves as part of this group? Paul presents himself as the spokesperson for a group, but that does not mean the group actually exists in the way he conceptualizes it. This is a good example of a case where it is our source itself that takes the first jump away from flatness. Scholars are simply following Paul's lead. Keeping things flat here would mean thinking about Paul's interactions (in person and through letters) with specific people in Thessalonica and the extent to which some of them have adapted and adopted ("mediated" in Latour's terms) some elements of Paul's ideas about the existence of an *ekklesia*.[23]

This may not make much of a difference in a short and comparably simple letter like 1 Thessalonians, but when things are more complicated and contentious, failure to keep things flat is much more problematic. In 1 Corinthians, for example, Stanley Stowers has shown the dangers in assuming that there really existed a Corinthian *ekklesia* corresponding to Paul's vision.[24] Again here, Paul is serving as a spokesperson for a group. It is he who is asserting the existence of a community in Corinth assembled around—and loyal to—his ideology. As Stowers shows, there is indeed a network of people in Corinth (and surely a competition as well), but it does not correspond to Paul's description. Paul's letters simply do not provide the data necessary to fully understand the complex competitive situation in Corinth.

---

22 The letter is shot through with "cheerleading" language, that is language designed to encourage notions of group identity. See, for example, 1:4 (the Thessalonians are "chosen"), 1:6 (the group is an idealized example to others and is under attack from the outside), 1:9 (other people recognize the Thessalonian *ekklesia* as a group), etc.

23 The concept of mediators is critical for Latour. Some forms of network theory assume a simplified model of transmission in which ideas stay relatively stable as they spread from node to node on the network. Latour stresses the point that humans much more commonly transform ideas that they receive. A proper network model assumes that almost every node is a mediator of ideas, not simply an intermediary retransmitter of them. Latour, *Reassembling*, 38–42.

24 Stanley K. Stowers, "Kinds of Myth, Meals, and Power: Paul and the Corinthians," in *Redescribing Paul and the Corinthians*, ed. Ron Cameron and Merrill Miller (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 105–50.

Flat Competition

Keeping things flat in analyzing competition is critical precisely because framing data as competition can so easily lead to projecting higher-level abstractions, namely groups in competition. Keeping things flat means:

- Assuming that our sources provide evidence for *group formation attempts* rather than evidence for cohesive groups corresponding to our sources' espoused ideologies;
- Not assuming that the "other side" existed as described by our sources and maintaining the possibility that the "other side:" (1) did not conceptualize themselves as a "side" at all and (2) was not engaged, either practically or ideologically, in the competition as framed by our sources (they did not *care*).

The more local and small-scale the analysis can remain, the less likely the jump to higher order abstractions, and the more fruitful our analysis can be.[25] Beyond avoiding these potential pitfalls, maintaining a flat landscape of competition is also valuable because it encourages us to pay attention to who is actually competing with whom in our sources.

Test Case: Pliny's Christiani

Pliny's letter of 111/112 CE to Trajan on the issue of problematic Christians in Bithynia Pontus provides a useful test case for a flat approach to competition. First, because it has been very well-studied, and second, because of its status as one of the earliest pieces of evidence for competition between Christians and the Roman state from a non-Christian source.[26] Briefly, since it is so well-known, the letter is Pliny's report to the emperor Trajan on a local disturbance involving Christians. Pliny reports that people called Christians were denounced to him by the local populace. In response to this, Pliny felt it was necessary to formulate a 'test' to ensure that those accused really were Christians (10.96.1–6). He made further inquiries about the activities of Christians and found nothing but a "*superstitionem pravam*" (10.96.6–8). He reports that Christians stopped meeting after his ban on political assemblies, but that significant numbers were still being accused (10.96.7–9). Trajan, in his response, praises Pliny's actions, especially his diligence in ensuring innocent people were not falsely accused, and his refusal to lend credence to anonymous blacklists (10.97).

---

25 On scale, see Latour, *Reassembling*,173–218.

26 For a summary of scholarship on this letter, see T. D. Barnes, "Legislation Against the Christians," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 58 (1968): 32–50; see also note 31 below.

One particular and curious phrase in the letter has attracted much attention. In describing the situation, Pliny records the testimony of an unknown number of persons who claim that they *had* been members of this group but were not members any longer (10.96.6–8). These people claim that the activities of the group were completely benign, and Pliny records these activities. They include gathering to sing hymns to Christ, and pledging oaths not to steal, lie, or commit adultery. After this ritual of swearing morality oaths, members separated but came together later in the day to share a meal. Pliny includes the curious statement that their food was "common and harmless [*promiscuum et innoxium*]." This unusual turn of phrase has sparked an enormous amount of scholarly speculation since it seems odd that Pliny would need to make this qualification, unless there was some reason to think that the Christians were eating something *not* "harmless."

Charges of "human sacrifice" and cannibalism were a normal part of Roman religious polemic, so it is not at all implausible that either Pliny or his former-Christian informers were intentionally countering this charge by stressing that the food was harmless.[27] Later Christian sources claim that non-Christians explicitly charged Christians with performing orgies and cannibalism as part of their rituals.[28] Given the many references to "body" and "blood" in Christian rituals and texts, it is not hard to imagine that these references were inflated by non-Christians into charges of cannibalism.[29] Pliny's letter may provide evidence that these charges were very early indeed. This interpretation, however, is not certain. If a charge of cannibalism was really at stake, one might imagine Pliny would do more to address it than simply qualify Christian food as "common and harmless."

The Problem with Groups in Bithynia-Pontus

I want to suggest that attention to a flat analysis may push us to read Pliny's letters in a slightly different way and help us account for some of the odd aspects of the letter. How might we usefully consider Pliny's letter as evidence of competition? Certainly, the letter is evidence for conflict between different parties in Bithynia Pontus. There are several ways in which the concept of competition could aid. We might consider a competition between Pliny and Christians. This would be an opening skirmish in the very long competitive process leading to the eventual

---

27 On the polemics of "human sacrifice" see, James Rives, "Human Sacrifice Among Pagans and Christians," *Journal of Roman Studies* 85 (1995): 65–85. Wilken points out that, ironically, direct charges of Christian cannibalism in the early period come only from Christian sources. See Wilken, *Christians as the Romans Saw Them,* 22. On the problematic nature of emic term "human sacrifice" as repeated by scholars, see Daniel Ullucci, "Sacrifice in the Ancient Mediterranean: Recent and Current Research," *Currents in Biblical Research* 13, no. 3 (2015): 414–415.

28 Minucius Felix *Octavius* 9.5–6.

29 1 Cor 11:24–30; Rom 5:9; Mt 26:26–29; Mk 14:22–25; Lk 22:15–20; Jn 6:52–56.

Christian dominance of the ancient Mediterranean. We might also approach the letter as evidence for competition between Christians and non-Christian persons intent on exposing what they see as an illicit and offensive new religious group invading their community. Notice that both of these approaches might easily lead to assumptions about groups in Bithynia Pontus. That is, they both tempt a jump away from a flat analysis.

If we frame the analysis as competition between Pliny and Christians, we start thinking about a group of Christians in Bithynia Pontus. The letter, however, is not at all revealing about this supposed group. We learn that some people were accused of being in the group but denied that they ever were (10.96.5). Others admit to being former members but claimed they had left years ago (10.96.6–7). Others affirmed that they were Christians even when threatened with punishment or death (10.96.3–4).

It is tempting to read these passages in light of later Christian martyr texts. This genre builds on the trial scenes in the Gospels and other sources to standardize an image (largely fictive as Candida Moss has shown) of the stalwart Christian who refuses to renounce Christ even in the face of death.[30] It would be odd indeed if a Roman author inadvertently created a quintessential Christian martyr scene in the very first extant Roman mention of Christians! Pliny says he executes these people for "stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy [*pertinaciam certe et inflexibilem obstinationem*]" (10.96.3). Scholars are conflicted on how to understand Pliny's description. We do not know how the people who were executed understood their own actions, or Pliny's. It seems unwise to turn them into stereotypical Christian martyrs. The Christian martyrdom "script" has not even been fully created in *Christian* texts at this point. In the end, we simply do not know enough about the Christians in Bithynia Pontus, and analyzing these passages as evidence of competition between Pliny and Christians yields frustrating partial results. Again, the argument is not that there was no competition between Pliny and Christians, but that the letters are not revealing on the details of this competition.

Framing the issue as Christians vs. non-Christians creates similar problems. We do not know why non-Christians denounced Christians to Pliny. Pliny himself does not know if he should be looking for actual malfeasance or just people self-identifying as Christians (10.96.2). It is, once again, easy to jump to imagining a group of angry locals attacking a new foreign cult. There is no evidence, however, that the Christians are newcomers, nor that they represent a small, embattled fraction. Pliny's claim that the sale of sacrificial meat had significantly fallen off suggests that the movement was large. His claim that it is now coming back suggests that the movement is fading; indeed he claims to have encountered several defectors (10.96.9–10). It seems more useful here to

---

30 On the genre, see Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). For the argument that many, if not most, Christian martyrdom accounts are fiction, see Candida R. Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (New York: HarperOne, 2013).

consider Christianity *not to be a distinct group, but rather an idea* that spread through the area (prompting practices) and then faded. In short, Pliny's letter tells us very little about the reality of Christian groups. It appears, then, that framing this data as competition is not very useful.

To clarify, my argument is not that there was no competition happening between Christians and non-Christians in Bythinia Pontus, but rather that the letter gives us very little useful information about what this competition might have really looked like. This is not intended as a critique of all scholarship that has attempted to discern what was really going on in Bithynia Pontus. Given that this is our first mention of "*Christiani*" in a Roman source, the very use of the term and the recognition of Christians as a phenomenon, in a context of local conflict, tells us a lot. The history of scholarship on this letter, however, is illustrative of the frustrating limits of evidence. Key questions include: the legal basis of Pliny's procedures, the actual conduct of the *Christiani*, the exact sequence of events, and the specific legal justification for execution.

In the mid-1960s a heated, at times virulent, debate between G. E. M. de Ste. Croix and A. N. Sherwin-White took place in the pages of the journal *Past and Present* over the legal grounding of Pliny's executions.[31] The same questions were addressed later by T. D. Barnes and Stephen Benko.[32] This work was fruitful in that it showed that Pliny was following no established law banning Christianity because no such law existed at the start of the second century (contra many scholarly assertions).[33] This work, however, also illustrates our inability to adequately answer basic questions about what was going on in Bithynia Pontus, and the problems of approaching letter 10.96 as evidence for groups in competition.

---

[31] Sherwin-White argued that Pliny executed Christians for *contumacia* ("stubbornness" or what we might loosely call "contempt of court"), not for being Christians. de Ste. Croix rejected this, maintaining that refusal to sacrifice was at the core of the charges. He further argued that Roman persecution of Christians was unlike their responses to other groups. See G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, "Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?," *Past & Present*, no. 26 (1963): 6–38; G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, "Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted? -- A Rejoinder," *Past & Present*, no. 27 (1964): 28–33; A. N. Sherwin-White, "Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted? -- An Amendment," *Past & Present*, no. 27 (1964): 23–27; and Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 1–24.

[32] Barnes, "Legislation Against the Christians;" Stephen Benko, "Pagan Criticism of Christianity During the First Two Centuries A. D.," *ANRW* 23.2 (1980): 1054–1118.

[33] Fredriksen addresses this in her critique of the term *religio licita*. She points out that this is not a Roman legal term and that continued debate over when Christianity was deemed "legal" or "illegal" in the Roman empire is based in an incorrect understanding of Roman jurisprudence. See Paula Fredriksen, "Mandatory Retirement: Ideas in the Study of Christian Origins Whose Time Has Come to Go," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 35, no. 2 (June 1, 2006): 231–46.

Reading Pliny "Flat"

Does this mean that there is nothing to be gained and only potential problems to be created in theorizing this as competition? I believe there is something to be gained, by keeping the analysis flat. Latour offers several strategies, which he metaphorically refers to as "clamps," to keep analysis flat.[34] I will discuss here only Latour's "first move," which he calls "localizing the global."[35] Here Latour argues that we must, "lay continuous connections leading from one local interaction to the other places, times, and agencies through which the local site is *made to do* something … If we do this, we will render visible the long chains of actors linking sites to one another without missing a single step."[36] Attending to this, he asserts, will be empirically difficult and dependent on access to data. The point here it to "resist the temptation to jump" to higher level abstractions.[37]

In the case of Pliny's letters, the temptation is to assume the existence of a defined and static Christianity in Bithynian Pontus. Pliny's letters do not provide us that evidence, they provide something else. Here Latour's suggestion to "accompany the master narratives safely back inside the rooms where they are displayed," is useful.[38] Following this suggestion would lead to deeper literary analysis of Pliny's letter collection and how and why it was produced.

William Johnson has analyzed Pliny's letters from exactly this perspective. He points out that, unlike many other letter collections which have survived from the ancient Mediterranean, Pliny's collection was not a chance archive produced by a sender or receiver simply preserving their letters. Rather, Pliny intentionally collected, edited and published his own letter collection.[39] The choice of which letters to preserve is undoubtedly strategic, and we do not know the extent to which they may have been edited from their original form to better fit their new genre. Indeed, Elaine Fantham draws attention to the "sheer self-consciousness" apparent in Pliny's attempt to present an ideal self-portrait in his letters.[40] Keeping things flat would encourage us first to attend to the fine-grained local setting before moving to any larger level constructions. In this case, the immediate setting of the letters we have was not a conflict between Pliny and a group of Christians in Bithynia Pontus. Rather, the setting is an intentional collection of letters carefully arraigned and

---

[34] On "clamps" see Latour, *Reassembling*, 174, 184, 204–207.
[35] Latour, *Reassembling*, 173.
[36] Latour, *Reassembling*, 173. Emphasis original.
[37] Latour, *Reassembling*, 173.
[38] Latour, *Reassembling*, 190.
[39] Johnston, *Readers,* 32–35.
[40] Elaine Fantham, *Roman Literary Culture: From Cicero to Apuleius* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 201.

distributed among Pliny's circle of literate friends. What if we start our analysis of competition there?

As Johnson and Fantham effectively show, Pliny is indeed involved in a competition, not with Christians, but with other wealthy educated Roman glitterati. Throughout the letters, Pliny attempts to present his life as a model of what a Roman elite should be. The letters project an ideal Roman man living the ideal Roman life. This man is sophisticated, highly literate, musically and poetically talented, austere, morally impeccable, loyal to his friends, and droll. He is surrounded by equally accomplished friends with whom he enjoys literary discussions, music, poetry, and urbane dinner parties, all while faithfully executing his duties to the state.[41] Whatever the real situation behind letter 10.96 (and certainly there was one), the letter is preserved in this quite different context of gentlemanly literary competition. Analyzing this competition may help us better explain the letter.

There is a puzzling aspect of letter 10.96. To be sure, Pliny is quite negative about Christianity: he calls it a "nefarious *superstitio*[42];" he summarily executes people for being members; and he tortures two women to convince himself that he has found the whole truth. Given this, there are two unexpected parts of the letter. First, Pliny's actual description of Christian behavior is oddly positive and, second, the end of the letter asks Trajan for leniency so that people "infected" by Christian ideas might be saved.

To the first point—Pliny's description of the practices of Christians is strikingly similar to his description of the ideal Roman man in other letters. The Christians meet regularly, wake before dawn, sing hymns, swear morality oaths, and meet for meals. Pliny's idealized group of Roman gentlemen meet regularly, wake early, enjoy poetry recitations and singing, are scrupulously moral by Roman standards, and enjoy meals together.[43]

The evening meal, in particular, was the site of idealized interactions among *amici,* where intellectual, literary, poetic, and musical skills were displayed. The simplicity of the food was a critical piece of this idealization. For the Roman gentleman, the delights of the dinner were social, intellectual, and artistic, not gastronomic. Following a long philosophical and literary tradition, Pliny critiques expensive and elaborate dinners as morally suspect, anti-intellectual, unhealthy, and not fit for the true Roman gentleman. He, half-jokingly but half -seriously, assails the moral

---

41 See Johnson, *Readers and Reading,* 32–62.

42 On the development of the term *superstitio* in Roman discourse, see Dale B. Martin, *Inventing Superstition from the Hippocratics to the Christians* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004); L. F. Janssen, "'Superstitio' and the Persecution of the Christians," *Vigiliae Christianae* 33, no. 2 (1979): 131–59; Wilken, *Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 40–62.

43 Johnson, *Readers and Reading,* 36–42. See, in particular, letter 3.1.

character of a friend who apparently skipped one of Pliny's austere dinners to attend a different party which featured exotic sea urchins, oysters, and Spanish dancing girls (1.15.2–3).

Pliny's report that Christians meet for an evening meal, coming right after his descriptions of their other activities which match the daily itinerary for his ideal Roman man, suggest that he is conceptualizing this meal as an idealized meal among *amici*. In this light, his description of Christian food as "common and harmless (*promiscuum et innoxium*)" seems less like an extremely oblique reference to cannibalism and more like a description of an ideal dinner. Christian food was "common," not expensive and extravagant delicacies which clot the mind and spirit, ruin intellectual and artistic enjoyment, and are harmful to both stomach and constitution. Such things are *obnoxious* to the gentlemanly ideal.

These similarities between Christian practices and the practices of Pliny's idealized Roman suggest that Pliny's portrayal of Christianity is more complex than normally assumed. He may view it as a nefarious *superstitio*, but it has some good parts, too. In fact, the only people in the letter described in exclusively negative terms are the non-Christian local inhabitants. According to Pliny, these people make hysterical and groundless accusations (remember that Pliny proved to his own satisfaction that some of those denounced to him as Christians were falsely accused) and they circulate anonymous blacklists, a practice Pliny abhors, and which Trajan too suggests is uncivilized. In general, the non-Christian populace comes off as fearful, irrational, unjust, and prone to witch-hunts—quite the opposite of the ideal Roman gentleman.

To the second point—at the end of the letter, Pliny actually places himself in the position of advocate-to-the-Emperor on the behalf of Christians. He claims that the "problem" of Christians could be checked, and wayward people reformed, if only Trajan would allow an opportunity for them to repent.[44] Here Pliny may be self-consciously projecting ideals of Roman magnanimity and clemency we see presented in some imperial writings, for example Seneca's *de Clementia*.[45] In his reply, which Pliny strategically includes in his collection, Trajan ratifies Pliny's opinion and his method, granting the flexibly of response that Pliny had requested.

Pliny's positive words about Christians along with the fact that he intervenes on their behalf to the emperor are explicable only if we follow Johnson and Latour in considering the audience of the letter. I would argue that the real competition going on in letter 10.96 is between Pliny and his elite friends. This accords with Latour's suggestion to "follow the master narrative"

---

44 If Pliny was thinking of "Christianity" as a group of crazed people following a dangerous *superstitio*, it is hard to understand why he would be interested in gaining the Emperor's support in saving then. It seems, again, like Pliny sees Christianity more as a set of bad ideas that could be effectively stamped out.

45 On this issue, see David Konstan, "Clemency as a Virtue," *Classical Philology* 100, no. 4 (2005): 337–46. Thanks to Kevin McGinnis for this point.

to places where it is displayed, in this case the *triclinia* of Pliny and his peers reading these letters over dinner and drinks.

The letter is one of many which display Pliny, the ideal Roman gentleman, dealing sagaciously with the garrulous and unruly local population he has the unhappy duty of governing. Pliny is the arbiter of justice and Roman order. He treats the wrangling over Christianity as a spat among his quarrelsome children. He takes decisive action, meeting out law and order even to wayward Christians. These Christians might be infected with a malicious *superstitio*, but they still have honorable traits and deserve justice and a chance to repent. Pliny is the magnanimous peacemaker between them and the emperor. In the published letter collection, it is the local non-Christian rabble, who have in some cases falsely accused their own neighbors, who are rightly condemned, and Pliny's wise actions given Imperial approval.

This approach can help explain some of the odd features of the letter and helps us better situate the actual competition for which the letters are direct evidence. Keeping things flat may usefully dissuade us from imagining defined groups in Bithynia Pontus and pursuing an analysis of competition for which we simply do not have sufficient evidence. Again, the argument here is not that there was no real competition between Christians and non-Christians in Bithynia Pontus. Rather, the point is that letter 10.96 does not provide much real evidence of this competition. We would need other sources to fully understand what was surely a complex situation in this region in 111/112 CE.

Conclusion

I hope this paper might point to ways in which Latour's insistence to keep things flat can aid scholarly attempts to explore religious competition in the ancient Mediterranean. Latour's warnings may help avoid some of the ways in which a focus on competition can tempt scholars to project groups and competition that may not exist. Latour criticizes the use of "the social" as a mystical agent and explanation in scholarly analysis. "Social competition" is prone to very similar problems. In addition to methodology from Latour outlined above, we may benefit by clearly defining what kind of competition we are analyzing. This approach and Latour's suggestion to "follow the master narrative" to the places it is displayed and validated would, ideally, push analysis of ancient competition into new and more useful directions. In the case of Pliny's letter, I hope it forces us to consider some of the oldest and most discussed early Christian evidence in a new way.