1. Introduction

In one of Lucian’s most interesting works regarding religious trends in the Roman Empire, his *Peregrinus*, the satirical author narrates what he had allegedly experienced during the celebration of the Olympic festival of 165 CE. The Cynic philosopher and former member of a Christian community Peregrinus/Proteus jumped into a fire to his death in order to liberate the mortals from the fear of death. This is how Lucian describes the scene in which Peregrinus announced the imminent showdown:

> When we arrived in Olympia, the opisthodome was full of people criticizing Proteus or praising his intention, so that most of them even came to blows. Finally, after the contest of the heralds, Proteus himself made his appearance, with myriads of people escorting him. (…) He said that he wanted to put a crown of gold on a golden life; for one who had lived Herakles’ life should also die Herakles’ death and be commingled with the ether. “And I wish”, said he, “to benefit mankind by showing them the way in which one should despise death. For I think all men should become Philoktetes for me”. The more witless among the people began to shed tears and call out: “Save your life for the Greeks!” but the more manly shouted “Carry out your decision!” by which the old man was very frightened, because he hoped that all would cling to him and not give him over to the fire, but keep him in life—against his will, naturally!

Religious celebrations may aim to the virtual communication between humans and superhuman beings, but above all they are a communication between real people, between agents and spectators. The interaction both among those who attend rituals and between performers and spectators

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1 This study is part of the project “The Social and Cultural Construction of Emotion: The Greek Paradigm” (Oxford, 2009–2013), which is funded with an Advanced Investigator Grant by the European Research Council. I would like to express my thanks to Katherine LaFrance for correcting my English.

2 Luc., *Peregr.* 32–33.
is occasionally referred to in the literary sources and alluded to in cult regulations; the relevant material has never been systematically collected. As every interaction among people, it entails tensions and it can never be free of emotions—affection, hatred, envy, pride, anger and so on. With subtlety and irony, Lucian highlights theatrical elements in Peregrinus’ appearance and his interaction with his audience. The selection of certain details allows Lucian to present Peregrinus’ actions as a staged show. Peregrinus had carefully selected the stage: the opisthodome of the great temple of Zeus, in the greatest Panhellenic sanctuary. He had selected the timing, the celebration of the Olympic festival—and among the various events of the festival he had selected the contest of the heralds. He made his appearance while being followed by a huge entourage. He presented a prepared speech—a script—with the aim to arouse emotions—admiration and courage in the face of death—and to create an illusion—the illusion of his own fearlessness.

Emotions he did arouse, but not only the expected ones: some wept and implored him not to kill himself, others gladly sent him to his death. Every theatrical show runs the risk of being a failure, and this show was a failure. Theatricality and emotion—the emotions of Peregrinus and his spectators, the emotional interaction between Peregrinus and his audience, the interaction amongst the spectators—are very prominent in this narrative, as they generally are in rituals and religious celebrations.

A religious celebration is an institutionalised occasion for the virtual communication of the mortals with a god, with gods, or with the gods. In accordance with the principle of reciprocity, which characterizes most hierarchical relationships, a community of worshippers, as small as a family or a private cult association or as big as a civic community or the population of a province—uses this occasion in order to make an offering both as an expression of gratitude for past services and in expectation of new ones. ‘Staging’ and ‘feeling’ are, therefore, inherent in religious celebrations. The emotions range from gratitude and hope to the fear of god, the joy at the extra-ordinary character of the festive day, and the pride for a community’s achievements. In such communal celebrations certain emotions are prescribed or expected, others are banned. Festivals invite

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3 Chaniotis 2006 and 2010a.
4 From honorary decrees we may infer that certain events during a festival were regarded as more appropriate for announcements than others, especially because they attracted large audiences; see the examples collected in Chaniotis 2007a, 54–57.
5 On reciprocity in ancient religion see Grottanelli 1989–90; Parker 1998.