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School of History, Classics and Archaeology
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Contents

Senior Editor's Foreword

As we begin the second quarter of the 21st century, and approach the 25th anniversary of *Pons Aelius*, I'm encouraged to reflect on the changing academic landscape. From a time of handwritten or printed papers many early career researchers are more likely to remember in crayon than CPMs, *Pons Aelius* continues to provide space for postgraduate and emerging researchers to share their work.

The pieces in this issue display a commitment to exploring unusual sources and platforming neglected voices, illuminating myriad ways the past helps us understand the present. Timescale-hopping moments during this Issue include an inventive pairing of incels with classical reception and a Formula 1 analogy regarding Byzantine chariot racing, displaying how *Pons Aelius* remains concerned with the contemporary world whilst illuminating new work on well-trodden topics.

Dan Theodorou makes thorough use of recent scholarship on the incelosphere to weave compelling links between the past and present, impressing the urgency of this issue upon the reader effectively. Chantel Chesney's work on Aristophanic comedy reminds us of the symbiosis of the serious and satirical, encouraging us to remember that politics and humour have long coexisted.

In her analysis of the significance of Teiresias' age in classical contexts, Lynne Westhead dives into this under-appreciated social category, reminding us of the importance of analysing age alongside masculinity in historical scholarship. Teiresias comes to life as we are taken on a tour of his life and symbolism. In his exploration of the persistence of pagan ritual in Asia Minor, Isaac Saunders' imaginative writing style provides an eminently enjoyable backdrop to an analysis of the blurring of boundaries between the purposes and practices of devotion and ritual.

Next, Riley Phares takes us on a skyscraping tour from the top to the bottom of the social scale, analysing the significance of chariot racing as both an instrumental and exciting pastime in Byzantine society. Finally, Yoana de Iuliis considers the importance of Peter Mark Adams' *Ritual and Epiphany in the Age of Mithras* amongst existing and contemporary scholarship.

My warmest thanks and appreciation to all the contributors who made this 18th edition possible, and to the editorial team for their patience, candour, and commitment throughout.

I'm sure readers will find something new and intriguing in this Issue, and hope that reading it is as engaging an experience as putting it together has been.

Happy reading!

Lily Tidman, Senior Editor

From "Stoicmaxxing" to "Cucked" Roman Emperors: Responses to the Ancient World in the Incelosphere

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Introduction

The ancient world has proved a fruitful resource for far-right movements looking to legitimise their ideological narratives, from Italian Fascists to more recent online white nationalist, misogynistic communities. For example, the alt-right, a term coined by prominent white nationalist Richard Spencer in 2008, describes "a set of far-right ideologies, groups and individuals," who believe that "'white identity' is under attack by multicultural forces."[1] Exposure to the alt-right's ideas has mostly taken place online on websites like 4chan, 8chan, and Reddit, allowing their core ideological tenets, such as protecting "Western civilisation," to influence the rhetoric of far-right, white nationalist, misogynistic communities on the internet today.[2] Groups that specifically, although not exclusively, coalesce around anti-feminism, have come to be known collectively as the manosphere.

Communities within the manosphere can be identified through their subscription to the 'red pill.' Owing its name to the film *The Matrix* (1999), members of this philosophy believe, like the main character Neo, that they have 'taken the red pill' and now see reality in its true form. However, rather than believing that artificial intelligence is using pacified humans as a power source, as in *The Matrix*, the men of the red pill believe in the conspiracy

[1] "Richard Bertrand Spencer," Southern Poverty Law Centre, https://www.splcenter.org/resources/extremist-files/richard-bertrand-spencer/. "Alt-Right," Southern Poverty Law Centre, https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/alt-right.
[2] Southern Poverty Law Centre, "Alt-Right."

that they are victims under the tyranny of the West's pro-feminist, anti-male "gynocracy."[3] These broad umbrella manosphere beliefs help to contextualise the way in which community members often view the ancient world, with Greece and Rome acting as sites onto which they can project and legitimise their patriarchal, white ethnostate fantasies.[4]

This paper looks at the classical reception of incels (a portmanteau of involuntary celibates), a group that sits within the manosphere, but is considered to be the most extreme.[5] For example, compared to other manosphere groups such as men's rights activists, Pick Up Artists, Men Going Their Own Way, and Traditional Christian Conservatives, incels are the only group to have been linked to terrorism.[6] Notable cases include the mass murders carried out in the USA, Canada, and the UK by Elliot Rodgers, Alek Minassian, and Jake Davison.[7]

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[3] Donna Zuckerberg, *Not All Dead White Men: Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age* (Harvard University Press, 2018), 13.

[4] Ashton Kingdon, *The World White Web. Uncovering the Hidden Meanings of Online Far-Right Propaganda* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 71-75, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-75393-0.

[5] Linda Coufal and Lion Wedel, "Radicalization within a Network of Misogynist Extremists: A Case Study of An Incel Forum," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communication* 12, no. 852 (2025): 2, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-05161-8.

[6] Ibid, 2; Demeter Lockyer, Michael Halpin, and Finlay Maguire, "The Emergence of the Incel Community as a Misogyny-Motivated Terrorist Threat," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 37, no. 3 (2025): 371-373, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2023.2296515. Terrorism is a term without a clear definition. However, scholars such as Lockyer, Halpin and Maguire deem incels to be a terrorist threat because instances of misogynistic-motivated violence, such as the ones mentioned in this paper, align with legal and political definitions. For example, they refer to the United States of America's PATRIOT Act and the Canadian Criminal Code, which both point to terrorism as a coercion or intimidation of the public for an ideological purpose. Additionally, they also argue that "incels *themselves* position violence from those connected to the community as terrorist activity."

[7] "Elliot Rodger: How Misogynist Killer became 'Incel Hero'," BBC, April 26, 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-43892189; Steve Morris, "Plymouth Shooting: Burst of Savagery that Began With an Attack On a Mother," *The Guardian*, February 20, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/feb/20/plymouth-shooting-eight-minutes-of-savagery-inquest-jake-davison.

Marta Barcellona points to such examples as evidence of terrorism "driven by a strong hate element."[8] While stemming from personal revenge, these cases demonstrate a desire to target "the structure of modern society, which they feel to be unfair and biased in favour of women and 'Alpha males'."[9] Additionally, unlike other manosphere groups, incels believe their perceived structural inequality to be immutable, which has led to their being named the most radical group within the manosphere by researchers such as Linda Coufal and Lion Wedel. [10] This paper seeks to examine how incels respond to the ancient world and consider how their extremist beliefs impact their classical reception in comparison to more 'mainstream' groups within the manosphere.

Inceldom began as a non-political discussion board in the late 1990s titled "Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project."[11] The board was meant for people who could not maintain or obtain sexual relationships and its demographic was initially relatively diverse; women made up a quarter of users, with members also identifying as several different sexual orientations and racial identities.[12] Incels began to develop into a community made up of mostly men during the mid-2000s and early 2010s, and it has been recently estimated that there are roughly 100,000 members across different online platforms.[13] Online incel spaces today,

[8] Marta Barcellona, "Incel Violence as a New Terrorism Threat: A Brief Investigation between Alt-Right and Manosphere Dimensions," *Sortuz: Oñati Journal of Emergent Socio-Legal Studies* 11, no. 2 (2022): 178-179.

[9] Ibid, 179.

[10] Coufal and Wedel, "Radicalization," 2.

[11] Sarah E. Daly, and Shon M. Reed, "'I Think Most of Society Hates Us': A Qualitative Thematic Analysis of Interviews with Incels," *Sex Roles* 86 (2022): 15, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-021-01250-5.

[12] Ibid, 15.

[13] Ibid.

rather than acting as a place to provide comfort or advice, are primarily focused on sharing frustration, anger, and hatred towards women.

They view society as hierarchically organised by looks, with the very top occupied by 'Alphas,' named 'Chads' and 'Stacys,' followed by 'normies' who are the most populous and sit in the middle, with incels occupying the bottom rung.[14] Because incels believe that women dictate the sexual hierarchy by only dating certain men to advance themselves (monetarily, socially, etc.), they blame women for their 'oppressed' position within society.[15] To solve this problem, many incels favour misogynistic solutions such as "coercion, rape, or a complete return to enforced monogamy under strict patriarchal rule."[16]

Because incels view themselves as at the bottom of the hierarchy, many have turned from the red pill to the black pill. Those who have 'swallowed' the black pill misconstrue genetics research to argue that DNA is the most important factor in the sexual marketplace, with 80% of women believed to only be attracted to the top 20% of men, i.e., Alphas or Chads.[17] As a result, they believe that they will never be able to move upwards within the hierarchy, with no amount of self-improvement able to make them more attractive.[18] In one survey of over 250 active incel forum users, 94.9% of respondents said that they believed in

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[14] Brandon Sparks, Alexandra M. Zidenberg, and Mark E. Olver, "Involuntary Celibacy: A Review of Incel Ideology and Experiences with Dating, Rejection, and Associated Mental Health and Emotional Sequelae," *Current Psychiatry Reports* 24, no. 12 (2022): 732, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11920-022-01382-9.

[15] Ibid, 732.

[16] Ibid, 733.

[17] Stephane J. Baele, Lewys Brace, and Travis G. Coan, "From 'Incel' to 'Saint': Analyzing the Violent Worldview behind the 2018 Toronto Attack," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 33, no. 8 (2021): 1667–91, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1638256. This incel theory is commonly referred to as the 80/20 rule.

[18] Daly and Reed, "Most of Society," 15.

the black pill.[19] In Sarah Daly and Shon Reed's interviews with self-identified incels, they conclude that participants felt that they:

> 1) experience masculinity challenges that affect their romantic opportunities,
>
> 2) are marginalized or treated as "subhumans" due to their appearance or other characteristics, and as a result,
>
> 3) experience negative emotions related to their inceldom.[20]

These feelings affect incels' subscription to black pill philosophy and their actions online, which in turn also affect their responses to antiquity.

Incels and the Ancient World

Tao Beloney, in one of the few pieces of scholarship to specifically look at incels' classical reception, examines the use of quotes from ancient writers such as Plato, Aristotle and Juvenal on the Incel Wiki's "[t]imeless quotes on women." Beloney argues that the Wiki page is a way to legitimise "incelology" by "asserting that incels are much older and their ideas are more universal than they truly are."[21] The article also highlights the more radical views that exist within the Incelosphere.[22] For example, the inclusion of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* – a collection of elegies written in the early first century CE that advised men and women on "the Art of Love" – is used as evidence that women actually enjoy rape, therefore rendering

[19] Anne Speckhard, et al., "Involuntary Celibates' Experiences of and Grievance over Sexual Exclusion and the Potential Threat of Violence Among Those Active in an Online Incel Forum," *Journal of Strategic Security* 14, no. 2 (2021): 97, https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.14.2.1910.

[20] Daly and Reed, "Most of Society," 14.

[21] Tao Beloney, "Making Misogyny Timeless on the Incel Wiki," *Pharos: Doing Justice to the Classics*, February 27, 2023, https://pharos.vassarspaces.net/2023/02/27/timeless-misogyny-incel-wiki-tertullian-ovid/.

[22] Ibid.

the concept of rape non-existent.[23] Pick Up Artists are more likely to use Ovid to justify men not seeking consent, rather than the complete dismissal of the notion of rape.[24]

The following examination continues to evaluate incels' relationship to antiquity, but will turn to look at material from incels.is, a sister-site of the Incel Wiki. The website hosts 763,051 threads, 20,286,887 posts and 35,497 members, and claims to be a space for men "that struggle with or are unable to get into romantic relationships with women despite trying" from "all walks of life, and from all cultural and racial backgrounds."[25] However, the membership rules state that women and LGBT people are not permitted to join, as the forum only accepts heterosexual men.[26] As well as having exclusionary membership rules, many of the threads contain misogynistic, racist, and other discriminatory discussion topics, images, and comments. In Curtis Dozier's work on white nationalist uses of ancient Greece and Rome, he does not cite white nationalist websites so as not to lend them legitimacy and visibility.[27] Similarly, I have chosen not to cite incels.is threads as I would scholarly publications to prevent the affirmation and spread likewise harmful rhetoric.[28]

This paper assesses threads discussing Stoicism and Marcus Aurelius. Threads have been chosen based on the inclusion of the terms 'Stoicism,' 'Stoic,' and 'Marcus Aurelius,' and then analysed dependent on whether users have engaged with any of these terms

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[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid; Barcellona, "Incel Violence," 173. Pick Up Artists are men who are interested in connecting with women and share flirting and seduction tricks with each other. While some communities are supportive spaces, some are more aggressive, "morphing their flirting strategies into rape strategies."

[25] Incels.is, "Welcome to Incels.is - Involuntary Celibate Forum," https://incels.is/; Statistics correct as of 24 January 2026.

[26] Incels.is, "Rules and FAQ," https://incels.is/threads/rules-and-faq.799/.

[27] Curtis Dozier, *The White Pedestal: How White Nationalists Use Ancient Greece and Rome to Justify Hate* (Yale University Press, 2026), xiii, https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.37105670.

[28] Readers can find the quotes mentioned in this article on incels.is.

substantially, with off-hand comments excluded. This topic has been chosen for analysis because the second century Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius (who lived 121-180 and reigned 161-180 CE), was used as a Stoic icon for the alt-right during their peak, with his translated work appearing on recommended reading lists for aspiring Alpha males.[29] The alt-right populated online spaces with "Modern Stoicism" or "Alt-Stoicism" to vindicate their ideology and spread their ideas to those seeking out information on ancient philosophy.[30] For example, texts such as Aurelius' *Meditations* were divorced from their original context to make them more widely appealing and easier to apply to modern life.[31] Additionally, by framing Stoicism as a self-help tool, the writings of Aurelius and others like him were employed as a "life hack" in men's journey to self-improvement.[32] Donna Zuckerberg, in her analysis of the manosphere's discourse on the classical world, argues that "[S]toicism reinforces for the Red Pill community…that men are superior to women because they are by nature more rational and less emotional."[33] While Zuckerberg's work primarily focuses on material from the mid-2010s, the proliferation of Alt-Stoicism within the manosphere has been impactful, and discussions have continued to take place on incels.is about both Marcus Aurelius and Stoicism.

[29] Zuckerberg, *Dead White Men*, 46.

[30] Matthew Sharpe, "Into the Heart of Darkness Or: Alt-Stoicism? Actually, No…," *Eidos: A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* 2, no. 4 (2018): 106, https://doi.org./10.26319/6921.

[31] Zuckerberg, *Dead White Men*, 60-61.

[32] Ibid, 60-61.

[33] Ibid, 69.

Stoicmaxxing

In numerous threads, Aurelius and his work are recommended as a tool for men in the incel community to cope with negative emotions and perceived marginalisation. For example, in a thread on incels.is asking for book recommendations, one user suggested *Meditations* stating that "stoicmaxxing is great." The –maxxing suffix originated from the term 'looksmaxxing,' which describes incels' attempts to improve their appearance through a range of stylistic, lifestyle, or surgical alterations.[34] When the –maxxing suffix is applied, it is normally to demonstrate a sense of self-improvement. Stoicmaxxing therefore represents a way for some incels to use Stoicism to improve their life.

On another thread about 'stoicmaxxing,' one user advises others to see Stoicism as a way to deal with their negative feelings, stating that:

> what soy-ciety tells us clashes with reality, causing distress which leads to depression. However the philosophy of stoicism argues that one can find fulfilment only when one is living in conformity to reality. The way we should deal with this is to calibrate our expectations to reality by identifying, and then either modifying or removing any core beliefs (from society/your expectations) that we hold that are incompatible with reality.

Here, we can see how users engage with some of the broad beliefs of Stoicism – Aurelius in *Meditations* does say that we should "see things in all their naked reality" – however, the user frames reality as the incel worldview and uses the philosophy to reinforce their misogynistic

[34] Daniel J. Konig, Angad S. Sidhu, and George S. Corpuz, "Looksmaxxing: Straddling the Inflection Between Self-Enhancement and Self-Harm," *Facial Plastic Surgery & Aesthetic Medicine* (2025): 1, https://doi.org/10.1177/26893614251409793.

ideology.[35] The use of the term "soy-ciety" is a reference to the manosphere belief that soy milk has oestrogen in it, an idea stemming from the conspiracy theory that men's testosterone is intentionally being lowered, leading society to become a gynocracy.[36] This use of intentionally gendered language contrasts a 'feminine' society that hides the truth of reality from incels, with a 'masculine' philosophy that will provide them with the tools necessary to deal with their situation. This reflects a wider trend within the manosphere of viewing Stoicism as a philosophy that vindicates a difference between logical men and overemotional women.[37] Ergo, Stoicism will aid logical male incels because they are the only ones that see the world as it really is.

Users in another thread recommend *Meditations* to each other because of Aurelius' nonchalance toward sex: "[i]n the book there are also many references to sex and like the Chad that he is, sex tires him and seems boring and even counterproductive for a calm mind." Because the incelosphere is dominated by heterosexual men, sex is viewed as an activity that happens between men and women, and therefore a nonchalance towards sex is viewed as a rejection of women.[38] By minimising the effect that sex has on his life, Aurelius is viewed as removing the control that women have in the sexual hierarchy, therefore reasserting his own power and achieving the position of Chad. While drawing on a real Aurelius quote, the user

[35] Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. C. R. Haines, Loeb Classical Library 58 (Harvard University Press, 1916), 4.11.

[36] Callum Jones, Verity Trott, and Scott Wright, "Sluts and Soyboys: MGTOW and the Production of Misogynistic Online Harassment," *New Media & Society* 22, no. 10 (2020): 1910, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819887141; Iselin Gambert, and Tobias Linné, "From Rice Eaters to Soy Boys: Race, Gender, and Tropes of 'Plant Food Masculinity'," *Animal Studies Journal* 7, no. 2 (2018): 131-132.

[37] Zuckerberg, *Dead White Men*, 69.

[38] Ryan Kelly Casey, and Chase Aunspach, "Incels, Compulsory Sexuality, and Fascist Masculinity," *Feminist Formations* 32, no. 3 (2020): 156, 159, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27182036.

ignores the surrounding context; that when we are faced with "impressions," we should "get to grips with the actual things...so as to see them as they really are."[39] By interpreting Aurelius' views on sex as "boring" or "counterproductive," rather than as an example of Aurelius viewing objects and experiences without their social "prestige," the user can use out-of-context paraphrasing of *Meditations* to reinforce their own worldview.[40]

In viewing Aurelius as a Chad, incels can turn to Stoicism and *Meditations* as a tool to reverse the power that women supposedly hold over men. In a misogynistic thread criticising men for "settling" for women their own age (as opposed to striving for younger, and therefore within incel logic, more attractive women), one user quotes Aurelius in advising young men to completely give up on attaining relationships with women:

> Fact is attaching their happiness to validation from holes and pussy is only gonna result in misery unless they are a Chad so the best thing a young man can do is detach completely from holes as much as humanly possible to avoid what is basically constant pain. As Marcus Aurelius said, "Think of yourself as dead. You have lived your life. Now, take what's left and live it properly." I wish someone had drilled that into me as a young man and told me to apply it to foids.

The act of using dehumanising and derogatory terms such as "holes," "pussy," and "foids" is common on incels.is to sexualise women, reduce them to their bodies, and compare them to machines.[41] Deborah Cameron argues that these types of insults, while a recent development of online internet culture, continue to reflect traditional forms of misogyny and reinforce

[39] Aurelius, *Meditations*, 6.13, "of sexual intercourse, that it is merely internal attrition and the spasmodic excretion of mucus."

[40] Ibid, 6.13.

[41] 'Foids' is a portmanteau of female androids.

patriarchal views of "women's proper place."[42] The poster uses this terminology to conceptualise a worldview in which women are sub-human and should not be regarded with emotion, consequently placing them outside the realm of humanity, a space implicitly reserved for men. The Aurelius quote is employed alongside this view to legitimise the poster's argument, relying on *Meditations*' established position within the ancient philosophical cannon. In other spaces within the manosphere, Stoicism is used to improve one's life, including as a way to successfully date.[43] However, we can see here how Stoicism is viewed as acting as a different type of self-help tool for incels; if they are not Chads and therefore able to access sex, then women are no longer of interest and should be dismissed from the incel worldview – a belief that is justified with ancient philosophy.

Marcus Aurelius the Cuck

Alternatively, there are some incels who, because they subscribe to the nihilist black pill, do not buy into the idea that Stoicism can provide benefits; they believe there is nothing they can do to change their reality, even if they came to terms with it, so do not see the advantages of self-help tools. Quotes like "Stoicism is redditsoy philosophy" abound on incels.is, criticising the way that other red pill groups in the manosphere (who operate on websites like Reddit) view Stoicism as a tool of self-improvement.

Unlike users who view Stoicism positively to detach themselves from the desire to have sex and/or relationships with women, some see the philosophy as a way to subdue their anger towards society and make them complacent towards being at the bottom of the social

[42] Deborah Cameron, *Language, Sexism and Misogyny* (Routledge, 2023), 142-143, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003294115.

[43] Zuckerberg, *Dead White Men*, 46.

hierarchy. For example, in a thread discussing Stoicism, one user posted a video that praises Ryan Holiday's *The Obstacle Is the Way* (2014) for other users to respond to. While Holiday does not sit within the manosphere himself, Zuckerberg credits him as "skilled at creating and promoting the kind of content that appeals to the men who frequent [red pill] websites."[44] Holiday simplifies Stoicism for his readers, making ancient texts seem practically applicable for 21st-century problems, while leaving out elements that do not culturally translate.[45] As Zuckerberg points out, this proves problematic as his work labels misogyny, racism, homophobia, and ableism, etc. as a "disadvantage," proceeding to make "it vanish by proclaiming disadvantage universal to the human condition."[46] Many in the manosphere are therefore able to justify "their belief in the intellectual superiority of white men."[47]

However, incels do not view themselves as occupying, or being able to occupy, a position of superiority within society, meaning many on incels.is respond differently to Stoicism. On the thread discussing the praise of Holiday's book, the poster of the video commented with "blind rage" that:

> Stoicism is a worthless, stupid, masochistic philosophy, while you train and accept and discipline yourself like a monk, Chads and normies are having time of their lives, living, traveling, fucking, falling in love, doing drugs and drinking, going to parties etc. "Just be stoic bro, doesn't matter you rot in a room and wageslave and spend your life miserably, just be stoic, show them your strength of will bro"

This comment reflects the frustrations with Stoicism that are reflected in many forum posts, as users imagine that all those above them on the social hierarchy do not need to be Stoic;

[44] Ibid, 62.

[45] Ibid, 63.

[46] Ibid, 64.

[47] Ibid, 66.

they can simply enjoy life without facing the hardships that incels do. Additionally, calling oneself a "wageslave" references the way that incels view work. In a study conducted by Anna Beckett-Herbert and Eran Shor that analysed incels.is posts related to work, they found that many users struggle to find a job, blaming this on women in the workplace.[48] When incels do find work, other users may call them a "fakecel" as they see incels with employment as contributing to the society that has oppressed them.[49] Therefore, philosophies like Stoicism are seen as mollifying incels' anger towards society, so that they will "suppress normal emotions to bad situations" and not challenge the hierarchy of society.

In other threads, commentors identify tropes used by other members of the manosphere to promote Stoicism and critique them. One user states that "I am willing to bet that the redpilled gymcopers that think lifting will fix all their problems, think roman statues telling them 'don't care bro' is valid advice."[50] Roman statues have been used extensively by the alt-right and the manosphere to promote a return to an imagined patriarchal, white supremacist past. Famously, this was seen in 2016 when white nationalist group Identity Evropa placed posters across college campuses in the United States featuring ancient and classicising statues alongside text that read "Protect Our Heritage" and Our Future Belongs to Us."[51] Since then, ancient statues have been used as a memetic image to promote red pill philosophy, allowing those in the manosphere to project their ideology beyond their own circles into wider audiences.[52] However, incel criticism of this motif is not designed to

[48] Anna Rose Beckett-Herbert, and Eran Shor, "'Don't Work for Soyciety': Involuntary Celibacy and Unemployment," *Gender, Work & Organization* 32 (2025): 1561, https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.13248.

[49] Ibid., 1560; A 'fakecel' is a portmantua of fake and incel.

[50] 'Gymcope' is a portmantua of gym and cope. It is used to describe people that cope with their life by going to the gym. 'Cope' is a regular insult on incels.is.

[51] Zuckerberg, *Dead White Men*, 1.

[52] Ibid, 3.

critique the misogyny or white supremacy implied in these images. Rather, incels reject Alt-Stoicism, viewing it as a philosophy that serves women, with one user stating that "'Stoicism' is foid worship." Stoicism not only represents a tool to mollify incels' radical ideology and anger towards society but also reinforces their nihilism; even if they were to climb the social hierarchy, the only fate that awaits them is the stoic worshipping of women.

Aurelius is also rejected as a figure of praise within black-pilled circles. In comparison to many in the wider manosphere who view him as "introspective and inquisitive," many incels see him as a figure of weakness.[53] Users often reference the rumours that Aurelius' wife, Faustina the Younger (c.130-175 CE), was suspected of sleeping with a gladiator and hence label the emperor a "cuck." Describing someone as a cuck is common in far-right, manosphere spaces.[54] Derived from the term 'cuckold,' the racist and misogynistic term intends to signal weakness in its targets, as it references interracial cuckold pornography, in which white men watch, or knowingly allow, their white female partners to have sex with black men.[55] The trope of the cuckold is "used to explore the anxieties of a wounded patriarchy," a theme reflected on in one thread where a user evidences Faustina's, and other ancient Roman women's, relationships to gladiators as evidence to support their argument that "women's nature is truly immutable":[56]

> [gladiators] were worthless criminals, prisoners of war, slaves, and thus low lives comparable to literal prostitutes. Yet…they were ubiquitously considered transcendental sex symbols in Ancient Rome…rich Roman women would also pay

[53] Ibid, 58.

[54] Ibid, 2.

[55] Geoffrey Lokke, "Cuckolds, Cucks, and Their Transgressions," *Porn Studies* 6, no. 2 (2019): 212, https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2018.1555053.

[56] Ibid, 213.

> tons of money to have sex with the Chad gladiators…And oftentimes, behind their husband's back. By virtue of that, there were quite a few (recorded) examples of gladiators cucking actual bona fide roman politicians and emperors, most famously: Marcus Aurelius.

This comment describes gladiators as both "low lives" and as having sexual success with women, demonstrating a negative view of the gladiator/Chad figure, while also condemning the sexual choices of Roman women. As Alexandra Sills has argued, gladiators have been idealised by those in the manosphere, with Instagram users creating AI-generated art of Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg as fighting gladiators during their rift in 2023.[57] Sills argues that gladiators are viewed as men of the people, able to challenge the establishment and the "malevolent agents of leftist ideologies…restoring the pre–eminence of heterosexual white men."[58] While this has great appeal to men in red pill circles, the gladiator is still a figure towards which black-pilled incels can direct their anger; Chads are hated for sitting at the top of the hierarchy, with their challenge to the establishment unable to trickle down to incels.

Furthermore, multiple users in the thread saw Aurelius as weakened by his wife's actions. Because the Emperor did not reassert his hegemonic masculinity by, as one user suggested, killing his wife and getting a "new one," the community does not see him as performing masculinity to their restrictive standards. And because Aurelius is viewed as weak and effeminate, Stoicism is disregarded; "the most famous stoic was a gigacuck." This reinforces the black pill idea that nothing can be done for incels and that there is no way to escape their subordinate position in the hierarchy; if an Emperor cannot stop his wife, or as one user calls her, his "property," from cheating with "Chad gladiators, then incels will never

[57] Alexandra Sills, "The Colosseum on the Silver Screen: The Allure of the Hollywood Gladiators for the Alt-Right," *Melita Classics* 10, (2024): 191.
[58] Ibid, 192.

have the power to subdue women. [59] Additionally, viewing Aurelius and Faustina's relationship in this light allows incels to reinforce their misogynistic world view that women will always go for Chads, confirming their own inability to escape inceldom. As one commenter says, it is "Over for MarcusAreliuscels[sic]."[60]

The rejection of self-help tools and improvement methods are an important part of black pill incel ideology. Halpin argues that incels weaponise their subordinate position to justify their hateful and extreme ideology.[61] In their perceived oppression, they can blame women and feminism for their social isolation and lack of sexual success, perpetuating their misogyny under the guise of fighting for incel rights. Because they need to maintain their subordinated position, "any hope or positivity is treated as an incel false consciousness that prevents true acceptance of the black pill and necessitates elimination."[62] While for some in the incelosphere, Stoicism is viewed as a self-help tool, for those committed to black pill thinking, even accepting Alt-Stoicism would mean admitting the inaccuracy of their philosophy and forsaking their misogynistic views. This mindset facilitates demoralisation and fatalism, causing extremist reactions in some.[63] For example, in a thread in which one incel called on others to embrace Stoicism, another responded by saying that the "only right philosophy is extreme violence." While Alt-Stoicism reinforces misogyny and white supremacist ideas, the extremeness of black-pilled incel ideology means that even a form of Stoicism that has been edited to fit the ideas of the manosphere does not prove radical enough.

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[59] Michael Halpin, "Weaponized Subordination: How Incels Discredit Themselves to Degrade Women," *Gender & Society* 36, no. 6 (2022): 828, https://doi.org/10.1177/08912432221128545.

[60] This is a portmanteau of Marcus Aurelius and incels.

[61] Halpin, "Weaponized Subordination," 814.

[62] Ibid, 823.

[63] Ibid, 823.

Additionally, within historical far-right contexts, such as fascist and national socialist dictatorships, classics was used to legitimise "the attitudes and behaviour inculcated by dominant social and educational institutions."[64] In the modern far-right uses of classics, we can see this again reflected in the romanticisation of the ancient world as a site in which "white, heterosexual men were the 'alpha males'."[65] If incels who subscribe to the black pill see themselves as permanently residing within the bottom of the sexual hierarchy, then they have no investment in dominant institutions or with a view of history that glorifies the position of the Alpha male; examples from the ancient past only serve to reinforce their fate.

Conclusion

Studies examining how the alt-right and the manosphere have engaged with the ancient world have proved essential for classicists to understand how antiquity has become a tool to justify moves towards a white nationalist, patriarchal society. Threads on incels.is demonstrate that some users view the ancient world in a similar fashion, seeing ancient philosophy as a tool to fight against their perceived oppression by women and reinforce their extreme misogyny. However, incels who subscribe to the black pill often engage with ancient material differently, leading to a rejection of the red-pilled version of antiquity, with no philosophy or historical figure providing a template for which to help improve their lives; the ancient past only serves to reinforce their nihilistic view of the world.

[64] Lorna Hardwick, "Thinking with Classical Reception: Critical Distance, Critical Licence, Critical Amnesia?" in *Classics in Extremis: The Edges of Classical Reception*, ed. Edmund Richardson (Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 14, https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350017283.

[65] Oskar Aguado-Cantabrana, "This is their #RomanEmpire: Toxic Masculinity, Far-Right Propaganda and Social Media Trends Under the Lens of Classical Reception Studies," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* (2025): 11, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12138-025-00717-0.

Because Alt-Stoicism and celebration of *Meditations* abound within red-pilled communities, comparing responses between the manosphere and the incelosphere has demonstrated how incel reception compares to other communities. While much of the classical field's response to alt-right and manosphere reception of antiquity has addressed its utilisation in terms of a promotion of a white nationalist and patriarchal worldview, we can see that a rejection of the value of the ancient world can also legitimise hateful ideology. Therefore, when tackling extremist, far-right classical reception, the field needs to consider responses that both glorify and ridicule the past.

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Fantasy Without Flight: The Inescapability of Politics and the Decline of Athenian Democracy in Aristophanic Comedy

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Introduction

Aristophanes' comedic depiction of fantasy-like worlds engages with new perspectives through the use of talking animals.[1] In these alternative realities, a human may establish an imperial avian empire which subjugates both gods and humans alike, or a deity may outcroak a chorus of frogs. However, scholarly interpretations over Aristophanes' authorial intent remains divided: with the orthodox consensus maintaining these works as an escapist fantasy or illusory retreat from the harsh realities of political life; while the revisionist perspective—aligning with William Arrowsmith's "Fantasy Politics"—displays the "realistic narration of the unreal, and the supernaturalization of real" to embed directives for political reform within fantastical frameworks.[2] Within the latter strand, James McGlew positions the theatre as an extension of the political assembly, where the protagonist performs as an orator to offer fantastical solutions to real-world problems in front of a hesitant chorus.[3] While Geoffrey Arnott advises an individualistic text-by-text analysis to avoid overgeneralisations, this investigation suggests that a more comprehensive interpretation

[1] This investigation employs "fantastical" to mean fantasy-like.
[2] David Konstan, "A City in the Air: Arisotphanes' 'Birds'," *Arethusa* 23, no. 2 (1990): 183-207; William Arrowsmith, "Aristophanes' Birds: The Fantasy Politics of Eros," *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* (1973): 130.
[3] James McGlew, "'Everybody Wants to Make A Speech': Cleon and Aristophanes on Politics and Fantasy," *Arethusa* 29, no. 3 (1996): 345-6.

emerges when comparing Aristophanes' depiction of the world above and below.[4] In the world above, Aristophanes' *Birds* construct a wall partitioning heaven and Earth, while in the world below, his *Frogs* inhabit a river between Earth and the underworld.

This investigation seeks to chart a middle path between these two camps, where Aristophanes employs the narrative of escape to underscore the necessity of political reform—illustrating the illusory nature of escape due to the inextricable political nature of the human condition. To contend this, Aristophanes articulates proto-Aristotelian thoughts, who would later assert that man is either a political animal endowed with speech or an outcast akin to a "bird which flies alone."[5] Aristophanes' comedies thus operate on the premise that the very capacity for speech binds individuals to the *polis* (state), rendering any attempt to flee ultimately futile. Furthermore, the recurring depiction of birds as a primitive 'other' between the two Greek thinkers is no coincidence.

A comparative analysis of the tripartite structure of Aristophanes' *Birds* and *Frogs* reveals notable parallels. Each play opens with a disillusioned and alienated protagonist who embarks on an escapist pursuit guided by personal *eros*, or selfish desire. However, their personal passion soon transforms into political ambition, leading to the dismantling of their fantastical worlds. In the end, despite diverging resolutions, both plays converge in critiquing the rise of manipulative demagogues who empowered the unpolitical masses with rhetoric and speech in the context of the unfolding Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE). Whether through cautionary warnings or prescriptive solutions, Aristophanes' depiction of fantastical worlds endeavours to reform Athens while illustrating the futility of escape. Rather than

[4] Geoffrey Arnott, "A Lesson from the 'Frogs'," *Greece & Rome* 38 (1991): 18, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017383500022944.
[5] Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library 264 (Harvard University Press, 1932), 1.253a.

provide an exhaustive recount of both plays in their entirety, this article instead pinpoints specific parallel elements to explore their reformist nature.

Prologue: Personal *Eros* and Fantasy as The Initial Desire to Escape

Classical philologists, such as David Konstan, often regard *Birds* as a more overtly fantastical escapist comedy than *Frogs*, fixating on the construction of *Nephelokokkygia* (or 'Cloudcuckooland') as a combination of four utopian models.[6] While it is tempting to envision a model utopia fashioned in the sky than the underworld, rather than dissecting the structural compositions of these fantastical worlds, it proves more rewarding to explore the underlying reasons why individuals are drawn towards them. These fantastical worlds were not objectively "perfect" havens, but subjective retreats which experientially appealed to an individual's basest desires. Thus, Dionysos' trek to the underworld can be seen as a form of escape, as he desires the pleasant poetry only Euripides can provide.[7] Similarly, Peisetareus affirms he is not "looking for a city greater than" Athens, but one "just better suited" to him.[8] Through this perception-based framework, recurring themes of personal *eros*, excess luxury, and selfish desires guide the protagonists away from reality.

Beginning with *Birds*, Peisetareus' disdain for Athens' litigious and political nature leads him to covet the birds' lifestyle. Arising from his reluctance to repay his debts, Peisetareus and his companion, Euelpides, laments that Athenians "chirp" away at lawsuits

[6] Konstan, "A City in the Air," 183-207. Konstan identities four Utopian models: (1) Absolute negation, a society that has no rules or *nomoi* (meaning law) at all; (2) Antinomian, a society marked by the reversal or inversion of *nomoi*, where what is illegal at home is lawful there; (3) Eunomia, a society in which the laws and conventions are imaged as just or excellent; (4) Hypertrophy, where the order of things is not better, but simply grander and more magnified without boundaries.
[7] Aristophanes, *Frogs*, trans. Stephen Halliwell (Oxford University Press, 2016), 92-104.
[8] Aristophanes, *Birds*, trans. Jeffrey Henderson, Loeb Classical Library 179 (Cambridge, 2000), 123-4.

"their whole lives long," differentiating themselves as "a couple of jurophobes."[9] Peisetareus immediately deviates from the traditional heroic archetype, reinforcing his selfish and indulgent nature when he expresses his ultimate designs for a wedding feast and sexual pleasure.[10] Subsequently, Peisetareus' animosity towards Athenian politicians ultimately manifests as hypocrisy, as his ridicule of demagogues such as Cleonymus—whom he derides as a gluttonous "gobbler"—foreshadows Peisetareus' own insatiable hunger and manipulative rhetoric.[11] Just as Cleonymus was maligned for having "tossed his crest," Peisetaerus would turn his back on Athens to rule over an imperialistic avian empire.[12] It is no coincidence Peisetaerus would later acquire wings, symbolically positioning him closer to a "gobbler" bird, and subsequently Cleonymus.[13] It was this greed that compelled Peisetaerus to turn to the birds, who, despite their apparent uncivilised nature, appeared to live a life of carefree luxury.

Peisetareus desires what Dora Pozzi characterises as the "Pastoral ideal," a mode of idyllic harmony which the birds initially seemed to embody.[14] Despite being half-human following his partial metamorphosis into a bird, Tereus' introduction is steeped in pastoral imagery alongside his avian counterparts: he wakes from a midday nap following a meal of "myrtle berries and gnats"; remains free from economic concerns; and is proclaimed to be "[l]iving the life of honeymooners."[15] Pozzi delivers a compelling analysis of the avian bucolic world which Peisetareus covets. However, she dismisses an explanation of the birds' utopian lifestyle, claiming it as "free from the bounds of logic."[16] This interpretation

[9] Aristophanes, *Birds*, 27-48, 110-17.
[10] Ibid., 128-42.
[11] Ibid., 289.
[12] Ibid., 290.
[13] Ibid., 654-5.
[14] Dora C. Pozzi, "The Pastoral Ideal in 'The Birds' of Aristophanes," The Classical Journal 81, no. 2 (1985): 119-29.
[15] Aristophanes, *Birds*, 82-3, 161.
[16] Pozzi, "The Pastoral Ideal in 'The Birds' of Aristophanes," 121.

overlooks Aristophanes' more nuanced implication, in which the birds' pastoral existence derives from their feeble grasp on speech, prefiguring Aristotelian conceptions of humanity's political nature being inextricably linked to their capacity for speech.[17] Marked by their "agape" beaks, the birds remain unencumbered by political ambition and are said to be of one mind.[18] It is only because Tereus "taught them language," that Peisetaerus could begin to manipulate them and incite civil conflict.[19] Holding undertones of primitivist nostalgia, Aristophanes thereby portrays the world above as one of carefree *eros*. Tying everything together, Tereus' recurring description of Peisetaerus as "passionately enamoured" and holding a "passionate desire" for the birds' way of life, subsequently reinforces the themes of *eros* and apolitical desires underpinning Peisetaerus' initial desire to escape Athens.[20]

Similarly, in *Frogs*, Dionysos journeys to the underworld, driven by "the most intense desire" which has taken "hold of [his] heart" to revive a deceased playwright for his own artistic pleasure.[21] Herakles immediately misconstrues this desire as one of love or sexual pleasure, but Dionysos redefines it as an indulgent passion for art or food, akin to a "sudden desire for soup."[22] These two delimitations of desire parallel Peisetaerus' own declared passions for sex and a wedding feast. Subsequently, Dionysos expresses his discontent toward contemporary poets who were "haunts of twittering swallows."[23] Much like Peisetaerus, who flees the litigious chirping of Athenians by following the calls of a crow and jackdaw, Dionysos pursues the pleasurable twittering of playwrights by tracking Euripides in the underworld. This recurring motif of bird calls serving as navigators unifies *Birds* and

[17] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1.1.10-12.
[18] Aristophanes, *Birds*, 164-70, 1014-16.
[19] Ibid., 198-200, 1582-84.
[20] Aristophanes, *Birds*, 326, 413-16.
[21] Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 56.
[22] Ibid., 59-70.
[23] Ibid., 92-5.

Frogs, casting Dionysos to be depicted as being guided by the same apolitical *eros* as Peisetaerus.

Dionysos' quest to bring back Euripides is initially portrayed as a personal, selfish desire. Dionysos ignores Herakles, who mocks Euripides' ambitious, yet airily utterances, as a "great big con-trick."[24] Instead, Dionysos confesses to derive immense pleasure from Euripides' words as "it sends [him] crazy!"[25] This suggests Dionysos' motivations were driven by a desire for pleasurable, aesthetically sounding poetry rather than any political agenda. Furthermore, Dionysos' prioritisation of indulgence and excess is underscored by his decision to disguise himself as Herakles, which would enable him to enjoy luxurious travel at the best brothels, rest-stops, and bread-shops.[26] His reluctance to undertake the descent to Hades through unpleasant means—such as hanging, poisoning, or walking—culminates in his choice of a boat for its perceived comfort and convenience.[27] However, upon realising he is forced to row, Dionysos becomes frustrated and lashes out at a nearby chorus of frogs.[28] Thus, both plays commence with an escapist tonality, as Dionysos and Peisetaerus are driven by selfish and apolitical desires which propel them far away from their reality and homes.

Main Action: The Burden of Political Ambition and the Futility of Escape

However, along their journeys, both Peisetaerus and Dionysos find themselves unable to outrun human nature. Among Aristophanes' earlier works written during Cleon's lifetime (429-422 BCE), McGlew traces a narrative progression in which the play's settings transition

[24] Ibid., 105.
[25] Ibid., 104.
[26] Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 107-20.
[27] Ibid., 120-40.
[28] Ibid., 209-67.

from a grounded reality to fantasy.[29] However, a comparative analysis of *Birds* and *Frogs*—written after Cleon's death—reveals a reversal of this trend, with the fantastical topography shifting back to reality. Derived from the human faculty of speech, the protagonists' personal *eros* evolves into political ambition, leading to the dissolution of their respective fantasies. Each protagonist uncovers one side in the dual importance of rhetoric: Peisetaerus manipulates and corrupts the birds, while Dionysos recognises its constructive potential for education and instruction. In an ironic twist of fate, Peisetaerus recreates the same socio-political conditions he sought to escape, while Dionysos abandons his personal enjoyment to restore a playwright based on political utility.

In *Birds*, Peisetareus' original desire to indulge in the birds' luxurious lifestyle soon develops into a hunger to command an avian empire. Arrowsmith advances *Birds* as a politically and philosophical critique on Athenian imperialism; an allegory for Athens' reckless ambition and "fatal passion" for empire.[30] It is compelling to approach *Birds* as a commentary on colonialism and Athenian imperialism. From the outset, Peisetareus is described as wandering with a "basket, kettle, and myrtle boughs"—ceremonial implements associated with the founding of a colony—while Prometheus outright declares that Peisetareus "colonised the air."[31] However, the question emerges over which contemporary political conflict Aristophanes' alludes to. Arrowsmith argues that the play reflects the history of the Delian League (478-404 BCE): just as the Athenians organised the league to establish an empire against Persia, Peisetareus constructed an avian empire to challenge the authority of the gods.[32] Conversely, Katz interprets the play as a commentary on the Sicilian Expedition (415-413 BCE), which aimed to cut the Peloponnesian peninsula from its

[29] McGlew, "Everybody Wants to Make A Speech," 345.
[30] Arrowsmith, "Aristophanes' Birds," 126-34.
[31] Aristophanes, *Birds*, 40-5, 1515; See Jeffrey Henderson, "Aristophanes, *Birds,*" footnote 8.
[32] Arrowsmith, "Aristophanes' Birds," 131-3.

overseas allies, isolate the Lacedaemonians, and force their surrender—an objective mirrored in Peisetareus' plan to build a wall partitioning heaven and Earth to cut off the gods.[33] Lastly, Hall identifies parallels between Cloudcuckooland and Thrace, offering a commentary on Athenian exploitation of supposedly uncivilised and lawless peoples, represented allegorically by the birds.[34] Nevertheless, it proves more fruitful to accept all these references as part of a broader universal reproach. Rather than limiting his critique, Aristophanes exploited the fantastical nature of his comedy, crafting a universalised conflict that transcended immediate historical contexts to invoke Athens' wider imperialistic designs.

By transcending the applicability of his work to a single political conflict, this enabled Aristophanes to frame his critique of Athenian imperialism into a broader commentary on the corruptive influence of human nature, especially in relation to speech. As the chorus of birds aptly observes in their first encounter with Peisetareus: "A treacherous thing in every way is human nature."[35] Employing the power of rhetoric, Peisetareus mobilises the birds by making them aware of their kingly past, awakening them as political animals.[36] Peisetareus' persuasive rhetoric corrupts the birds' peaceful, pastoral existence, leading them to now believe their lives were only "worth living" if they "recover [the] sovereignty" they never knew to have possessed before.[37] By the play's conclusion, the birds, once united and harmonious, become factionalised, culminating in an attempted political coup.[38] Peisetareus' manipulation has led the birds to view themselves as "omniscient and omnipotent,"

[33] B. Katz, "The Birds of Aristophanes and the Politics," *Athenaeum* 54 (1976): 355-62.
[34] Edith Hall, "Aristophanes' *Birds* as Satire on Athenian Opportunists in Thracel," in *Aristophanes and Politics*, eds. Ralph Rosen and Helene Foley (Brill, 2020), 187-213.
[35] Aristophanes, *Birds*, 451-5.
[36] Ibid., 464-9.
[37] Ibid., 546-9.
[38] Ibid., 1014-16; 1582-5.

demanding reverence as "immortals" superior to gods.[39] And yet, the irony persists that Peisetareus, a human, assumes leadership over these supreme birds.

The naturally winged birds lack inherent ambition, while it is the wingless Peisetareus who conjures up political designs and metaphorically "wings" himself through his naturally endowed capacity of speech. Where he once pleaded with the birds to give him wings, Peisetareus later emphasises that speech alone uplifts the mind and body, telling an informer seeking wings that "I'm winging you, just by talking."[40] Subsequently, Peisetareus employs his speech to restrict the bird's physical wings, confining them to a single walled city and prohibiting them from flying "around in all directions."[41] This is exemplified when he halts Iris from flying through Cloudcuckooland.[42] Furthermore, Peisetareus' refusal to listen to other human visitors and instead choosing to drive them away by punching them repeatedly, illustrates his concern of falling prey to the rhetoric of others and the importance he places on speech.[43] Thus, Peisetareus' fantastical escape is proven futile due to the human capacity for speech and political action, which corrupts and dismantles his avian utopia.

Conversely, in *Frogs*, Aristophanes foregrounds the instructive and redemptive potential of speech. The importance of speech is reinforced first in the parabasis, where the chorus extols "the power of mouths," and later on by Euripides, who despite losing, declares "it's our task to improve all the people who live in the cities of Greece."[44] Along his journey, Dionysos' original desire for Euripides' euphonic verses transforms into an acknowledgement of Aeschylus' didactic and political utility. This tension between performance and meaning is highlighted through the juxtaposition of the two choral groups—

[39] Aristophanes, *Birds*, 685-93, 1058-1060.
[40] Ibid., 1437-51.
[41] Ibid., 164-70.
[42] Ibid., 1119-201.
[43] Ibid., 981-1035.
[44] Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 879-80; 1008-10.

the frogs and the Initiates of Mysteries—which foreshadow the poetic approaches of Euripides and Aeschylus respectively.

In examining the chorus of frogs, a central question emerges over why they lent their name to the play's title. Although the frogs' overall importance has been downplayed by scholars like Benjamin Rogers, their symbolic significance emerges through the play's historical context and the frogs' dramatic function.[45] *Frogs* was staged shortly after Athens' shocking naval defeat in the Sicilian Expedition, and the frogs—encountered by Dionysos as he rows across the River Styx—evoke clear associations with the Athenian navy. Charon's refusal to allow Xanthias aboard the boat underscores this reference, as he insists that only slaves who have "fought at sea" may board, alluding to the battle of Arginusae in 406 BCE which offered citizenship to slaves who rowed in the navy.[46] Furthermore, Aristophanes directly comments on the sea-based Sicilian Expedition through his later debate between the poets over one of its key political players, Alkibiades.[47] Thus, the title of *Frogs* evokes the play's broader commentary on naval conflicts.

The frogs also signal the moment Dionysos reorients his understanding over the utility of speech. While Dionysos initially desires the pleasurable "twittering" of the poetic playwrights, his frustration with the frogs' hollow croaking marks his awakening.[48] Scholars like Martha Habash propose that Dionysos shouts over the frogs either due to his inability to appreciate their "beauty," or because he was incapable of "competing with the Frogs in composition."[49] Habash's identification of the frogs' melodious quality is well-founded, as

[45] Benjamin Rogers, *The "Frogs" of Aristophanes* (George Bell & Sons, 1919), 34.
[46] Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 220-30.
[47] Ibid., 1420-67.
[48] Ibid., 92-5.
[49] Martha Habash, "Dionysos' Roles in Aristophanes' Frogs'," *Mnemosyne* 55 (2002): 7, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4433291.

the frogs themselves proclaim to be loved by the Muses, Pan, and Apollo.[50] However, it was not a matter of Dionysos recognising the frogs' aesthetic beauty, but his revelation surrounding the lack of substance in their musicality. The frogs' hypnotic and repetitive chorus of "Brékekekex ko-ax" functions as a parody of aesthetic excess. Dionysos, in realising this, decides to beat the frogs at their own game, drowning them out with absurd utterances about "his anus."[51] This foreshadows Euripides' own defeat, as Euripides similarly embellishes his verses with repetitive and rhythmic flourishes like "toils" and "thrum-splat," leading Aeschylus to interject in a Dionysiac fashion with nonsensical objects like a "miniature oil jar."[52] Thus, the frogs stand as the play's title as they mark Dionysos' initial shift toward valuing poetic *logos* and meaningful instruction over rhetorical flair and populist *pathos*.

Subsequently, the chorus of Initiates stood as precursors to Aeschylus, with Dionysos' enthusiastic reception of their performance serving as an implicit acknowledgement of the didactic role of art. Though the Initiates' songs begin in celebration of personal pleasure and selfish luxury, they transition to political critique, condemning corrupt demagogues who "stoke" [factions] up."[53] This mirrors Aeschylus' verses, which provided the best instruction on how "to save the city."[54] While the frogs sounded prettier, the Initiates talked about more attractive things. This underscores the later debate between Euripidean pleasure and Aeschylean substance, explaining Aeschylus' triumph in the weighing-scale challenge.[55] Thus, *Birds* explores the capacity of rhetoric to be used for political gain and manipulation, while *Frogs* advances its utility in civic guidance. Despite culminating in separate outcomes,

[50] Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 228-31
[51] Ibid., 237.
[52] Ibid., 1200, 1260-94.
[53] Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 360.
[54] Ibid., 1410-72.
[55] Ibid., 1365-410.

both Peisetareus and Dionysos are made aware of the importance of rhetoric, which subsequently pulls them from their fantasy worlds.

Exodos: Call to Arms Against the Demagogues

By demonstrating the futility of escape, Aristophanes' depiction of the world above and below was used as a vehicle for political critique and reform, merging the two plays into a cautionary tale documenting the decline of Athenian democracy. Here, Aristophanes warns against the rise of demagogues who exploit the power of speech to both empower and manipulate the unpolitical masses. Starting with *Birds*, Aristophanes depicts the dangers of contemporary democracy.

While Arrowsmith offers a compelling interpretation of the play as a critique of Athenian imperialism—framed through the perils of unchecked *eros* and human ambition—Aristophanes also appears equally invested in exploring the internal ramifications of these forces on Athens' local climate. This domestic dimension is underlined by other scholars, who predominantly fashion Peisetareus within a tyrannical mould: where he dons a golden crown; cannibalises attempted revolters; marries Sovereignty; and subjugates gods, humans, and birds alike.[56] However, this does not explain Peisetareus' specific justification for his act of cannibalism, where he claims the meat was taken from birds who rebelled "against the bird democracy."[57] While this statement may be read as a rhetorical manoeuvre characteristic of tyrannical manipulation, it is more productive to interpret Peisetareus as a demagogue operating within a democratic Cloudcuckooland.

[56] Aristophanes, *Birds*, 1275-6, 1582-4, 1608-13, 1706-65; Hall, "Aristophanes' *Birds* as Satire on Athenian Opportunists in Thrace," 189-210; Mario Telò, "The Politics of *Dissensus* in Aristophanes' Birds," in *Aristophanes and Politics*, eds. Ralph Rosen and Helene Foley (Brill, 2020), 241-2.
[57] Aristophanes, *Birds*, 1582-4.

When Tereus introduces Peisetareus to the birds, he is described as an old man with new counsel, alluding to the contemporary shift in Athenian democratic culture with the recent rise of populist demagogues.[58] Building upon this allegory, the chorus of birds served as a democratic assembly, granting Peisetareus the opportunity to "explain what kind of business" he holds without being interrupted, despite their clear distrust of him.[59] Rather than offering logical arguments, Peisetareus appeals to the birds' emotions, invoking the nostalgic imagery of a lost golden age to mobilise them. In this manner, Peisetareus echoes Aristophanes' previous portrayal of Cleon the demagogue in his *Knights*, where Aristophanes disparaged democratic leaders who exploited the emotions, fears, and prejudices of the public rather than relying on rational arguments. This anti-demagoguery precedent explains Poseidon's uncharacteristic and jarring lament in *Birds*, where in reference to the Triballian god he exclaims: "ah democracy, what will you bring us to in the end, if the gods can elect this person ambassador."[60] This out-of-place statement could be read in Aristophanes' voice, encapsulating his broader anxieties about the exploitation of gullible masses by unqualified populist figures.

Lastly, the parabasis reinforces Peisetareus' portrayal as a demagogue when the chorus of birds sardonically declares, "who ever kills any of the long deceased tyrants shall get a talent."[61] On one level, this distances Peisetareus from tyranny by suggesting that all tyrants are long gone. More significantly, it parodies the fear-mongering occurring in contemporary Athens, where demagogues would inflame the threat of tyranny to control the democratic populace—a sentiment Aristophanes previously demonstrated in *Wasps*.[62]

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[58] Ibid., 225.
[59] Ibid., 460-3.
[60] Ibid., 1565-73.
[61] Ibid., 1072-87.
[62] Aristophanes, *Wasps*, trans. Jeffrey Henderson, Loeb Classical Library 488 (Harvard University Press, 1998), 488-507.

Beneath its fantastical surface, *Birds* emerges as a cautionary allegory about the vulnerability of Athenian democracy to populist demagogues who employ rhetorical manipulation and supplant rational discourse.

This same impetus is carried into *Frogs*, where Aristophanes' voice emerges clearly through the chorus: "Please, you idiots listening now, it's not too late to change your ways. Choose to use the best men once again."[63] Scholars such as James Redfield and Mark Padilla emphasise the play's political call for the return of old democratic values, highlighting two ideological axes: where Aeschylus and Herakles represent the traditional values of heroism, courage, and moral virtue, while Euripides and Xanthias embody the newer demagogic trends of passion, radicalisation, and social stratification.[64] Aeschylus' Homeric warriors are claimed to inspire Ares, valour, and military discipline, while Euripides, with his focus on "Aphrodite's allure," is blamed for winging the flawed masses with words and creating a populace of "[b]ufoons who serve as public monkeys, [d]ecieving the people at every turn."[65] Padilla constructs a political stage through his analysis of Aristophanes' metatheatre, positioning Aeschylus and Euripides as politicians representing traditional and demagogic values respectively. Expanding on Padilla's framework, this investigation inserts Dionysos within this setting as a reflection of the demos itself. Dionysos' role as a judge underscores the instability of the Athenian demos, as he fluctuates between the two playwrights and sides with the most recent speaker. His hesitation—confessing that he finds Aeschylus wise and Euripides personally appealing—highlights the malleability of democratic deliberation.[66]

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[63] Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 734-5.
[64] James Redfield, "Comedy, Tragedy, and Politics in Aristophanes' 'Frogs'," *Chicago Review* 15, no. 4 (1962): 107-21; Mark Padilla, "The Heraclean Dionysus: Theatrical and Social Renewal in Aristophanes' 'Frogs'," *Arethusa* 25, no. 3 (1992): 359-84.
[65] Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 957-8, 1010-87.
[66] Ibid., 1413.

While Redfield and Padilla, in their singular focus on *Frogs*, offer a compelling analysis of Aristophanes' critique against demagoguery, this investigation seeks to further their insights by introducing a comparative analysis with *Birds*. When Euripides is first introduced to the audience by the slave, he is depicted as a new arrival who manipulates society's lowest stratum: "he started to harangue the criminals here…The One's who'd beaten their fathers…There's a crowd of them all in Hades…And when they heard his debating speeches, his verbal twists and turns, They went quite crazy about him…He was so puffed up that he laid his claim to the throne where Aeschylus sat."[67] At first glance, Euripides' introduction could be used as a summary for Peisetareus' actions in *Birds*, where a foreign arrival employs rhetoric to galvanise a lawless crowd for political power. While Euripides manipulates criminals, Peisetareus speaks to avians who view "all things shameful…for people controlled by custom" as "admirable."[68] It is no coincidence Aristophanes records both protagonists speaking to and influencing father-beaters. The final image of Euripides being "puffed up" and sitting on the throne evokes the same avian imagery as Peisetareus, who was "winged" with both words and feathers, and then crowned. Thus, Aristophanes frames Peisetareus and Euripides as embodiments of demagoguery, positioning Dionysos' choice of Aeschylus as a call to return to traditional democratic values.

Conclusion

Aristophanes' depiction of fantasy worlds in *Birds* and *Frogs* was a wish to reform Athens by exposing the hopelessness of escape. This is demonstrated through their tripartite structural parallels: where both protagonists embark on a fantastical journey in pursuit of

[67] Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 776.
[68] Aristophanes, *Birds*, 753-60, 1357-70.

apolitical passions guided by *eros*, but in meeting anthropomorphic animals which lend their names to the plays' titles, come to realise the utility of speech and subsequently the futility of their escape, before ultimately settling into a critique of demagoguery, whether through Peisetratus' embrace of populist tendencies, or through Dionysos' rejection of Euripides and his rhetorical manipulation.

The titles demonstrate a thematic progression, where the melodic and pleasurable chirping of birds which manipulate the emotions of the audience are revealed to be meaningless and shallow, nothing but the useless croaking of a frog. Redfield concludes that the hopelessness of fantasy in *Frogs* "makes it the saddest comedy" he knows.[69] This hopelessness—expanded to incorporate the inescapable burden of political ambition and rhetoric—underpins both *Birds* and *Frogs*. These plays offered the opposite of escape, illustrating how political issues pervaded even fantastical settings. In this way, Aristophanes first uses Peisetareus in his *Birds*, who becomes the very demagogue he sought to evade, to signal the necessity of realising the dangers facing Athens; before using Dionysos in his *Frogs* to advocate for the restoration of the old democratic order. Aristophanes' comedies offer a bitter medicine: while you can flee to an alternate world, you cannot run from your problems.

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[69] Redfield, "Comedy, Tragedy, and Politics in Aristophanes' 'Frogs'," 121.

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How Is Tiresias Old? Age, Time, and The Seer

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When Paul Cartledge published his popular study of the Greek city of Thebes in 2020, he gave it the subtitle *The Forgotten City of Ancient Greece*.[1] Certainly, compared to its neighbours Athens and Sparta, Thebes is much less well-known to the modern reader. Yet in antiquity, stories about the legendary past of Thebes ranked almost equal to those of Troy. The Theban epic cycle (of which we only have fragments) recounted the stories of Cadmus' foundation of the city, Oedipus, the Seven Against Thebes and the expedition of the sons of the Seven, the *Epigonoi*. It was still being read into the second century CE, rated by the early travel writer Pausanias as "the best after the Iliad and the Odysseus epic."[2] Of the characters who populated those stories, one of the most important was Tiresias the seer, who advised all the Theban kings from Cadmus onwards. When we first meet him in the *Odyssey*, he is set apart; Circe advises Odysseus to journey to Hades to consult "Theban Tiresias, the blind seer," whose mind, unlike all others, "remains steadfast" in the Underworld.[3] He plays a vital role in four fifth century BCE Greek tragedies (most notably Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos,* but also Sophocles' *Antigone* and Euripides' *Phoenissae* and *Bacchae*), where his appearance always marks "a caesura that separates the events before and after his scene."[4] Theban myth was also a popular topic for Roman writers, allowing them to reflect on a city which was almost a 'dark twin' of Rome, with dual foundation stories, strong associations with the number seven and stories in which the killing of royal brother by brother and civil war were

[1] Paul Cartledge, *Thebes: The Forgotten City of Ancient Greece* (Picador, 2020).
[2] Pausanias, *The Description of Greece*, trans. W. Jones (Harvard University Press, 1918), 9.9.5.
[3] Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Emily Wilson (W. W. Norton, 2018), 10: 492-5.
[4] Gherardo Ugolini, *Untersuchungen zur Figur des Sehers Teiresias* (Gunter Narr 1995), 22.

sources of fear and disaster. Ovid generally sets his tales of metamorphosis in the countryside but made an exception for Thebes, the only city discussed at any length in the *Metamorphoses*.[5] Seneca's tragedy *Oedipus* and Statius' *Thebaid* also explore the history of the royal house of Thebes and with it the character of Tiresias. In all of these receptions, Tiresias is not a simple figure: he is blind, yet has great insight though his powers of prophecy; he is a Theban who denies the claims of his *polis*; he is a human who is close to the divine; he is a man who spent seven years as a woman and he is everywhere referred to as old but shows no sign of dying.[6]

Greek myth is elastic; the stories told about gods, nature and important humans, originally spoken or sung and later turned into literature and visual art, were always changing. It is this which makes Greek myth, and Roman receptions of it, useful to think with; the ways in which mythical figures are depicted can suggest the norms and expectations of the societies framing the myth. Focusing on the only contradiction inherent in the myths of Tiresias which is applicable to all living beings, that of age, this article examines the depiction of Tiresias as an old man in the works of Greek and Roman literature outlined above. Examining the ways in which the different writers depict the mythical figure of Tiresias shows differing expectations of old age in classical Greece and late Republican and Imperial Rome. It also highlights how the mythical figure of Tiresias meets, fails to meet, ignores or transcends ancient expectations of old age; the Theban seer is not like other humans in his relationship with time, a difference which is at the root of his position outside many of the expectations of old age.

[5] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. David Raeburn (Penguin, 2004), books 3 and 4.
[6] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos*, trans. Robert Fagles, (Penguin, 1984), 339, 343-5, 467; Ovid, *Metamorphoses,* 3, 326-32; Euripides, *Phoenissae*, trans. John Davie (Penguin, 2005), 848.

The question of Tiresias' age is itself a vexed one. In neither Homer nor the fifth-century BCE Theban poet Pindar is he described as old and the Hellenistic poet Callimachus describes him as a boy "whose beard was just now turning dark."[7] It is likely that the now-lost *Thebaid* epic cycle and the fifth-century work focused on the lives of seers, the *Melampodia*, gave more information about Tiresias but, of the works remaining to us, it is only classical tragedy which delineates his lifespan.[8] Sophocles tells us that Tiresias was an honoured prophet during the reign of Laius, and Euripides' *Phoenissae* shows him acting as prophet to Laius' grandson Eteocles.[9] This implies a lifespan of three generations, which does not greatly exceed the 60 or 70 years expected for men in the ancient world.[110] Euripides' *Bacchae*, however, associates Tiresias (already an old man) with Cadmus, Laius' great-grandfather, implying a six-generation lifespan. This uncertainty concerning his age complicates attempts to measure him against age expectations: different stages of ageing were recognised in the ancient world, but where to put Tiresias on the continuum from a few grey hairs to "one foot in the grave?"[11]

Physical changes and infirmity were closely associated with age in both Greece and Rome; an analysis of over 600 representations of old men in Greek art identified white hair, wrinkles, and a bent body supported by a stick as key signifiers of age.[12] All of these tropes are used to describe the elderly in Greek drama and descriptions of Tiresias follow the same

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[7] Callimachus, *Hymn To Athene*, trans. Diane Raynor (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 75.
[8] For Theban epic see John Foley, *A Companion to Ancient Epic*, (Blackwell, 2005), 344-50; on the *Melampodia*, see Irina Kyriakou, "Tracing Melampus in the Hesiodic Melampodia (frr. 270–272 m.-w.)," *Yearbook of Ancient Greek Epic* 7, no. 1 (2023): 63-79, https://doi.org/10.1163/24688487-00701006.
[9] Sophocles, *OT,* 562-4.
[10] See Robert Garland, *The Greek Way of Life: from Conception to Old Age* (Duckworth, 1990), and Tim Parkin, *Old Age in the Roman World: A Cultural and Social History* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).
[11] See Galen, *Health,* trans. Peter Singer (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 5.12.379-80K for an example of a life-course and the stages of old age.
[12] Peter Emery, "Old Age Iconography in Archaic Greek Art," *Mediterranean Archaeology* 12 (1999): 17–28, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24667845?seq=1.

conventions.[13] His hair is grey and his body is weakening: he begs Manto to "go before me to keep me from stumbling; your father is weak."[14] Roman poetry, too, often comments on stereotypical elements in the appearance of old age.[15] Ovid describes Tiresias' "frost-white locks," Seneca adds "trembly knees," and Statius a "haggard visage."[16] Yet the routine invocation of the infirmity of old age in Greek tragedy does not affect Tiresias' ability to hold his own in an verbal contest with the King. His age is a side-issue, his position as a prophet and one who "sees most often what Lord Apollo sees" is what matters; as he tells Oedipus, "the truth is what I cherish and that's my strength."[17] In Seneca and Statius, however, Tiresias' age depletes his ability as an augur. In Seneca's *Oedipus*, Tiresias admits that his age prevents him from allowing the god to possess him, the surest course to an answer, while in Statius' *Thebaid*, Tiresias himself seems to doubt his own abilities.[18] When, after a long rite, ghosts from the underworld fail to appear, Tiresias' first concern is that it is his age which dissuades the goddesses from doing his bidding: "Don't sneer at these frail years."[19] Roman writers not only associated old age with infirmity, but advocated strenuous attempts to avoid the mental and physical impairment age could bring: "It is our duty … to resist old age .. to fight against it as we would fight against disease; to adopt a regimen of health."[20] One reason for this was the fear that being infirm meant that one would become disposable: "Sell worn-out oxen, blemished cattle, … an old slave, a sickly slave, and whatever else is

[13] For example, in Aeschylus *Agamemnon*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (University of Chicago Press, 1953), 75; Euripides *Heracles*, trans. William Arrowsmith (University of Chicago Press, 1956), 110-12; Euripides, *Ion*, trans. Ronald Willetts (University of Chicago Press, 1958), 1041-43.s.
[14] Euripides, *Phoenissae*, 840, 923.
[15] For example, Juvenal, *Satires*, trans. Susanna Braund (Harvard University Press, 2004), 10; Martial, *Epigrams*, trans. David Shackleton Bailey (Harvard University Press, 1993), 3.43.
[16] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 3.516; Seneca*, Oedipus,* trans. Emily Wilson (Oxford University Press, 2010), 289; Statius, *Thebaid*, trans. Jane Wilson Joyce (Cornell University Press, 2008), 4.581.
[17] Sophocles, *OT*, 285, 356-7.
[18] Seneca, *Oedipus,* 297-8.
[19] Statius, *Thebaid,* 4.512.
[20] Cicero, *On Old Age,* trans. W Falconer (Harvard University Press, 1923), 36.

superfluous."[21] Reflecting the cultures of the writers, then, in Greek tragedy Tiresias displays the outward signs of old age but retains his mental abilities; in Seneca and Statius, however, he is on the cusp of Galen's final stage of old age, on his way "along the road to Hades."[22]

Beyond the outward appearance of old age, however, there is something else which sets Tiresias apart from social norms; he is alone, with no household, social circle or position in civic life. These expectations around social links, crucial to the elderly, he neither meets nor fails to meet, but confounds. In neither Greece nor Rome was there any state support for the elderly; old people relied on their family to support them. In classical Athens, although sons became legally independent of their fathers' authority at the age of 18, both parents had the right to be fed, housed, and cared for by their son for life (daughters would be part of their husbands' households). It was also the son's responsibility to arrange for parental funerals and memorial rites.[23]

In Roman elite households, family support for old men was likely to be forthcoming, since the authority of the male head of the household, the *paterfamilias*, lasted until the end of his life, including the ownership of all property within the family.[24] Tiresias' household is limited; a daughter, Manto, is first introduced in Euripides' *Phoenissae* and becomes more important in Seneca and Statius, but there is no indication of Tiresias having a wider household, a wife, other children or even household servants. This is not because he is a seer; Amphiaraus, a renowned seer, is the son of Oecles, husband of Eriphyle, and father of Alcmaeon and Amphilochus.

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[21] Cato, *On Agriculture,* trans. W. Hooper (Harvard University Press, 1934), II.7.
[22] Galen outlines three periods of old age: active old age, where men may still carry out their civic duties; middle old age, when the elderly should rest and the very old, described above; *Health,* 5.12.379-80K.
[23] Barry Strauss, *Fathers and Sons in Athens: Ideology and Society in the Era of the Peloponnesian War* (Taylor and Francis, 1993), 65.
[24] Judith Evans Grubbs, "Promoting Pietas through Roman Law," in *A Companion to Families in the Greek and Roman Worlds,* ed. Beryl Rawson (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 377-92.

As well as being isolated in terms of having no extended family, Tiresias also appears socially isolated. The chorus in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* describes old age as, among other things, *ἀπροσόμιλον*, literally, "not coming together with a crowd of people," or unsociable.[25] What, in their view, "strengthless age" lacks highlights the importance of social bonds for the elderly in ancient Greece. The comic playwright Aristophanes celebrates the still-firm bonds between old soldiers and there is abundant evidence in inscriptions and papyri from the fifth century BCE for associations organised around cults, neighbourhoods or trades and professions in *poleis* all over Greece.[26] Roman men also valued sociability with *collegia* based, like Greek associations, on occupation, religious cult or neighbourhood. The builders' and carpenters' association, *collegium fabrum tignariorum*, for example, collected a monthly contribution to celebrate religious rituals with convivial meals and to help out members in need.[27] The common usage of such funds in both Greek and Roman associations to pay for burials of members suggests that elderly members of such clubs were not uncommon.[28] Unlike Cicero's version of Cato, who maintains his social connections even when out of Rome, Tiresias appears to have no peers and little interest in sociability.[29] His comment in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*, "you will bear your own burden to the end, and I will bear mine," is very much against the vision of shared social life in democratic Athens.[30]

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[25] Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus,* trans. Robert Fagles (Penguin, 1982), 1234-5.

[26] For example, in Aristophanes, *Wasps,* trans. David Barrett (Penguin, 1964), 300-60; *Acharnians,* trans. Alan Sommerstein (Penguin, 2002), 696-9; Vincent Gabrielsen and Mario Paganini, "Associations' Regulations from the Ancient Greek World and Beyond: An Introduction," in *Private Associations in the Ancient Greek World: Regulations and the Creation of Group Identity*, ed. Vincent Gabrielsen and Mario Paganini (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 3-15.

[27] *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951p00109515u&seq=254, CIL 6.996, 1060, 9405–8.

[28] *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum,* XIV 2112.

[29] Cicero, *Old Age*, 45-6: "When among the Sabines I keep up the practice of frequenting such gatherings, and every day I join my neighbours in a social meal."

[30] Sophocles, *OT*, 320; James Kierstead, "Associations," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Athens*, ed. Jenifer Neils and Dylan Rogers (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 379-91.

In most Greek *poleis* and in Rome, elite men were also expected to contribute to the political life of the city; in Athens, during the democratic period of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, this expectation was extended to all male citizens. Although positions of power were mostly filled by middle-aged men, older men retained a political presence.[31] In Athens, the post of Arbitrator was reserved for men older than 59.[32] The proviso that anyone who failed to serve in that post after reaching the appropriate age would forfeit his civil rights, unless he was holding some other office that year or was abroad, suggests that men of around 60 were commonly politically or commercially active. Roman senators were appointed for life and, whilst authors such as Cicero and Pliny idealised a life of cultured leisure after a busy political career, they often did not take their own advice: Cicero died aged 64 deeply involved in Roman politics.[33] In Sophocles' *Antigone*, Tiresias advises Creon on policy but does not otherwise show any interest in politics.[34] He even displays little enthusiasm for being a citizen of Thebes; when Oedipus accuses him of having "no love for Thebes who reared you," he does not deny it.[35] He is "no slave of yours [Oedipus'] but Loxias [Apollo's]."[36] This is surprising behaviour for both Greeks and Romans for whom the *polis* or *urbs* was also the *patris* or *patria*, words derived from the same stem as pater, father, and so literally 'fatherland.' Citizens ranked their *polis* or *urbs* with their families as entitled

[31] Develin, Robert, "Age Qualifications for Athenian Magistrates,*" Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 61 (1985): 149-59 discusses the age qualification of 30 for Athenian magistrates and argues that younger men may have been allowed to take up positions due to the absence of men of fighting age; this argument would also hold true for men over 60.
[32] "Aristotle," *Athenian Constitution,* trans. Henry Rackham. (Harvard University Press, 1935), 53.2-5.
[33] For example, Cicero, *Old Age*, 17; Pliny, *Letters*, trans. Betty Radice (Harvard University Press, 1969), 4.23.
[34] Sophocles, *Antigone,* trans. Robert Fagles (Penguin, 1982), 994-5.
[35] Sophocles, *OT,* 323.
[36] Ibid., 410.

to their devotion.[37] Tiresias not only denies his emotional ties to his fatherland but is physically estranged from the normal places frequented by old men: the street, *oikos* or *domus*, *agora* or *forum*, senate or lawcourts. Rather, he consults the birds in his "seat of prophecy" or conducts necromantic rites in a grove "far from the city," "its soil fat with fresh gore."[38] Tiresias stands outside these social conventions associated with age.

Tiresias challenges the time-fixed notions of lifecycle and lifespan to which the ancient world repeatedly returned.[39] Because of the impossibility of pinning down his age and his flouting of the core social expectations of old age, he represents a complex response to the three key conceptions of time in the Greek world. In terms of *chronos* (linear or historical time) Tiresias is associated with the reigns of specific Theban kings, namely Cadmus, Pentheus, Laius, Oedipus, Creon and Eteocles, but the facts concerning his own passage through time are blurred. The circumstances of his birth and death are obscure and he is always old but never ageing. *Kairos* represents an exact or critical time, often associated with a crux or opportunity. In terms of the structure of Attic tragedy, Tiresias' scenes in *Oedipus Tyrannos*, *Antigone,* and *Phoenissae* can be seen as a turning point. As Ugolini notes, "After the seer's appearance and his prophecies, his antagonist is no longer the same."[40] In terms of Tiresias' own life, though, the action of *kairos* is harder to discern. He has no control over the timing of his interviews with the ruler: when he is summoned by the king he must obey, even if reluctantly. He can urge his interlocutors to seize the opportunity to take decisive action yet

[37] For example, Demosthenes, *Orations*, trans. Charles Vince (Harvard University Press, 1926), 18.205: "Every man of them thought of himself as one born, not to his father and his mother alone, but to his patris."; Cicero, *On the Laws,* trans. Clinton W. Keyes (Harvard University Press, 1928), 2.2.5: "that fatherland must stand first in our affection in which the name of republic signifies the common citizenship of all of us."
[38] Euripides, *Bacchae*, trans. John Davie (Penguin, 2005), 350;
Seneca, *Oedipus*, 530; Statius, *Thebaid,* 4.444.
[39] Ray Laurence and Francesco Trifilò, *Mediterranean Timescapes: Chronological Age and Cultural Practice in the Roman Empire*, (Routledge, 2023), chapter 3, compares life course stages in many ancient systems.
[40] Ugolini, *Untersuchungen,* 23.

he is powerless to ensure that they do. Again and again he retires, disgruntled, whilst Oedipus, Creon, or Pentheus choose precisely the most disastrous course of action. Tiresias' life cannot even be seen in terms of *aion*, time seen as a whole or a span, as his existence has no clear end. Oedipus manages to achieve a satisfying end to his life, "taken without lamentation, illness or suffering," but Tiresias must live on; a later source quoting the pseudo-Hesiodic Melampodia implies that Tiresias saw his great age as a burden.[41] Even after death he endures a restless afterlife as the only soul in Hades who retains his understanding, seen in the Odyssey as a gift from Persephone but certainly one with an element of horror.[42]

We have seen that, other than as regards the outward physical signs of old age, Tiresias not only fails to meet but renders irrelevant the differing expectations of ancient Greece and Rome concerning the elderly. Tiresias is not old in the same way that Oedipus is old in *Oedipus at Colonnus*, or Cadmus in *Bacchae*. Each of these men displays the physical signs of age but has family and companions around him and at the end can accept his death as a culmination, even if not an entirely welcome one. Tiresias not only stands outside the social conventions associated with age, but cannot be fitted into the scheme through which time was regarded in ancient Greece. By complying with or challenging the written or unwritten rules of what old men were expected to be or do, Tiresias excites debate both in antiquity and now concerning what those rules actually were. Yet, as discussed at the beginning of this article, ageing or being ageless is only one of the many contradictions inherent in the figure of the blind-farsighted, Theban-stranger, human-godlike, female-male Theban seer. There can be only one Tiresias; even after death he is exceptional, privileged (or condemned) to retain his personality in the dreary land of Hades. It is no surprise that he is far from a typical old man.

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[41] Sophocles, *OT*, 1663-5; John Tzetzes, *Scholiast on Lycophron*, trans. Eduard Scheer (Weidmann, 1881), 683: "Father Zeus, would that you had given me a shorter span of life to be mine."
[42] Homer, *Od*yssey, 10.495.

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Sacred Waters: The Archangel Michael and The Re-Narration of Pagan Healing Practices in Byzantine Asia Minor

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When religious authorities change, embodied ritual practices prove remarkably resistant to elimination. Shared understandings of the world provide a solid baseline upon which to build the structures that organise and sustain groups. Fundamental to these understandings are ritual actions, which over time develop their own logic independent of the theological frameworks of religious authorities.[1] This presents a significant challenge for these religious elites, as when they change, it is extremely difficult to erase previously existing embodied practices - people continue to do what works. This is especially the case regarding healing, sacred springs, and water more generally.[2] Within the Byzantine world (c.330-1453 CE), the cult of the Archangel Michael is particularly illustrative of this issue. The archaeological and literary evidence demonstrates that Byzantine authorities did not eliminate existing venerative practices directed toward divine figures, but instead re-narrated them within Christian cosmological doctrine, staking theological claim to practices which existed long before them to provide justification for their continued practice. The following investigation is focused on the relationship between sacred water, healing springs, and Saint Michael (the Archangel), with three case studies, Aphrodisias, Chonae, and Sosthenion,

[1] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *L'homme Nu* (Plon, 1971), 600, as cited in Fritz Staal, "The Meaninglessness of Ritual," *Numen* 26, no.1 (1979): 10, https://doi.org/10.1163/156852779X00244.
[2] Etienne Dunant, "Water in Sanctuaries and Sacred Places: Attica, Boeotia, Corinthia and the Argolid" (PhD diss., University of Warwick, 2008) discusses this issue; Rangar Cline, *Ancient Angels: Conceptualizing Angeloi in the Roman Empire*. (Brill, 2011), 105; Hugh Jeffery, "Eight Hundred Years of the Cult of the Archangels at Aphrodisias/Stauropolis: Modern and Ancient Narratives," in T*rends and Turning Points: Constructing the Late Antiquity and Byzantine World,* eds. Matthew Kinloch and A. D. MacFarlane (Brill. 2019), 216.

discussed below.[3] Given that published reports of these sites are scarce, literary and historical analysis will be particularly important. A brief introduction to the term angel and the theory and methodology which guides this investigation will be provided first.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Religion is a fundamental building block of human society, and "'[r]outinisation, regularisation, [and] repetition, lie at the basis of social life itself."[4] These repetitions, as the basis of social functioning, become deeply entrenched in identities and understandings of one's place and thus are extremely difficult to dislodge when their stated rationale becomes problematic for a governing class. As such, there is a long history of religious traditions adopting aspects of previous forms of worship or organisation into their own canons as a way of reframing a shared mythos.[5] If one accepts ritual as pure activity, this trend makes sense, as it is the act itself which carries the importance, the 'logic' of which is socially negotiable.[6] This analysis examines archaeological, architectural, and literary evidence for how Byzantine

[3] Saint Michael and Michael the Archangel refer to the same thing.
[4] Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3; Jack Goody, "'Against 'Ritual': Loosely Structured Thoughts on a Loosely Defined Topic," *Cambridge Anthropology* 2, no. 2 (1975) as it appears in *Secular Ritual,* eds. Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff (Van Gorcum, 1977), 28 as cited in Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 72.
[5] For example, Peter Brown, *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World* (Cambridge University Press, 1992); Milan Kostrešević, "Godfearers and Religious Syncretism: Investigating Aphrodisias' Stone Inscription and Its Time," *Studia Antiqua et Archaeologica* 29, no. 2 (2023): 331-45, https://doi.org/10.47743/saa-2023-29-2-8; Newme Atungbou, "Religious Syncretism in India's Northeast: A Case of the Heraka," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 59, no. 4 (2024): 1323-35, https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096221131995; Pavel Barakhvostov, "The Formation of Religious Institutions and Religious Syncretism as a Compensatory Mechanism in the Social System of Ancient China," *Religious: Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama dan Lintas Budaya* 9, no. 1 (2025): 109-24, https://doi.org/10.15575/rjsalb.v9i1.40555.
[6] Staal, "The Meaninglessness of Ritual," 4; Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Polity Press, 1990), 18, 264.

authorities re-appropriated existing pagan practices into Christian understandings of *angelos*, divine intermediaries, particularly the cult of the Archangel Michael.

This analysis utilises the theoretical frameworks regarding rituals as established by Catherine Bell, Pierre Bourdieu, and Roy Rappaport amongst others.[7] Central too is the function of text as elucidated by Edward Said, that being "a text, by being a text, by insisting upon and employing all the devices of textuality," serves to "dislodge other texts."[8] In this analysis, this argument will be taken further, arguing that not only does text serve to dislodge other texts but also myths from their place in a real and physical sense. Before examining the archaeological evidence for continuity of practice, it is necessary to first establish what angels were in both pagan and Christian contexts and why they proved particularly useful for elite re-narration.

What Is an Angel?

It is well-established that the inhabitants of the ancient Mediterranean venerated spirits and gods associated with particular places (Dan. 9:21; Dan. 10:10–14) as well as intermediary beings which connected the mortal and the divine.[9] The English term 'angel' comes from the ancient Greek word *angelos* used in the Septuagint (the earliest known Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) to render the Hebrew *mal'ak*, both of which mean

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[7] Theoretical frameworks regarding ritual are discussed at length in both Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice;* Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*; Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity.*

[8] Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Harvard University Press, 1983), 45 as cited in Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 82.

[9] Shampa Mazumdar and Sanjoy Mazumdar, "Religion and Place Attachment: A Study of Sacred Places," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 24, no. 3 (2004): 385-97, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2004.08.005; Cline, *Ancient Angels: Conceptualizing Angeloi in the Roman Empire,* 105; Erika Kovács, "Angyalok a Szentírásban," *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai: Theologia Reformata Transylvaniensis* 60, no.1 (2015): 69, https://doaj.org/toc/2065-9482; Jeffery, "Eight Hundred Years of the Cult of the Archangels," 213.

'messenger.'[10] In the Bible, this term is used to refer to both human and inhuman beings, but in English, the term refers to various divine beings which served as intermediaries between humans and YHVH (i.e. God). Divine angels are central to both the Abrahamic faiths and many of the region's pagan practices.[11] The Judeo-Christian concept of an angel is drawn from two primary sources: earlier Semitic deities of the Divine Council, progressively reinterpreted as subordinate beings under monotheistic reformations, and Zoroastrian astral beings encountered during the Babylonian exile.[12] The exile proved particularly significant for angelology, as with the Jewish people's geographic displacement from Israel, their ability to commune with God was removed, thus necessitating new forms of divine intermediation.[13] These beings are often strongly tied to specific locations (Dan. 9:21, Dan. 10:10-14) as well as serving as protectors and deliverers of justice (Matt. 18:10; Acts 12:15) in addition to their intermediary roles.[14] It is clear that water had been an extremely important aspect of religious life and imagination in Anatolia at least as far back as the Hittite communities of Late Bronze Age, who developed numerous and diverse practices revolving around both sacred springs and water for their liminality and connection to the underworld.[15] As such, the association of

[10] Glen Bowersock, "Michonis Lecture: Pagan Angels in Late Antiquity," *La Lettre du Collège de France* 9, no. 9 (2015): 2, https://doi.org/10.4000/lettre-cdf.2205.
[11] John Charles Arnold, *Ego sum Michael: The Origin and Diffusion of the Christian Cult of St. Michael the Archangel*. (PhD diss., University of Arkansas, 1997), 57.
[12] The Exile took place roughly between 598-538 BCE, after the conquest of Judah by the Neo-Babylonian Empire and prior to its subsequent conquest by Cyrus the Great; Annette Evans, "The Origins of Jewish Beliefs in Angels," *Scriptura* 101, no. 1 (2009): 199, https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC100496.
[13] Kovács, "Angyalok a Szentírásban," 77-8.
[14] Ibid., 73; G.H.R. Horsley and Jean M. Luxford, "Pagan Angels in Roman Asia Minor: Revisiting the Epigraphic Evidence," *Anatolian Studies* 66 (2016): 142, 145, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0066154616000090.
[15] N. İlgi Gerçek, "Rivers and River Cults in Hittite Anatolia," in *Cult, Temple, Sacred Spaces: Cult Practices and Cult Spaces in Hittite Anatolia and Neighbouring Cultures: Proceedings of the First International HFR Symposium, Mainz, 3–5 June 2019,* eds. Susanne Görke et al. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2020), 253, 270-1; Ömür Harmanşah, "Event, Place, Performance: Rock Reliefs and Spring Monuments in Anatolia," in *Of Rocks and Water: Towards an Archaeology of Place,* ed. Ömür Harmanşah (Oxbow Books, 2014), 154.

angels with specific locations made them ideal vehicles for reconfiguring place-based pagan practices, particularly those centred on sacred and healing waters.

Why Michael?

The character of Michael the Archangel is particularly relevant when addressing the question of the popularity of his cult during the Byzantine period. He is one of only three angels named in the Old or New Testaments and is described as serving as God's *archistrategos* (in Hebrew: *śār(īm)* ('prince(s)'), an approximate translation), or commander-in-chief.[16] First mentioned in the first book of Enoch (1:1:36), written in the third century BCE, and then reappearing in the Book of Daniel (10:13, 10:21, 12:1) and Revelations (12:7-12), his lack of formal introduction suggests he was a well-known and well-understood character in the mythological landscape of the time.[17] Usually depicted in the context of fighting off demons, he serves as mankind's protector in life as well as during the soul's journey to the afterlife, and as such can be understood as fulfilling a similar psychopompic role to deities such as Thoth and Hermes, amongst many others.[18] Additionally, given his pre-Christian origins in pagan and Jewish tradition, he was "a credible personification of healing waters that had been converted from pagan to Christian use and seems to have appealed to a population that had undergone the same conversion."[19] While theologically murky, with

[16] Alexandros Tsakos and Marie von der Lippe, *The Archangel Michael Beyond Orthodoxies: History, Politics and Popular Culture* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2025), 2-3.
[17] Ibid., 2.
[18] Thoth is the Egyptian pantheon's god of the moon and writing, amongst other things. Hermes is the Greek pantheon's god of messengers and travelers; Irini Leontakianakou, "A Post-Byzantine Creation: The Archangel Michael Triumphant and Psychopomp," *Zograf: Časopis za Srednjovekovnu Umetnost* 33 (2009): 145-58, https://doi.org/10.2298/ZOG0933143L; Horsley and Luxford, "Pagan Angels in Roman Asia Minor," 141-2; Tsakos and von der Lippe, *The Archangel Michael Beyond Orthodoxies*, 3.
[19] Glenn Peers, *Subtle Bodies: Representing Angels in Byzantium* (University of California Press, 2001), 6; Evans, "The Origins of Jewish Beliefs in Angels," 203; Tsakos and von der Lippe, *The Archangel Michael Beyond Orthodoxies,* 3; Philipp Niewöhner, "Healing Springs of

many prohibitions against the worship of angels to be found, it is clear that because angels, as non-gendered intermediary divine beings, could be associated with numerous gods, shrines formerly dedicated to a multitude of deities could all be united in a Christian re-narration of myth to fall under the jurisdiction of Michael, the protector of mankind and God's commander and thus an excellent mediator of justice.[20] This appears to have been particularly the case with regards to sacred springs. Philipp Niewöhner argues:

> [a]s water was obviously animate and did not change or die when Christianity superseded paganism, the change in religion may have been more credible and acceptable if the new dedication could somehow be seen to have evolved out of an ancient Anatolian tradition rather than to have fallen from the sky.[21]

Michael's naming within the Bible, his adaptability, and incorporation of imagery and description from numerous pre-Christian deities in a way which was immediately recognisable made him particularly effective in the complex religious environment of late antique Asia Minor.[22]

Continuity of Place and Practice

The presence of sacred healing waters has been long attested in Anatolia. These presented a particular problem for zealous Christians of the period because, unlike temples or sacred groves, they could not be cut down or destroyed. Additionally, in a world of pre-

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Anatolia: St. Michael and the Problem of the Pagan Legacy," in *Life is Short, Art Long: The Art of Healing in Byzantium: New Perspectives,* eds. Brigitte Pitarakis and Gülru Tanman (Istanbul Research Institute, 2018), 99.

[20] For example, Eirini Afentoulidou, "Ministering Spirits, Guardians, Intercessors: The Discourse of Angels in Byzantine Liturgical Texts," in *Inventer les Anges de l'Antiquité à Byzance: Conception, Représentation, Perception: Travaux et Mémoires 25/3,* ed. Delphine Lauritzen (Association des Amis du Centre d'Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance, 2021-2022), 631.

[21] Niewöhner, "Healing Springs of Anatolia," 121.

[22] Alan Cadwallader, "St Michael of Chonai and the Tenacity of Paganism," in *Intercultural Transmission in the Medieval Mediterranean,* eds. David W. Kim and Stephanie L. Hathaway (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012), 72.

modern medicine, effective treatments were "too few and the ill too desperate," for traditions regarding healing springs to be easily put to an end.[23] Indeed, several 20th- and 21st-century explorations, using methods like Psoriasis Area and Severity Index (PASI) scores, Real-Time Quantitative Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR), and immunohistochemistry, have since confirmed that many healing spring locations do possess tangible health benefits, meaning that many of the results reported and experienced by ancient people were physical as well.[24] This made these practices even harder to eliminate.

The countryside of Asia Minor appears to have been one of the last holdouts of traditional pagan worship in the Byzantine world, with evidence for veneration in both public and private plentiful up until Justinian's law requiring the baptism of all pagans under threat of property seizure in 529 CE.[25] This is likely in part due to its geographic isolation. G.H.R. Horsley and Jean Luxford point out that, for the most part, soldiers and administrators had regular contact only with larger population centres on major communications routes in the provinces. They argue:

> [a]ccordingly, if not even a remote chance of securing justice was available at a human level, we should not be surprised that villages corporately made their own arrangements to secure social harmony (or at least coexistence); and where else was there to turn except to the gods who were guarantors of justice?[26]

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[23] Niewöhner, "Healing Springs of Anatolia," 97-8.

[24] For example, Sedat Ozçelik et al., "Kangal Hot Spring with Fish and Psoriasis Treatment," *Journal of Dermatology* 27, no. 6 (2000): 386-90, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1346-8138.2000.tb02188.x; Roberta d'Emmanuele di Villa Bianca et al., "Hydrogen Sulfide as a Mediator of Human *Corpus cavernosum* Smooth-Muscle Relaxation," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences - PNAS* 106, no. 11 (2009): 4513-18, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0807974105; Jingyan Liang et al., "Carbonate Ion-Enriched Hot Spring Water Promotes Skin Wound Healing in Nude Rats", *PloS One* 10, no. 2 (2015): 1-10, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0117106; Yulan Lv et al., "The Progress and Application of Hot Spring Hydrotherapy in Medical Fields: A Narrative Review," *Complementary Therapies in Medicine* 96 (2026): 103312, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ctim.2025.103312.

[25] *Codex Iustinianus*, ed. W. L. Carey (The Latin Library, undated), CJ.1.11.1pr-1.11.1.2; Esen Ogus, "'Urban Transformations at Aphrodisias in Late Antiquity: Destruction or Intentional Preservation?" in *Reuse and Renovation in Roman Material Culture: Functions, Aesthetics, Interpretations,* eds. Diana Y. Ng and Molly Swetnam-Burland (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 160-5.

[26] They refer here to a study by Steven Mitchell, "The Administration of Roman Asia from 133 BC to AD 250," in *Lokale Autonomie und Römische Ordnungsmacht den Kaiserzeitlichen Provinzen vom 1.*

This was particularly exacerbated by the apparent tendency of Jewish and Christian peoples to settle in cities and urban areas rather than the countryside.[27] Three sites in Asia Minor demonstrate distinctive strategies for Michael-centric re-narration of rituals regarding sacred water: Sosthenion (artistic appropriation), Chonae (mythological appropriation), and Aphrodisias (spatial incorporation).

At Sosthenion, near Constantinople, there existed a sanctuary to Michael from the fifth century CE.[28] This was built over a shrine which, according to the myth provided by John Malalas, a sixth-century Byzantine chronicler from Antioch, had been built by the Argonauts on the spot where a mysterious winged figure had appeared to them to predict their triumph over a local king who was blocking their path through the Bosphorus.[29] This was the origin of the name of the place, which was called *Σωσθένιν* ('they had been saved'). Upon visiting the shrine, Constantine is said to have re-dedicated it after witnessing the winged statue and receiving a vision in a dream which revealed the figure to be Michael.[30] Whether or not this specific origin story was well-established and widely believed is less relevant than the fact that Malalas felt the need to provide it, indicating that the site was of particular importance to local pagan practices. Malalas' reliance on the work of Apollonius of Rhodes for his telling of the tale of the Argonauts likely suggests that it was, however.[31]

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bis 3. Jahrhundert (Schriften des Historischen Kollegs Kolloquien 42), ed. Werner Eck (Oldenbourg, 1999), 17-46; Horsley and Luxford, "Pagan Angels in Roman Asia Minor," 143.

[27] Horsley and Luxford, "Pagan Angels in Roman Asia Minor," 150.

[28] Victoria Casamiquela-Gerhold, "Constantine the Great and the Churches of Saint Michael at Anaplous and Sosthenion: Some Further Notes on Their Location," *Cuadernos Medievales* 30, (2021): 17, http://hdl.handle.net/11336/183048.

[29] John Malalas IV, 13 as cited in Glenn Peers, "The Sosthenion near Constantinople: John Malalas and Ancient Art." *Byzantion* 68, no. 1 (1998): 110, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44172474.

[30] Johannes Thurn, *Ioannis Malalae Chronographia* (De Gruyter 2000), 54-6 as cited in Casamiquela-Gerhold, "Constantine the Great and the Churches of Saint Michael," 17; Peers, "The Sosthenion near Constantinople," 110; Niewöhner, "Healing Springs of Anatolia," 122.

[31] Peers, "The Sosthenion near Constantinople," 113.

The fifth-century historian Sozomen reports a series of healing miracles which took place at Sosthenion.[32] It is unclear from the source material whether these took place before or after the re-dedication of the place to Michael. Additionally, the presence of a monk-like hooded statue, most likely to have been a depiction of the minor deity Telesphorus, who is associated with Aesclepius, indicates that this place was at one point likely a healing sanctuary.[33] Malalas' literature serves to dislodge the previous pagan myth and present a sanctioned Christian rationale for the ritual importance of the site.

Chonae (Chonai, ancient Colossae) was an extremely important city in the Byzantine world, famed for its healing springs.[34] So too was the story of the Miracle of St. Michael at Chonae, which culminates in the Archangel splitting the rock surrounding the healing spring to divert a flood which had been unleashed by pagan idolaters in an attempt to destroy the Christian shrine.[35] It was one of the most popular stories in the Byzantine period.[36] The site was a rural sanctuary and existed before it took on particular significance to Christians. This fact is alluded to in the text itself as the spring is described as being discovered rather than produced.[37] Indeed the very descriptions used to portray Michael reveal the syncretism present within the text, with his appearance heralded with thunder and lightning and Michael himself speaking a phrase starting with "*μὰ τόν*" ("by …"; the phrase was used to swear an oath by a divine figure, for example, "by Zeus"), an oath incomplete and theologically uncomfortable in Christian tradition but common in classical literature, particularly in reference to Zeus, who was of special importance at Colossae, as evidenced by imagery on

[32] The relationship between the location referred to in Malalas and Sozomen is up for debate - see Casamiquela-Gerhold, "Constantine the Great."
[33] Peers, "The Sosthenion near Constantinople," 115-16.
[34] Cadwallader, "St Michael of Chonai and the Tenacity of Paganism," 61.
[35] The text is also called The Miracle of St. Michael at Chonae; Cadwallader, "St Michael of Chonai and the Tenacity of Paganism," 62; Peers, *Subtle Bodies,* 157-8.
[36] Peers, *Subtle Bodies*, 157.
[37] Cadwallader, "St Michael of Chonai and the Tenacity of Paganism," 70.

coins.[38] The Miracle text thus transforms local traditions into Christian mythology while maintaining the sacred status of the site.

At Aphrodisias, spatial rather than narrative continuity illustrates the pragmatism of local authorities in navigating a delicate religious balance. The Maeander region of south-western Anatolia appears to have been an epicentre of angel worship in the late antique period.[39] The site of Aphrodisias, later called Stauropolis, was named for its patron deity Aphrodite, and was of particular renown for her temple, which was transformed into a cathedral dedicated to the Archangel Michael (and perhaps also Gabriel) in late antiquity.[40] This architectural conversion was likely triggered by the city's support for the unsuccessful rebellion of Illus against Emperor Zeno (in 481-488 CE), which may have triggered a crackdown on pagan practices which had previously been tolerated.[41]

Key to this sanctuary was a small well, which the expansions to the site during the cathedral construction were conspicuously diligent in ensuring was incorporated.[42] Ceramic sherds from the Archaic period (c.700-500 BCE) excavated from its bottom suggest that this well was one of the earliest features of the temple complex and is explicitly cited by Pausanias as being "an analogous example to the well of Poseidon in the Erechtheion at Athens, a comparison that makes little sense unless our well were also thought to be sacred."[43] As such, by the time of the cathedral's construction, this well was an established

[38] Ibid., 72-7.
[39] Jeffery, "Eight Hundred Years of the Cult of the Archangels," 205.
[40] Ibid., 207.
[41] Ogus, "'Urban Transformations at Aphrodisias," 170.
[42] Jeffery, "Eight Hundred Years of the Cult of the Archangels," 211.
[43] "Archaic Period," National Archaeological Museum, January 24, 2019, https://www.namuseum.gr/en/collection/archaiki-periodos-2/#:~:text=The%20Archaic%20Period%20was%20a%20time%20of,to%20the%206th%20century%20BC%20(700%2D500%20BC); Lisa R. Brody, "The Cult of Aphrodite at Aphrodisias in Caria," *Kernos* 14 (2001): 94, https://doi.org/10.4000/kernos.772; Pausanias, *Description of Greece, Attica*, xxvi, as cited in Jeffery, "Eight Hundred Years of the Cult of the Archangels," 212.

marker in the sacred geography of the region. Thus, the choice to take pains to include it, despite a willingness to undertake drastic architectural rearrangements in other areas, demonstrates an intentional and planned decision which likely was an effort to maintain the fragile social balance between the pagan and Christian residents.[44] Whilst no concrete evidence has yet been found linking the saltwater well in the cult centre at Aphrodisias to a specific healing tradition, the continued relevance of sacred water to people in this transitional time remains.

What Does This Reveal About Religious Dynamics and Transitions?

The popularity of Saint Michael at sacred water sites across Asia Minor demonstrates that religious transition in late antique Byzantium was fundamentally a process of re-narration rather than replacement. Byzantine ecclesiastical authorities did not eliminate existing venerative practices but instead provided new theological frameworks that made these practices compatible with Christian cosmology. This analysis has demonstrated that popular practice had an inertia which had to be negotiated with by elites. Despite theological squeamishness on the part of more 'orthodox' Christians regarding their pagan association, traditions revolving around sacred springs could not simply be eliminated, leading ecclesiastical leaders to choose appropriation over suppression. The case studies discussed demonstrate some of the different strategies employed to provide new frameworks for existing ones. Additionally, while homilies and other ecclesiastical or official texts often present neat conversion narratives with a clear distinction between Christian and heretical practice (for example, Athanasius of Alexandria's *Contra Gentes* or John of Ephesus'

[44] Ogus, "Urban Transformations at Aphrodisias," 163, 170.

Ecclesiastical History), the archaeology reveals a far more complex picture.[45] This demonstrates the disconnect between theology and lived religion and further reminds archaeologists and historians to read and analyse these texts not as histories but as narratives within a vibrant literary tradition, with clear goals and literary motifs employed liberally throughout.[46] The experience of conversion as re-narration rather than replacement has too been emphasised. While it is true that many Christians saw formerly pagan sites as being polluted, this did not stop them from building sacred Christian sites close nearby, still staking claim to the same site and its miraculous effects.[47] Through the veneration of the Archangel Michael, a sanctioned alternative to these pagan practices was presented. The theological superstructure changes, but the ritual infrastructure persists. Rather than eliminating pagan practice, Byzantine Christianity provided new mythological narratives that made existing practices theologically acceptable. This is visible in spatial and architectural choices (the well at Aphrodisias), artistic continuities (Sosthenion), and mythological appropriation (miracle at Chonae). Whilst this analysis is limited in scale to three sites in Asia Minor in late antiquity, they are particularly illustrative of the complexities within the narrative of Christianisation. Future scholarship on the connection of other saints to existing practices, as well as an expansion of the geographic area, would be particularly important, as would an investigation into the relationship of artistic depictions of these Christian characters with the pre-Christian depictions of the deities and divine figures important in the region they were found.

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[45] Kim D. Bowes, *Private Worship, Public Values, and Religious Change in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 2.

[46] For explorations of this perspective, see Stephanos Efthymiadis, "Part II: Hagiography as Literature," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography,* ed. Stephanos Efthymiadis (Taylor and Francis Group, 2014); Jody Ondich, *Reading the Bible as Literature: A Journey* (Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, 2022).

[47] Ogus, "Urban Transformations at Aphrodisias," 162; For an example in Germia, Sura, see Niewöhner, "Healing Springs of Anatolia," 118-19.

Conclusion

The literary and archaeological evidence from Sosthenion, Chonae, and Aphrodisias demonstrates that the veneration of the Archangel Michael at sacred water sites in late antique Asia Minor was not simply the replacement of pagan practice with Christian orthodoxy, but rather reflective of a complex negotiation between popular religious needs and ecclesiastical authority. Byzantine elites strategically appropriated existing venerative traditions, providing new theological narratives that legitimised practices which had proven effective for centuries. While church authorities articulated clear boundaries between acceptable Christian devotion and pagan idolatry, the physical remains of cult sites reveal continuous spatial, architectural, and ritual practices that transcended these distinctions. The persistence of place-based healing traditions required ecclesiastical negotiation rather than outright replacement. Future scholarship must move beyond reductive elimination and replacement narratives that privilege elite textual sources and instead embrace the complex, interconnected web of faith, ritual, and imagery that shaped lived religion for non-elite populations. The Michael cult represents a paradigm that reveals how religious change operated through strategic re-narration of embedded practices rather than their wholesale elimination.

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And Away We Go: How Chariot Racing in The Hippodrome of Constantinople Was Used by Multiple Groups for Their Own Political and Personal Agendas

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Sports have been an integral part of human culture for thousands of years. Perhaps one of the most exhilarating forms is motorsports. From NASCAR to Formula 1 (F1), the drive to push the limits of how fast humans can go and outperform their competitors is an ancient practice. Racing, however, is not without political intrigue and a fair share of controversial figures. In F1 the return of Flavio Briatore in 2024 after being banned from the sport for his involvement in the race fixing scandal of the 2008 Singapore Grand Prix known as "crashgate" caused outrage from the fans.[1] Bernie Ecclestone, who is credited with making F1 a major global media asset, has faced multiple accusations of corruption.[2] Where there is high-stakes racing, there are people who use the setting for their own means. Before the single-seaters, stock cars, motorbikes, and any form of self-powered vehicle, there was chariot racing.

A chariot is typically a two-wheeled vehicle that the driver stands on.[3] During the time of the Byzantine Empire, that tradition continued with the construction of elaborate

[1] Luke Smith, "Once Banned from F1 for Race Fixing, Flavio Briatore is Welcomed Back," *The Athletic*, June 23, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/5581546/2024/06/21/f1-flavio-briatore-alpine-crashgate/.
[2] Jasper Jolly, and Giles Richards, "From F1 Supremo to Tax Fraud Conviction: The Rise and Fall of Bernie Ecclestone," *The Guardian*, October 12, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2023/oct/12/rise-and-fall-of-bernie-ecclestone-formula-one.
[3] Bela I. Sandor, "The Genesis and Performance Characteristics of Roman Chariots," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 25 (2012): 475-85, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1047759400001318.

venues to host these events, where spectators by the thousands would watch.[4] Chariot racing was not just a sport; it had influences on the wider social and political culture of the Byzantine Empire. It was not exclusively the elite that could participate in this culture, nor the only ones who could find ways to use racing as a tool for their own agendas. The cultural phenomenon of chariot racing was used by multiple groups to mobilise their political and personal agendas. Emperors used it to directly communicate with their subjects and to establish their power. The different circus factions' influences and roles went beyond the arena. These organisations had political influence on government and the common citizens who supported their charioteers. Then, there were the charioteers themselves who used racing to gain wealth, fame, political influence, and immortalise themselves in history. While there were many hippodromes throughout the Empire, the Hippodrome of Constantinople was the most significant.[5] This paper will specifically look at the racing culture and events within this Hippodrome. The significance of its location for major events in chariot racing history and its location in the capital city made it an important setting. To study the world of Byzantine chariot racing, it is crucial to understand the spaces where these events took place.

The Hippodrome was not just a venue for hosting races, but also a demonstration of the power and reach of the Emperor, and by extension, the Empire.[6] It was also a place where circus factions could interact with officials, while charioteers could earn their glory. Hippodromes throughout the Empire were based on a Roman circus, specifically the Circus Maximus in Rome.[7] A circus was an event space like the modern-day stadium. Shaped like a

[4] Cyril Mango, "A History of the Hippodrome of Constantinople," in *Hippodrome / Atmeydani: A Stage for Istanbul's History*, ed. Brigitte Pitarakis, trans. Cem Akaş et al. (Pera Museum Publications, 2010), 35.
[5] David Parnell, "The Emperor and His People at the Chariot Races in Byzantium," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 37, no. 3-4 (2023): 235, https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2020.1762576.
[6] Mango, "A History of the Hippodrome of Constantinople," 36-43.
[7] Ibid., 36-7.

hairpin, they had multi-tiered seating to house large crowds of spectators.[8] Chariot racing had been popular since the time of Ancient Greece. One of the first known horseracing events took place in about 680 BCE when it was added to the Olympic Games.[9] In this period, chariot racing was a part of athletic festivals, not its own standalone event.[10] It was during the Roman period that elaborate racing venues were constructed, turning racing "into a spectator sport performed by professionals."[11] These circuses were built in urban settings and were able to fit thousands of spectators.

There has been debate about who ordered the construction of the Constantinople Hippodrome and when it was built. The popular belief is that the circus was begun under Emperor Septimius Severus (reigned 193-211) in the second century CE and completed under Constantine around 330.[12] As a punishment for supporting an uprising against him, Severus demoted the city (then known as Byzantion) to the status of a village and tore down its defensive walls. Starting around the sixth century, commentators claimed that he had a change of heart.[13] John Malalas in the sixth century and the Chronicon Paschale in the seventh century described this change.[14] Severus then started to reconstruct the city and began many building projects, including the Hippodrome.[15] Despite being accepted by many scholars, there are critics of this timeline.

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[8] Ibid., 36.
[9] Weronika Klecel, and Elżbieta Martyniuk, "From the Eurasian Steppes to the Roman Circuses: A Review of Early Development of Horse Breeding and Management," *Animals (Basel)* 11, no. 7 (2021): 14, https://doi.org/10.3390/ani11071859.
[10] Mango, "A History of the Hippodrome of Constantinople," 36.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., 37-8.
[13] Ibid., 38.
[14] John Malalas, *The Chronicle of John Malalas*, trans. Elizbeth Jeffreys, Michael Jeffreys, and Roger Scott, (Brill, 1986), 155; *Chronicon Paschale 284-628 AD,* trans. Michael Whitby and Mary Whitby (Liverpool University Press, 1989), xv.
[15] Mango, "A History of the Hippodrome of Constantinople," 37.

Cyril Mango argues that it would be very unlikely that Severus would have commissioned these massive and costly projects when the city had little ability to defend itself.[16] The location of the Hippodrome was not the most convenient place for a horseracing track. Mango states that it appears to have been built with the intention of being next to the imperial palace, due to the uneven ground of the site.[17] A substructure measuring at least 200 metres in length had to be built to support a hippodrome in this location. With this evidence, Mango argues that the Hippodrome of Constantinople was created by Constantine.[18] Jonathan Bardill also supports this argument, noting there have been no pre-Constantine coins found in any excavation of the site.[19] It should be noted that archaeological evidence of the site has "not been extensive and poorly published."[20] The origin of the Hippodrome is still unclear and needs further research.

The Hippodrome was about 429 metres in total length and could seat about 30,000 spectators.[21] The central barrier of the Hippodrome was called the *euripos* and the chariots raced around it. It was approximately 230 metres in length.[22] The arena was adorned with many bronze statues that were collected from Constantine's conquests of other cities.[23] Among them were four bronze horses, statues from ancient myths such as those of Scylla and Helen of Troy. In the *euripos* was also a line of stone monuments and bronze statues.[24]

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[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid., 38-39.
[19] Jonathan Bardill, "The Architecture and Archaeology of the Hippodrome in Constantinople: With Plans and Architectural Graphs by A. Tayfun Öner," in *Hippodrome / Atmeydani: A Stage for Istanbul's History*, ed. Brigitte Pitarakis, trans. Cem Akaş, et al. (Pera Museum Publications, 2010), 94.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., 99.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Jonathan Bardill, "The Monuments and Decoration of the Hippodrome in Constantinople," in *Hippodrome / Atmeydani: A Stage for Istanbul's History*, ed. Brigitte Pitarakis, trans. Cem Akaş, et al. (Pera Museum Publications, 2010), 167.
[24] Bardill, "The Architecture and Archaeology of the Hippodrome in Constantinople," 135-9.

Included in this lineup was the Serpent Column. One of the three remaining monuments and statues left from the Hippodrome (the others being the Masonry Obelisk and the Egyptian Obelisk), this was a bronze statue of three intertwined snakes.[25] The Imperial Box (*kathisma*) was described by Heron of Byzantium as being located on the east side of the arena and opposite the Serpent Column.[26] There, the Emperor would watch the races along with thousands of his subjects. Here, they were able to turn chariot racing into a tool of statecraft.

Chariot races were a chance for Emperors to showcase their power and to be seen by the people. To take full advantage of this, the Emperors made it a priority to patronise the games often. In the imperial palace, there was a staircase that connected directly to the *kathisma*.[27] Spectators not only expected the Emperor to attend races, but they also expected him to engage with them. Many emperors thoroughly enjoyed the races and would often endorse a favourite colour. The Hippodrome was also used for proclamations and coronations of Emperors for the masses to witness.[28] Some rulers also used the imagery of the charioteer to build their image.

Emperor Maurice (reigned 582-602 CE) had a gold coin made of him depicting him as a charioteer. The coin was part of the Kyrenia Girdle and depicts Maurice participating in the ceremonial circus procession of the consular games.[29] The Kyrenia Girdle, named for the village it was found by in Cyprus, was made up of four gold medallions and 13 gold *solidi* (gold coins used in by the Byzantine Empire). The girdle dates from around 583-602 CE.[30]

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[25] Ibid., 164.
[26] Ibid., 140-1.
[27] Parnell, "The Emperor and His People at the Chariot Races in Byzantium," 236.
[28] Engin Akyürek, *The Hippodrome of Constantinople* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 41.
[29] Cécile Morrisson, "The Emperor in Triumph as Charioteer," in *Hippodrome / Atmeydani: A Stage for Istanbul's History*, ed. Brigitte Pitarakis, trans. Cem Akaş et al. (Pera Museum Publications, 2010), 45.
[30] Philip Grierson, "The Kyrenia Girdle of Byzantine Medallions and Solidi," *The Numismatic Chronicle and Journal of the Royal Numismatic Society* 15, no. 45 (1955): 55-70, https://www.jstor.org/stable/42662849.

There is speculation regarding when it was originally created. It has been argued the girdle was first made in 583 and was later added to in 602, as several coins show Maurice acting as consul for these specific games at different items in his life.[31] He is only known to have acted as consul in 583 and 602. Philip Grierson argues that the gridle was made in full in 602 that because there were many medallions and coins used for this piece it was likely there were all commissioned in one batch.[32] The consular games depicted on this girdle were not only meant for entertainment, but also associated with *sparsiones* (the scattering of coins among the crowd).[33] These events would gain favour from spectators and were a popular motif for rulers for centuries, as seen in the gold coin created by Honorius (reigned 397-403 CE).[34]

While using racing culture was a powerful tool for establishing Emperors' power, it also had the potential to backfire. Integral to chariot racing were the circus factions that acted like modern sports clubs would today. These factions originated from the Roman Republic. There were four main factions: the Blues, Greens, Reds, and Whites.[35] The division between these factions could be seen in the Hippodrome itself. Supporters would wear their teams' colours sitting in their designated section, creating a vivid display for spectators.[36] Justinian (reigned 527-565 CE) favoured the Blues faction and overlooked their misdeeds.[37] The Blues were one of the most popular factions, along with the Greens, with whom they had a fierce rivalry. There did not seem to be a class or economic difference between supporters of either

[31] Ibid., 66.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Morrisson, "The Emperor in Triumph as Charioteer," 46.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Charlotte Roueché, "The Factions and Entertainment," in *Hippodrome / Atmeydani: A Stage for Istanbul's History*, ed. Brigitte Pitarakis, trans. Cem Akaş, et al. (Pera Museum Publications, 2010), 50-1.
[36] Ibid., 60.
[37] James Allen Stewart Evans, *The Age of Justinian: The Circumstances of Imperial Power* (Routledge, 1996), 133-5, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ncl/reader.action?docID=165859&c=RVBVQg&ppg=136.

faction.[38] Even before he became emperor, Justinian knew the importance of currying favour among the Blues. They were loyal supporters of his reign until the Nika Riots of January 532, an outbreak of violence lasting five days. The riots were named 'Nika' because those involved used it as their watchword for oncoming military men. Nika meant 'conquer' and was also used by parties when they cheered for their charioteers.[39] Leading up to the riots, there were tensions within the Empire. The most notable was that resulting from Justinian's law code that started to be enforced in 529. These new reforms caused a sense of anxiety, and the older establishment was looking back to the reign of Emperor Anastasius (reigned 491-518 CE).[40]

Things came to a boiling point in the Hippodrome when the Greens had chanted their grievances to Justinian about their suffering at the hands of one of his *spatharii* (a eunuch officer) in the Hippodrome.[41] Justinian ignored these cries, and this led to a series of riots that were perpetrated by the Greens and the Blues. To apply the law equally, he had sentenced both Green and Blue rioters to death.[42] However, there was a botched execution where a Green and a Blue survived. At the following race, both factions pleaded for mercy for the men, but Justinian refused.[43] This must have left the Blues, who had enjoyed imperial favour for years, feeling betrayed. This led to both factions joining forces in revolting against the Emperor.

Starting on the 13 January 532 after trying to appeal to the Emperor at the Hippodrome, rioters wreaked havoc on the city, and the military was sent to suppress them. The rioters called for the Emperor to be replaced by Hypatius, a nephew of the former

[38] Alan Cameron, *Circus Factions: Blues and Greens at Rome and Byzantium* (Clarendon Press, 1976).
[39] Evans, *The Age of Justinian: The Circumstances of Imperial Power,* 121.
[40] Ibid., 123-5.
[41] Ibid., 119.
[42] Ibid., 120.
[43] Parnell, "The Emperor and His People at the Chariot Races in Byzantium," 238-9.

Emperor Anastasius.[44] The violence of the revolt peaked on 17 January. After failing to appease the crowds in the Hippodrome, Justinian ordered the massacre of over 30,000 people who had gathered in the venue. Hypatius and his brother Pompeius were also executed.[45] The events of the riots affirmed Justinian's authority as several rivals for the throne were now out of the way.[46] It should not be lost on the reader that Justinian's inability in this episode to use the space of the chariot races to quell the situation, rather instead escalating tensions, shows how powerful chariot spaces could be. It also demonstrated that non-elites, like many of the members of the Blues and Greens, could use the spaces for their own advantage. While the Nika Riots were a victory for the Empire, they still showed the Emperor could not blindly ignore the wills of his subjects in the spectators' seats. The factions that ran against these racing teams had influence that went beyond the track.

During the Roman period, these factions were privately run, but by the Byzantine period, they were under state funding.[47] They were Empire-wide institutions that responded to events that happened in other cities. Once, when a Blue leader was killed in Tarsus, Blues in Constantinople rebelled.[48] They were headed by a *factionarius*, who was likely a former driver. These factions had an immense support staff similar to those in F1 teams. They had positions such as doctors, veterinarians, people in charge of the stables, messengers, overseers, and many others, along with the charioteers.[49]

There were several critics of the members of these factions. Prokopios describes them in *The Secret History* as people "who showed no respect for sacred or human convention in their zeal to win in these contests."[50] Critics like Prokopios showed concern about the power

[44] Evans, *The Age of Justinian: The Circumstances of Imperial Power*, 122.
[45] Ibid., 122-3.
[46] Ibid., 124-5.
[47] Akyürek, *The Hippodrome of Constantinople*, 48.
[48] Ibid., 51.
[49] Roueché, "The Factions and Entertainment," 55-6.
[50] Prokopios, *The Secret History*, trans. Anthony Kaldellis (Hackett Publishing Company, 2010), 137.

these factions had. These organisations "went beyond being mere 'racing clubs' and had various social and political functions."[51] Aside from racing, the factions also served in imperial ceremonies and would assemble into a militia if the city was under threat.[52] As mentioned previously, the arenas where races took place were spaces where people could directly communicate with the Emperor. While this was present centuries prior, in the fifth and sixth centuries, requests from the crowd became more frequent.[53] Prior to the Nika Riots, Emperor Anastasius also came under pressure from the factions. Recorded in John Malalas' writings, the Greens had requested the release of a fellow member for throwing stones. Anastasius refused, and the Greens reacted by throwing stones at him.[54] There was another riot that was put down, and to bring peace, Anastasius appointed the leader of the Greens city prefect, a high-ranking official role with administrative duties.[55] Even after the Nika riots, the factions continued to exist and participate in politics. These clashes eventually led to the Emperor taking more control over them.[56]

Eventually, chanting in the crowds became orchestrated instead of remaining under the control of the spectators, further eliminating popular expression at chariot races.[57] The influence and importance of these factions can still be seen in the physical monuments they left behind. Like the Emperor, the factions also commissioned monuments for the Hippodrome.[58] While there were many charioteers that raced on that track, one name stood out from the rest. Porphyrius left his mark on Byzantine history by his great racing abilities,

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[51] Akyürek, *The Hippodrome of Constantinople*, 49.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Roueché, "The Factions and Entertainment", 61.
[54] Malalas, *The Chronicle of John Malalas*, 222-3.
[55] Ibid.; Alexander P. Kazhdan," Urban Prefect," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (Oxford Publisher Press, 1991; online ed., 2005), https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780195046526.001.0001/acref9780195046526-e-5663; Roueché, "The Factions and Entertainment," 61.
[56] Akyürek, *The Hippodrome of Constantinople*, 49.
[57] Roueché, "The Factions and Entertainment," 62.
[58] Bardill, "The Architecture and Archaeology of the Hippodrome in Constantinople," 171-9.

as seen on the multiple monuments erected in his honour. His rise into racing stardom led to him amassing glory, wealth, and influence.

Porphyrius was considered one of the great charioteers of the Byzantine Empire. He was likely born in the 480s - Alan Cameron estimates that his first monument, built by the Blues, was erected around 500.[59] Porphyrius was described as "a youth with first down on his cheeks," during this time, so he would have been about 20.[60] He was of African origin and came over to Constantinople from Alexandria when he was young.[61] At an early age, he was already showing signs of greatness. Monuments are typically used to honour charioteers when they retire.[62] His first monument being erected at such an early stage in his career was extraordinary. Also unique about Porphyrius is the fact that he had multiple monuments erected by different factions. Porphyrius originally raced under the Blues until he caught the attention of Emperor Anastasius.

Anastasius was a supporter of the Greens and, at his request, Porphyrius switched over.[63] It is also believed the Greens made him a higher offer.[64] As the leader of the Greens, Porphyrius would lead a group into burning a synagogue and participating in a massacre of Jewish people in Antioch in 507.[65] As previously described in the section about the Nika Riots, the power behind these factions was immense. These faction leaders could convince their supporters to go as far as committing acts of violence. Porphyrius' influence on multiple teams is a testament to his ability to navigate the Byzantine racing world. He switched between teams several times, and over his career, seven monuments were erected for him. Four of these monuments came from the Blues and three from the Greens. The final

[59] Alan Cameron, *Porphyrius: The Charioteer* (Clarendon Press, 1973), 160.
[60] Ibid., 155, 160.
[61] Akyürek, *The Hippodrome of Constantinople*, 57.
[62] Bardill, "The Architecture and Archaeology of the Hippodrome in Constantinople," 178.
[63] Akyürek, *The Hippodrome of Constantinople*, 57.
[64] Cameron, *Porphyrius,* 164.
[65] Ibid.

monument was built around 545, when he was over 60 and still racing.[66] There seemed to be no monument built to acknowledge his retirement. Over the course of his career, Porphyrius reaped the benefits of wealth and fame, showing how one could rise to prominence through the chariot races.

Chariot racing started a long decline in the seventh century. The Persian War (602-'28) and start of the Arab invasions (starting in 634) left the Empire smaller in land and in purse.[67] In former Byzantine territories, the new rulers had no interest in keeping the sport going.[68] These wars left the Empire under financial strain. Since chariot racing was directly controlled by government funding, it suffered. Eventually provincial tracks were shut down until only the Constantinople Hippodrome remained.[69] Emperor Heraclius (reigned 610-'41 CE) ended the use of the Hippodrome for political purposes, starting the decline of the factions' political power.[70] The last recorded chariot races were held by Alexius III in 1200.[71] Four years later, the Hippodrome was destroyed in the Fourth Crusade and was never rebuilt.[72] Its great bronze statues were carried off and melted down by Crusaders with the only the Serpent Column and four bronze horses that now are displayed at Saint Mark's Basilica in Venice surviving. The Byzantine Empire fell to the Ottoman conquest in 1453.[73] The Hippodrome, already in a state of disrepair, was chipped away by the building projects of the Ottmann Sultans until the once-great arena was left in the ruins that are still seen today.[74]

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[66] Bardill, "The Architecture and Archaeology of the Hippodrome in Constantinople," 178.
[67] Parnell, "The Emperor and His People at the Chariot Races in Byzantium," 242.
[68] Mango, "A History of the Hippodrome of Constantinople," 40.
[69] Sotiris Giatsis, "The Organization of Chariot-Racing in the Great Hippodrome of Byzantine Constantinople," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 17, no.1 (2007): 36-68, https://doi.org/10.1080/09523360008714113.
[70] Ibid., 58.
[71] Mango, "A History of the Hippodrome of Constantinople," 41.
[72] Brigitte Pitarakis, eds., *Hippodrome / Atmeydani: A Stage for Istanbul's History*. trans. Cem Akaş, et al. (Pera Museum Publications, 2010), 18-29, 40-1.
[73] Jonathan Harris, *The End of Byzantium* (Yale University Press, 2010), 229-32.
[74] Mango, "A History of the Hippodrome of Constantinople," 41-3.

Chariot racing was more than a sport. It was a phenomenon that brought people together from multiple levels of society. It was a place of entertainment and socialisation, but also an opportunity to further a political and personal agenda. This was not only used by elite members of society, but also lower classes. Emperors like Maurice used the races as a way of bolstering his image. Rulers like Justinian used their venues as a way to suppress rebellion. The Hippodrome was one of the few places everyday people could come into contact with those of the upper class and with the Emperor himself. The different circus factions influenced political structures and were feared by the imperial government for power they held over the people. Charioteers such as Porphyrius cemented their place in the Empire's history through their achievements on the track. Even centuries after, the influence and importance of chariot racing in the Byzantine world are still evident in the remaining archaeological and textual evidence left behind.

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Book Review: Peter Mark Adams, *Ritual & Epiphany in The Mysteries of Mithras* (Theion Publishing, 2025). ISBN 978-3-9820654-2-7.

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In *Ritual and Epiphany in the Mysteries of Mithras* (2025), Peter Mark Adams presents an ambitious and at times provocative reinterpretation of the Mithraic mysteries. Adams adopts a vision-based perspective when examining Mithraism, whereas earlier scholarship has tended to ground its interpretations primarily in material evidence (material culture) and organised religion (institutional structure). Adams instead emphasises visionary practice and embodied experience through religious ritual, intending to demonstrate an experiential relationship through which divine knowledge was gained. He argues both phenomenologically and through an analysis of how the initiation process – as a visionary experience – is constructed through specific physical (sensory), spatial (architectural), and ritual (dramatic) elements. In this way, Adams presents Mithraic rituals as producing direct sensory and bodily knowledge, rather than serving solely as symbolic representations or social interactions.

Central to the book's argument is Adams' explicit adoption of what he describes as an "ethnographic turn," which is shorthand for a movement in anthropology associated with Clifford Geertz's seminal 1973 collection of essays, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, which introduced a more culturally nuanced approach to the production of what he described as "thick description."[1] This is ethnography that captures the culturally situated or "emic"

[1] Peter Mark Adams, *Ritual and Epiphany in the Mysteries of Mithras* (Theion, 2025), 13; Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, 1973), 3–30.

perspective of the actors themselves.[2] Instead of interpreting Mithraic iconography and ritual through externally imposed analytical categories, Adams attempts to reconstruct the ritual world as it might have been perceived and understood by the initiates themselves. This emic, insider-focused approach draws upon comparative ethnographic research and the theoretical work of the philosopher José Gil, an interdisciplinary theorist whose primary work, *Metamorphoses of the Body* (1998), connects embodiment, ritual and the phenomenology of ritual performance.[3] On this basis, Adams contends that Mithraic initiation should not be understood simply as a symbolic system, but as a performative process in which meaning emerges through embodied participation in ritual action.[4] As he later reiterates, Adams' aim is to read the iconography and liturgy of an esoteric cult "in accordance with the notion of the 'ethnographic turn'," seeking to understand ritual space as it appeared to the ritualists themselves rather than attempting to rationalise it from an external standpoint.[5] Adams' main argument is that Mithraic initiation ceremonies were held within environments deliberately structured to induce altered states of consciousness. Darkness, confined architectural spaces, choreographed bodily movement and carefully staged moments of revelation are all presented by Adams as integral components of initiation, functioning together to produce disorientation and heightened sensory awareness. These conditions, Adams suggests, facilitated experiences that were transformative rather than merely instructional.[6]

Adams further situates Mithraism within a broader religious and philosophical landscape that includes other mystery cults, as well as movements such as Neoplatonism and various esoteric traditions. Within this comparative framework, Adams portrays Mithraism as offering a path of spiritual development and inner transformation, rather than simply

[2] Adams, *Ritual and Epiphany*, 13.
[3] José Gil, *Metamorphoses of the Body* (University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 14–18, 121–9.
[4] Adams, *Ritual and Epiphany,* 47, 74–5, 204.
[5] Ibid., 150.
[6] Ibid., 11–12.

providing a means of communal cohesion through shared meals or symbolic identifiers. Adams' introductory chapters critique earlier Mithraic scholarship that focused largely on iconography while giving insufficient attention to lived religious practice. Adams' intervention becomes clearer when situated against the dominant trajectories of Mithraic scholarship. Earlier foundational work, most notably that of Franz Cumont, interpreted Mithraism primarily through an Iranian diffusionist model, reading the cult's iconography as the survival of Persian religious mythology.[7] Subsequent scholars such as Manfred Clauss and Roger Beck shifted attention towards the Roman context, emphasising archaeology, social structure, and cosmological symbolism embedded in the tauroctony.[8] Richard L. Gordon likewise emphasised the cult's embeddedness within the associational life of Rome and the significance of civic networks, while David Ulansey advanced an alternative astrological framework, connecting Mithraism to Stoic cosmology and celestial mechanics.[9] Although these approaches differ considerably, they tend to privilege iconography, cosmology or institutional structure. In contrast, Adams foregrounds the embodied experience of ritual and the phenomenology of initiation, arguing that the cult's meaning developed as much from the performative, sensory and transformative dynamics of ritual itself as from symbolic representation or doctrinal cosmology. On this issue, Adams contends that such approaches obscured how Mithraism's adherents actually experienced it.[10] To clarify how Adams moves beyond this earlier paradigm, it is important to note that his methodology combines three distinct but interrelated strategies.

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[7] Franz Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra* (Open Court, 1903).
[8] Manfred Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and His Mysteries*, trans. Richard Gordon (Edinburgh University Press, 2000); Roger Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun* (Oxford University Press, 2006).
[9] Richard L. Gordon, "The Miles Frame in the Mitreo di Felicissimo and the Practicalities of Sacrifice," *Religio* 21, no. 1 (2013): 33–8; David Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries: Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World* (Oxford University Press, 1989).
[10] Adams, *Ritual and Epiphany*, 122–9.

First, he reinterprets the iconographic elements in their reconstructed ritual contexts as being unable to be understood outside the performance setting that accompanies these works. The author argues that the tauroctony (the bull-slaying image central to Mithraism), as an example of such iconography, cannot be understood outside its performance context. Consequently, rather than interpreting the reliefs as independent theological statements, he looks at how they were situated in the spatial choreography of the Mithraeum (i.e., the building used by the mystery cult of Mithras), and how factors such as illumination, restricted access, bodily movement and progressive initiation and would have affected those viewing or interacting with them.

Second, he examines the available archaeological evidence from the site itself (which includes its architectural layout, seating arrangement, line of sight and controlled lighting sources) in order to reconstruct the sensory experience of those who participated in the Mithraic rituals. By doing so, Adams places greater emphasis on how the Mithraic symbols functioned in the experience of participants or those observing the rituals than on their meaning.

Finally, the author uses a comparative analysis of initiation and transformation patterns in other mystery religions to argue that the Mithraic symbols provided an impetus to create a staged psychological and spiritual development for participants, rather than providing a fixed sanction to provide a basis for their beliefs or actions. Adams' methodological flexibility allows him to take into account regional variations in initiation practices, but he still grounds his examination in archaeological data and comparative ritual analysis. For example, in using the Mithraeum as his context for analysing sacred or ritual space, Adams conceptualises the cave-like architecture to be less a metaphorical construct than a purposely constructed ritual space that would have defined an initiate's bodily orientation, generated sensory deprivation and facilitated communally established hierarchical relationships. A

narrow entrance, a long hallway and a focal point (the tauroctony) located within a controlled visual line would have created an environment through which the initiate would have moved and focused their attention. In this reconstruction, space itself becomes pedagogical: it disciplines the body and forces revelation to occur in stages.

In a similar vein, Adams interprets Mithraic reliefs (most notably the tauroctony) as ritual technologies activated during ceremonial performances rather than as static theological images or cult objects.[11] Adams suggests that these reliefs functioned dynamically within liturgical action, perhaps illuminated at climactic moments or revealed progressively during initiation rites. By framing the imagery as performative rather than purely representational, he explains how iconography contributed to transformative experience. In this way, Adams achieves his objective of repositioning Mithraism as a lived, embodied religious system: he does so not by discarding iconography, but by embedding it within spatial, sensory and ritual practice.

Adams' discussion of the Mithraic grades – Corax (Raven), Nymphus (Bridegroom), Miles (Soldier), Leo (Lion), Perses (Persian), Heliodromus (Sun-Runner) and Pater (Father) – continues his emphasis on experience. The Mithraic grades formed a sevenfold initiatory hierarchy within the cult. These grades were not merely honorific titles but marked progressive stages of ritual participation and spiritual advancement. They are frequently associated with planetary symbolism (Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, the Moon, the Sun, and Saturn), reflecting a cosmological framework in which the initiate's ascent mirrored movement through the planetary spheres.[12] He interprets them not only as indicators of social status but also as markers of an individual's degree of mystical knowledge and spiritual advancement.[13] Structured as a sevenfold initiatory hierarchy, often associated with planetary

[11] Ibid., 107–10.
[12] Ibid., 143.
[13] Ibid., 137–40.

symbolism, these grades articulated a progressive process of ritual participation and inner transformation, culminating in the spiritual and liturgical authority of the Pater. Although this interpretative approach is coherent within Adams' overall framework, it draws substantially on analogies from philosophical and religious systems that developed later. This raises questions regarding the historical specificity of such analogies and the extent to which they can be applied reliably to the reconstruction of Mithraic belief and practice.

The book's focus on epiphanic and ecstatic experience is among its most original and potentially contentious contributions. In contrast to the sociological or symbolic models that have long informed Mithraic studies, Adams argues that the cult's religious significance should be sought primarily in the visionary and altered states experienced by its initiates. This emphasis brings welcome attention to the role of the body and sensory experience in ancient religion, although sometimes the distinction between plausible inference and speculative extension is not always clearly defined.

Adams' interpretative framework is supplemented by a series of AI-generated images illustrating the stages of Mithraic ritual.[14] These were developed by Adams with close reference to the ritually themed frescoes of the Mithraeum at Santa Maria Capua Vetere (ancient Capua Vetere), with additional details drawn from well-attested Roman ritual conventions, such as the veiling of the head during sacrificial acts and the deposition of *mola salsa* (a salted flour mixture) used to consecrate an offering or ritual object. These visual reconstructions function as useful heuristic devices, closely aligning with the book's ethnographic and performative orientation, and enabling readers to visualise ritual progression from an insider's perspective. The AI-generated ritual imagery was presented by Adams during talks on the book at the Occulture Conference (24 October 2025) and at

[14] The AI-generated scenes of Mithraic ritual were based on Martin Vermaseren's photographs and field notes, published in his *Mithraica I: The Mithraeum of S. Maria Capua Vetere* (E. J. Brill, 1971).

ArkeoPera (29 November 2025), where it elicited interest and constructive engagement from audiences that included a number of archaeologists.[15]

Ultimately, this text offers scholars a new approach to understanding Roman mystery religions by integrating methodological innovation with archaeological and comparative evidence. It represents a significant attempt to examine religious experience (with the word 'experience' stressed) within the framework of scholarly research on Mithraism. While many readers will find its phenomenological emphasis valuable, a number of the interpretations Adams advances are speculative, and not all will find them persuasive. Nevertheless, the volume will be of particular interest to postgraduate students and researchers working on phenomenology, ritual theory and the study of initiation in the Roman world.

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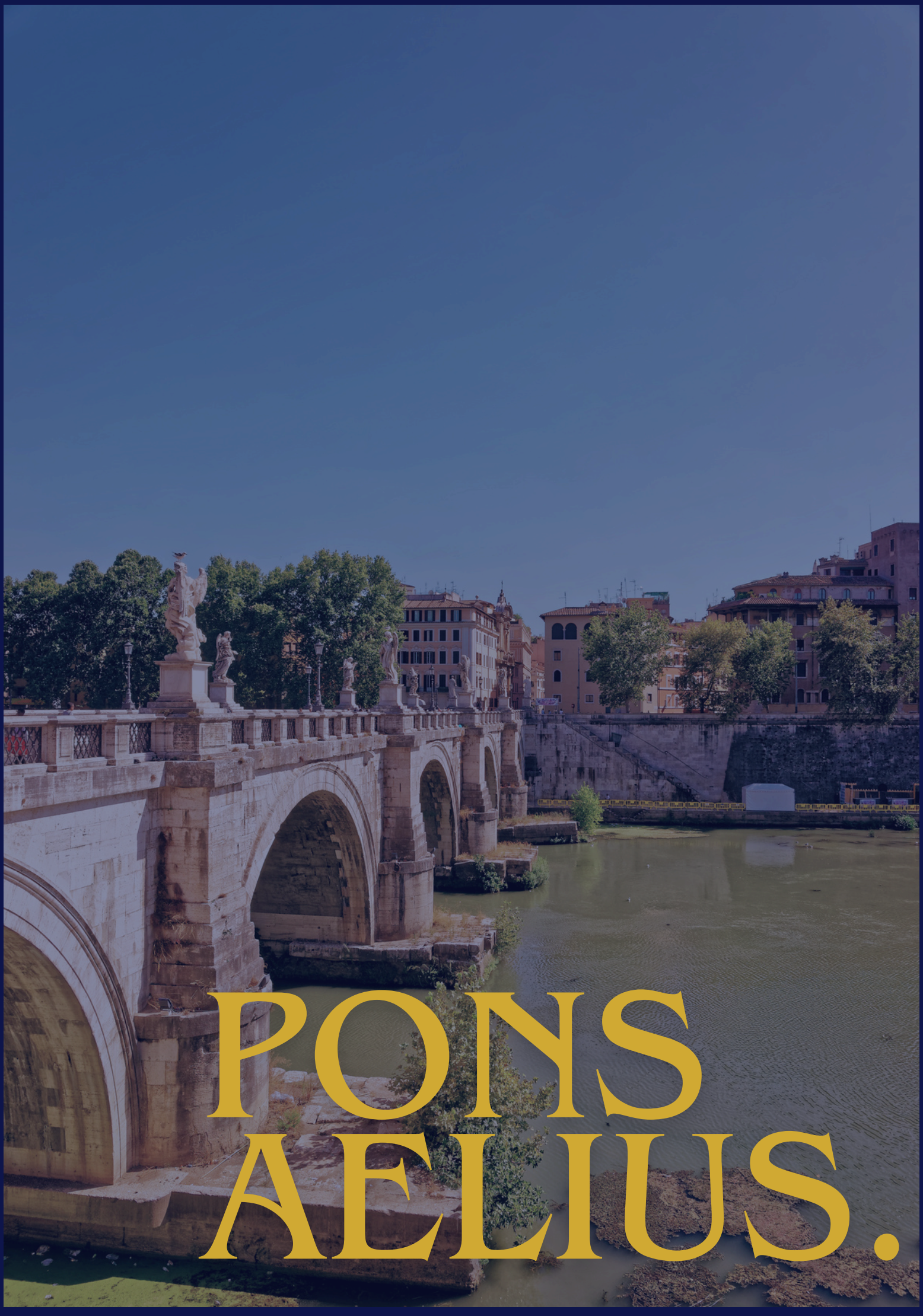
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