CHAPTER ONE

CULT ASSOCIATIONS ON THE BOSPORUS

2.1.1 The Collegia of Tanais

2.1.1.1 Membership and Organization

More than twenty reasonably well preserved inscriptions of Tanais thiasotes, as well as a large number of fragments that belonged to such inscriptions, are known today. Most of them had been discovered in 1869–1870 in the same locality (Pomyalovskiy 1888: 24) and later re-examined and republished by Latyshev inIOSPE II and IV. Two fragments (CIRB 1266 and 1267) were first published in CIRB. One inscription that does not appear in IOSPE is extremely important: CIRB 1259 (plate 25; below, 2.1.1.3), first published by Knipovich (1949: 117–118).

All the inscriptions of the synods¹ contain lists of thiasotes, headed by their officials. The number of members in the associations varies from about twenty-five to about fifty. They begin with the invocation Agathe tyche. Some stelae were erected as ex-votos, which is indicated by the phrase Θεῷ υψίστῳ εὐχή immediately after Ἀγαθή τύχη; some inscriptions were just addressed Θεῷ υψίστῳ. All of them are dated, and five are decorated with reliefs of eagles (plate 24; CIRB 1260, 1261, 1277, 1281, 1285). The majority of documents have βασιλεύοντος βασιλέως τοῦ δείνος φιλοκαίσαρος καὶ φιλορωμαίον as a preamble. Rostovtzev notes that “the tenor of all the inscriptions permits the supposition that the thiasoi were official religious associations, or in any case were recognized by the state” (ADZH 432).

Eagles holding wreaths and garlands in their beaks are represented on five stelae of the Tanais collegia. This decoration induced Schürer’s (1897: 220) to qualify Tanais thiasotes as half-Gentile. However, depictions of eagles occurred in various religious contexts, including unequivocally Jewish monuments. A stone “eagle table,” decorated

¹ These associations were never called συνοικογη, as Goodenough (1956/57: 224) erroneously states.
with Roman eagles clutching thunderbolts, was discovered in the Sardis synagogue (Kraabel 1978: 22). Reliefs of eagles ornamented synagogues in the Golan (Urman 1995: figs. 28a, 44a, 50a), in the Galilee (Goodenough 1956/57: fig. 9), and in Yaffa (Goodenough 1956/57: fig. 10), as well as sarcophagi in the Jewish cemetery of Beth Shearim (Goodenough 1956/57: fig. 15). On the other hand, eagles are the most common companions of Zeus and Jupiter, as well as of Baal Shamin, Jupiter Dolichenus, and other Eastern gods (Cook 1914–40, 2: 901; Merlat 1960: 108–110). Representations of eagles decorate monuments dedicated in Macedonia to Zeus Hypsistos (Tačeva-Hitova 1978a: 64–65), and in Thrace to Zeus Sabazios (EC Nos. 3.22, 23, pls. 51, 52) and Zeus Hypsistos (EC No. 4.20, pl. 69). Representations of eagles were offered to Theos Hypsistos, as well: in Philippopolis (Thracia, EC No. 4.13, pl. 67) and in Thyateira (Lydia, Kraabel 1969: 89). Depictions of eagles cannot therefore be used in attribution of a monument to a Jewish or pagan milieu.

Exclusive male membership in the cult associations was normal in all the Bosporan cities. However, in Tanais all or almost all the free men apparently belonged to the collegia. About three hundred thiasotes who lived between AD 225 and 230, that is, in the best documented five years, are known by name. The total number of the inhabitants of Tanais was then 1500–2000 (to judge by the size of the city site); the number of adult males could not have exceeded 250–300 (Shelov 1972: 277–278). There is no reason to doubt that the situation was the same both earlier and later. But if indeed this is the case, these corporations cannot be classified as regular private cult associations of the classical world, which have never embraced the entire civic community.

The ethnic composition of the synods is mixed: only half of the names of thiasotes are Greek, and the overwhelming majority of the non-Greek half are of Iranian origin. In the third century AD

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2 On two representations of Yahweh, one on a Phoenician coin of Gaza with an inscription YHW (Cook 1914–40, 1: 232, pl. 21) and the other on a gem with an inscription ΙΑΩ ΣΑΒΑΩ (Cook 1914–40, 1: 235, fig. 72), the Hebrew God, identified with solar Zeus, holds an eagle in his outstretched hand.

3 Utterly untenable is therefore Goodenough’s (1956/57: 232) conviction that Tanais collegia were “little communities.”

4 There are perhaps some exceptions to this rule, as for instance a short period when the Attic thiasoi might have been divisions of phratries (Ustinova 1988: 208–209).