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History, membership, and activity of the Roman *collegia dendrophorum* Outline of the problem

Dzieje, struktura społeczna i działalność
rzymskich *collegia dendrophorum*
Zarys problematyki badawczej

Abstract: The aim of this article is to outline the research problem of reconstructing the history, social structure and functions of one of the most popular private associations in ancient Rome, namely *collegia dendrophorum*. The article consists of two parts. The first presents the main directions of research on Roman private colleges, with particular emphasis on the *dendrophori*; the state of research on the colleges of interest to us was discussed and research possibilities in this area were indicated. In the second part, the methodology of research on Roman colleges is the subject of analysis. The current state of the source database and research limitations resulting from its specificity were presented.

Keywords: history of ancient Rome, Roman colleges, *collegia dendrophorum*, Latin epigraphy

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Streszczenie: Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie zarysu problemu badawczego, jakim jest rekonstrukcja historii, struktury i funkcji jednego z najbardziej popularnych stowarzyszeń prywatnych w starożytnym Rzymie, a mianowicie kolegiiów zrzeszających dendroforów (*collegia dendrophorum*). Artykuł składa się z dwóch części. W pierwszej z nich przedstawiono główne kierunki badań nad rzymskimi kolegiami prywatnymi ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem *dendrophori*, omówiono stan badań nad interesującymi nas kolegiami oraz wskazano możliwości badawcze w tym zakresie. W drugiej części przedmiotem analizy jest metodologia badań nad rzymskim korporacjonizmem. Scharakteryzowano aktualny stan bazy źródłowej oraz ograniczenia badawcze wynikające z jej specyfiki.

Słowa kluczowe: historia starożytnego Rzymu, rzymskie kolegia, *collegia dendrophorum*, epigrafika łacińska

A mong the inscriptions found during the excavations conducted in 1995 in ancient Lavinium (present-day Pratica di Mare) was a group of texts about a donation given by Gaius Servilius Diodorus to the local *collegium dendrophorum*.¹ It turns out that not only the municipal authorities but also a Roman senator, Pontius Fuscus, participated in executing the foundation set up by Diodorus. It is difficult to resist the impression that the college of the *dendrophori*, whose favour Diodorus courted, is completely at odds with the vision, which is very popular in the research literature on the subject, of private colleges as communities that offered the poor inhabitants of Roman cities an opportunity to improve their living conditions and receive a decent burial. Who were those *dendrophori*, who managed to attract the interest of members of the social elite of an important city such as Lavinium? Was this an influential occupational corporation, whose members traded in or processed wood, or was it a religious college, which played an important role in the cult of Magna Mater? Did the *dendrophori*'s position in urban life perhaps stem from the fact that they performed important public services for the city (helping with firefighting, policing)? Each of these hypotheses has an equal number of

¹ AE 1998, 282. The *collegia dendrophorum*, often referred to simply as the *dendrophores* or *dendrophoril dendrofori*; see e.g., CIL 8, 23400; 10, 7; 11, 1551; 12, 411, 1744; AE 1961, 201; 1983, 657.

supporters and opponents. The fact that we know so little about one of the most popular private corporations operating in the entire western part of the Roman Empire is even more surprising, since we have a considerable number of sources documenting the activity of the associations of the *dendrophori* (see below). The traces of their activity that can be found in epigraphic material allow me to assume that it can be the basis for painting a multi-dimensional picture of the history of this corporation. This vision should include both the “internal” history of their associations (organisation, social structure of their membership, corporate life) as well as their relations with the outside world (activity in the urban public space, relations with the municipal and imperial elites).

Although it is probably an exaggeration to believe that the majority of Roman city dwellers were affiliated to various types of associations and brotherhoods in the Imperial Period,² there is no doubt that these organisations were an important element of what historians have liked to call a “social network” since the 1990s. The *collegia dendrophorum* were one of the most popular and influential private corporations that functioned in the Greco-Roman world. Traces of their activity can be found in epigraphic material from 85 cities scattered throughout almost all the western part of the Roman Empire.³ It is surprising, to say the least, that this material has not been the subject of a dedicated study so far.

The *dendrophori* usually appear in academic discourse in the context of reflections on the activity of the so-called *tria collegia principalia*, which they reportedly formed together with the *fabri* and the *centonarii* colleges.⁴ The attention of historians studying this topic focuses on the question as to whether the *dendrophores* were a religious or an occupational corpo-

² Ramsey MacMullen speculated that at least one third of the male population of any given city might have been affiliated with *collegia* (R. MacMullen, *Roman social relations*, New Haven 1974, p. 174); cf. F. M. Ausbüttel, *Untersuchungen zu den Vereinen im Westen des Römischen Reiches*, Kallmünz Opf. 1982, p. 36–37.

³ F. Van Haepelen, *Collèges de dendrophores et autorités locales et romaines*, in: *Collegia: le phénomène associatif dans l'Occident Romain*, eds. M. Dondin-Payre, N. Tran, Bordeaux 2012, p. 47–62.

⁴ An example of such an approach to the problem: F. Diosono, *Collegia. Le associazioni professionali nel mondo romano*, Roma 2007, p. 56–67.

ration.⁵ While looking for answers, apart from the traditional interpretations, whose supporters saw the *dendrophori* as a religious college closely connected to the cult of Magna Mater or a corporation affiliating woodcutters and wood traders, other theories were proposed, e.g., to regard the colleges of the *dendrophori* as firefighter units or a sort of municipal police.⁶

Searching for the “raison d’être” of the colleges of the *dendrophori* – and other Roman private associations – turned out to be a historical dead end. At least since the 1980s, private associations have been treated as multi-functional communities, whose framework gave their members an opportunity to meet their various needs – from the most basic ones, such as the need to belong to a group, to social and religious ones, to the fulfilment of their social aspirations: belonging to “prestige groups”, participating in public life, self-presentation.⁷ Those needs were met in the course of complex social processes (horizontal and vertical integration within the *civitas*,

⁵ J. P. Waltzing, *Étude historique sur les corporations professionnelles chez les Romains depuis les origines jusqu’à la chute de l’Empire d’Occident*, Bruxelles-louvain, vol. 1, Bruxelles-Louvain 1895–1900, p. 240–253; S. Aurigemma, s.v. *dendrophori*, in: *Dizionario epigrafico*, vol. 2, p. 1671–1705; H. Graillot, *Le culte de Cybèle, Mère des Dieux à Rome et dans l’Empire romain*, Rome 1912, p. 266–278; K. Schillinger, *Untersuchungen zur Entwicklung des Magna Mater-Kultes im Westen des römischen Kaiserreiches*, Konstanz 1979, p. 398–406; R. Rubio Rivera, *Collegium dendrophorum. Corporación profesional y cofradía metróaca*, “Gerión” 1993, vol. 11, p. 175–183; O. M. van Nijf, *The civic world of professional associations in the Roman East*, Amsterdam 1997, p. 178–181, 196–197; F. Boscolo, *I dendrofori nella Venetia et Histria*, in: *Misurare del tempo, misurare lo spazio. Atti dell’Colloquio AIEGL*, eds. M. G. Angeli Bertinelli, A. Donati, Faenza 2006, p. 486–514; F. Diosono, op. cit., p. 56–67; cf. J. Liu, *Collegia centonariorum. The guilds of textile dealers in the Roman West*, Leiden 2009, p. 52–53.

⁶ J. P. Waltzing, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 198; J. S. Perry, *The Roman collegia. The modern evolution of an ancient concept*, Leiden–Boston 2006, p. 7–16; F. Diosono, op. cit., p. 56–67.

⁷ F. M. Ausbüttel, op. cit.; O. M. Van Nijf, op. cit., s. 28; N. Tran, *Les membres des associations romaines. Le rang social des collegiati en Italie et en Gaule sous le Haut-Empire*, Rome 2006 (Collection de l’École française de Rome, 367); K. Verboven, *The associative order: Status and ethos among Roman businessmen in Late Republic and Early Empire*, “Athenaeum” 2007, vol. 95, p. 861–893.

assimilation and compensation processes, but also building the sense of autonomy etc).⁸

A reconstruction of the history of the Roman *dendrophori*, which would include not just the genesis, organisation and operation of their associations but would also attempt to show the role they played in the urban tissue, requires confronting several more specific problems. It is undoubtedly necessary to verify the theses, proposed by some historians, about the correlation between the geographical spread of the *collegia dendrophorum* and the intensity of activities related to cutting and processing wood or the popularity of the cult of Magna Mater.⁹ The well-documented link between the *dendrophori* and the cult of Magna Mater raises questions about the impact which the Oriental/Hellenistic provenance of this cult had on their activity and about the relations between members of the association and priests of Cybele, who frequently appear in the sources.¹⁰ The important role played by the *dendrophori* during public cultic rituals in honour of Magna Mater poses the question about this association's place in the public space.¹¹ What goals did the associations and their members pursue by deciding to actively participate in this sphere of urban life? What expectations did the municipal and local authorities have regarding colleges? What means did both parties use to achieve those goals? The planned study will not, of course, give clear-cut answers to all these questions, but it will certainly allow us to formulate conclusions which will be applicable not only in a discussion about the *collegia dendrophorum* but in reflections about the essence of *il fenomeno associativo romano* in general.

⁸ See in particular D. Rohde, *Zwischen Individuum und Stadtgemeinde. Die Integration von collegia in Hafenstädten*, Frankfurt a.M. 2012 (Studien zur Alten Geschichte, 15).

⁹ See for example D. Faoro, *I collegia professionali nel bellunese. Il caso dei dendrophori. Stato degli studi e proposte di riflessione*, "Archivio storico di Belluno, Feltre e Cadore" 2004, vol. 304, p. 1–25 and J. Liu, *Collegia centonariorum...*, p. 53 (*dendrophori* and the cult of Magna Mater).

¹⁰ CIL 13, 1752; CIL 5, 81; AE 1929, 120.

¹¹ F. Van Haepelen, op. cit., passim; J. Liu, *Local governments and collegia. A new appraisal of the evidence*, in: *A Tall Order. Writing the social history of the ancient world. Essays in honor of W.W. Harris*, ed. J.-J. Aubert, Leipzig 2005, p. 279–310; eadem, *AE 1998. 282. A case study of public benefaction and local politics*, in: *Ancient documents and their contexts*, eds. J. Bodet, N. Dimitrova, Leiden 2015, p. 248–262.

Started by Theodor Mommsen,¹² the discussion about Roman corporations has reached a certain impasse. After the breakthrough brought about by studies conducted in the last two decades of the twentieth century, the interest in Roman corporations visibly increased. At that time, historians focused their attention on the social aspects of the colleges' operation, which quite quickly led to a fundamental change in the perception of the role which these organisations played in urban life. The image of colleges as organisations associating the poorest dwellers of the city, for whom affiliation with a college was, in the first place, a way to ensure a decent burial for themselves, was replaced with the vision of associations whose members, by joining a college, primarily wanted to mark their relatively high social standing.¹³ For the relatively wealthy members of the Roman *plebs media*, from where the majority of the *corporati* were supposedly recruited, colleges became a means to establish relations with the municipal elites and, consequently, to appear in the city's public space in roles which members of this social class were normally barred from.¹⁴

However, it turned out that this "integration and compensation model" of interpreting Roman corporations has its weak points and limitations as well. Most importantly, global studies on this phenomenon blur the differences stemming from idiosyncratic features of individual corporations; for instance, the chronological context is frequently overlooked. It is difficult to accept that, by referring to general observations concerning the *fenomeno associative*, we must leave without answers many questions about specific colleges operating in a particular place and time. While the "integration and compensation model" of colleges explains why associations were created in the first place and why so many dwellers of Roman cities joined colleges, general observations following from employing this model do not satisfactorily explain why they joined a specific association. Only more in-depth studies on selected colleges (or types of colleges) can bring answers to such questions.

¹² T. Mommsen, *De collegiis et sodaliciis Romanorum*, Kiel 1843.

¹³ See below: note no. 19.

¹⁴ See for example: K. Verboven, *Professional collegia: guilds or social clubs?*, "Ancient Society" 2011, vol. 41, p. 187–195.

Writing a history of one of the most popular Roman corporations can, therefore, become an important stimulus for progress in this area of historical studies. That this assumption is correct is confirmed by the study devoted to colleges associating the *centonarii*.¹⁵ Its author managed not only to depict the occupational character of this corporation and the particular role it played in the public life of the empire, but also to make many observations about the wider social context in which they functioned. The study on the Roman *dendrophori* may, therefore, bring valuable comparative material (both colleges are included in the so-called *tria collegia principalia*). On the other hand, it is equally important to attempt to address the correctness of findings obtained during synthetic studies on the *fenomeno associativo* with regard to the *dendrophori*. In this context, very interesting results could be obtained by analysing problems such as the *dendrophori*'s relations with the authorities (the emperor's role in the development of selected corporations), collegial patronage and its significance in the "energetic landscape" of the city,¹⁶ or the participation of socially disadvantaged groups (slaves, freedmen, women) in corporate life.

Since the colleges of the *dendrophori* are an institution which did not appear in Roman cities until the Imperial Period (unlike the occupational colleges which had existed "forever", i.e., from legendary times), it is valid to ask about their genesis. To this end, it must be established whether the beginnings of the corporation can indeed be traced back to the activity of Emperor Claudius, as most of the historians who specialise in this problem believe;¹⁷ to define the type of relations between the *dendrophori* and

¹⁵ J. Liu, *Collegia centonariorum...*, passim.

¹⁶ See idem, *The economy of endowments: The case of the Roman collegia*, in: *Pistoi dia tèn technèn. Bankers, loans and archives in the ancient world. Studies in honour of Raymond Bogaert*, eds. K. Verboven, K. Vandorpe, V. Chankowski-Sable, Leuven 2008 (Studia Hellenistica, 44), p. 231–256; F. Van Haepere, op. cit., passim; J. Liu, *AE 1998.282...*, passim.

¹⁷ L. E. Roller, *In search of God the Mother: The cult of anatolian Cybele*, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 1999, esp. p. 280–281; J. Liu, *Pompeii and collegia: A new appraisal of the evidence*, "Ancient History Bulletin" 2008, vol. 22, 1–2, p. 63; eadem, *Collegia centonariorum...*, p. 52.

the cult of Magna Mater reformed by this ruler; and to verify assumptions about the Greek/Oriental roots of the associations in question.

A preliminary analysis of the source material allows me to state that the organisational structure of the *dendrophori* did not deviate from models known from other private colleges.¹⁸ However, interesting conclusions may appear in relation to reflections on the size of these organisations. Due to the great diversity of Roman private associations in terms of their size (from religious colleges of a few dozen members to huge occupational corporations numbering hundreds of members), estimating the number of members of an average college of the *dendrophori* would certainly allow us to better appraise the role of these organisations in urban life, although the source data (very fragmentary lists of members) considerably limit research capability in this regard.

The primary objective of analysing the prosopographic material related to the activity of the associations of the *dendrophori* is, of course, to identify the social class/group which was the main recruitment base for these organisations. These findings, in turn, will allow me to address the thesis, dominant in contemporary historiography, according to which the social base of the colleges operating in Roman cities was their broadly defined middle class.¹⁹ It seems that regarding the *dendrophori*, the scope of the study can be considerably bigger and also include, at least in the case of several urban centres, an attempt to reconstruct the relations between members of the associations in question with families belonging to the local elites. The well-documented institution of corporate patronage,²⁰ foun-

¹⁸ See P. Wojciechowski, *Roman religious associations in Italy (1st–3rd century)*, Toruń 2021, p. 54–62.

¹⁹ O. M. Van Nijf, op. cit., p. 22; N. Tran, op. cit., passim; Wojciechowski, *Roman religious associations in Italy...*, p. 35–53.

²⁰ J. Nicols, *Tabulae patronatus: A study of the agreement between patron and client-community*, “Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt” 1980, Teil 2, vol. 13, p. 535–561; D. Nonnis, *Un patrono dei dendrophori di Lavinium. Onori e munificenza in un dossier epigrafico di età severiana*, “Rendiconti della Pontificia Accademia di Archeologia” 1995–1996, vol. 68, p. 235–262; J. Liu, *Local governments...*, passim; eadem, *AE 1998.298...*, passim; F. Mainardis, *Verba imaginisque: revisione di un decreto polse per un patrono dei dendrophori*, in: *Colonie et minicipi nell’era digitale. Documentazione epigrafica*

dations and gifts which benefited the *dendrophori* all indicate promising possibilities of research into the issue of the place of members of this association in the urban “social network”.²¹

The assumption that attempts to identify the “raison d’être” of the colleges of the *dendrophori* lack a methodological basis does not, of course, absolve us of the duty to present evidence of activities of the collegial members which is identifiable in the sources. This issue can be analysed in at least three thematic sections: corporate feasts and funerals, *collegia dendrophorum* as occupational associations or a “fire-fighting service” and the role of *dendrophori* in the cult of Magna Mater.

Regardless of a critical attitude towards Mommsen’s vision of “funerary colleges” or the idea that Roman colleges were meant to be a sort of “social clubs”,²² there is no doubt that the best-documented expressions of corporate activity were collegial feasts and various forms of participation in the funerary ceremonies of deceased college members. Traces of such activities are also visible in the source material concerning the colleges of the *dendrophori*. Their analysis will include the wider social context in which corporate banquets and burials were organised. Agreeing with the opinion that the majority of the *dendrophori* were recruited from the “middle class”, I assume that the symbolic value of these events was of much higher importance to them than a meal or a place in the corporate cemetery as such. The opportunity to demonstrate association with a prestigious (from their point of view) group by participating in collegial celebrations was an attractive form of self-presentation and a clear sign of social advancement for many members of this community. From this angle, I will analyse both feasts and distributions of presents organised by the *dendrophori* and commemorative rituals.

If evidence is discovered to confirm the theory that persons linked to harvesting, processing, transporting, or trading in wood belonged to these

per la conoscenza delle città antiche. Atti del Convegno di studi (Macerata, 10–12 dicembre 2015), eds. S. Antolini, S. M. Marengo, G. Paci, Roma 2017, p. 319–349.

²¹ D. Rohde, *op. cit.* and F. Van Haepere, *op. cit.*

²² K. Verboven, *Professional collegia...*, *passim*.

associations,²³ it will be necessary to reflect more broadly on the problem of the role which timber played in the Roman economy, which might in turn explain the high position of the *dendrophori* in the corporate hierarchy.

In turn, the popular hypothesis which attributes the role of city fire brigades to the *dendrophori* is based on the following two assumptions: the colleges of the *dendrophori* belonged to the category of *tria collegia*, which functioned as fire-fighting units as part of their the *utilitas publica*, which was supposedly a source of their great prestige.²⁴ A preliminary analysis of the source material and literature on the subject allows me to predict that it will be possible to prove that both of these assumptions are wrong.

Regarding the *dendrophori*'s activity in the sphere of religion, we have much more certain sources at our disposal. Apart from literary accounts about their participation in religious ceremonies related to the cult of Magna Mater and the priestly functions held by members of these associations, we also have data from quite numerous votive inscriptions founded by the *dendrophori* and evidence of their close relations with the imperial cult.²⁵ An analysis of this material will certainly allow me to formulate more far-reaching conclusions than is possible in research on the religious life of other types of associations operating in Roman cities.

The methodology of the study on the Roman *collegia dendrophorum* follows mainly from the nature of the sources on which it is based, comprised almost entirely of epigraphic material. It consists of almost 170 inscriptions, documenting the activity of the colleges of the *dendrophori*.²⁶ The inscriptions can be divided into two categories. The first are inscriptions put

²³ See D. Faoro, op. cit. and F. Boscolo, op. cit.

²⁴ See above note no. 6.

²⁵ See esp. J. Liu, *Collegia centonariuorum...*, p. 52–53.

²⁶ During over a century which has passed since the publication of Waltzing's work (1900), in which he collected all of the texts mentioning the *dendrophori* known in his times, the number of sources related to their activity has significantly increased (new inscriptions: J.-M. Salamito, *Les dendrophores dans l'Empire chrétien. À propos du Code Théod. XIV, 8 et XVI, 10, 20, 2*, "Melanges de l'École française de Rome. Antiquité" 1987, vol. 109, p. 991–1018; G. Mennella, G. Apicella, *Le corporazioni professionali nell'Italia romana: un aggiornamento al Waltzing*, Napoli 2000; the most up-to-date compilation of epigraphic material: F. Van Haepren, op. cit., passim).

up by the colleges themselves or by officials acting on their behalf. Apart from quite numerous honorific inscriptions, we can also include lists of corporation members and patrons and so-called corporate by-laws, displayed in collegial meeting places. The other, by far larger, category are inscriptions (mainly tomb and votive) which only include the corporation in question, e.g., information about membership in the college of the *dendrophori*, a function held in it or corporate patronage.

It is, therefore, of fundamental importance for the credibility of the research to answer the question as to whether we can reliably reconstruct the history of the Roman *dendrophori* on the basis of this sort of source material. The discussion on the representativeness of epigraphic material goes back almost to the beginnings of epigraphy itself and has not been solved in a way which is satisfactory to all historians specialising in the history of ancient Rome.²⁷ We cannot unequivocally answer the question whether – and if so, to what extent – the epigraphic texts available to us reflect historical relations and phenomena. To make matters worse, there are doubts even about such basic issues as to whether the found inscriptions are representative of the entire body of inscriptions produced during the period in question.

In the face of such serious methodological reservations, if we adopted an extremely pessimistic attitude, we would have to abandon studies based mainly on epigraphic material. However, such an attitude would preclude the possibility of further studies on many aspects of the history of imperial Rome. Most topics related to social history, especially those concerning social groups and phenomena located outside the circle of the imperial elite, would find themselves outside the scope of research.

This conclusion obviously also applies to corporate life. The research of historians such as Jinyu Liu, Andreas Bendlin, Françoise Van Haepere and Dorothea Rohde shows that, at least regarding studies on the *fenomeno*

²⁷ R. MacMullen, *The epigraphic habit in the Roman Empire*, “American Journal of Philology” 1982, vol. 103, p. 233–46; *Epigraphic evidence: Ancient history from inscriptions*, ed. J. Bodel, London 2000, passim; P. Wojciechowski, *Epigraphische Quellen in den Untersuchungen über das religiöse Leben der römischen Städte*, in: *Society and religions. Studies in Greek and Roman history*, vol. 2, ed. D. Musiał, Toruń 2007, 85–97.

associativo, it is possible to obtain positive results based on analysing almost exclusively epigraphic texts.²⁸ However, reliable research in this area must consider a few methodological reservations. First of all, the epigraphic material must be analysed in the context of the broadly understood epigraphic culture which produced it. The epigraphic culture and related customs changed not only over time and space, but also took on different forms depending on the social status of inscription creators (the elite and the non-elite, the freeborn and the freedmen, etc.). The frequently formulated opinions about the heyday or decline of corporate life in certain regions or periods stem from placing too much faith in the possibility of a quantitative analysis of epigraphic material and overlooking the customs which determined the characteristics of the “epigraphic production” in a specific place and time. Applying this statement to the study on the *dendrophori*, it should be, for instance, considered whether the inscriptions found in north Africa, documenting the activity of this college, are indeed evidence of popularity of *dendrophori* in this area or whether their presence is due to the local, rather specific, epigraphic culture.²⁹

It is equally important to consider the immediate context in which the inscription “functioned”. Usually, it is unfortunately only possible to reconstruct this context indirectly since epigraphic material is very rarely found *in situ*. This is also the case of inscriptions documenting the activities of the colleges of the *dendrophori*. However, considering both the contents and form (type of monument) of these inscriptions, we can be certain whether a given inscription was originally placed in the corporate meeting place or in the city’s public space.

We know considerably more about the social aspect of the creation and function of these inscriptions. Most of them were public (in the commonly accepted sense of the word). In the case of the inscriptions in question, the “public” to whom the message of the inscription was directed were collegial

²⁸ See esp. J. Liu, *Collegia centonariorum...*; A. Bendlin, *Associations, funerals, sociality, and roman law. The collegium of Diana and Antinous in Lanuvium (CIL 14.2112) reconsidered*, in: *Aposteldekret und Vereinswesen*, ed. M. Öhler, Tübingen 2011, p. 207–296; F. Haepelen, op. cit.; D. Rohde, op. cit.

²⁹ See R. Rubio Rivera, op. cit., p. 175–183; cf. J. Liu, *Collegia centonariorum...*, p. 52–53.

members, but in certain circumstances, the group of addressees might have been much larger (honorific inscriptions, tombs, etc.). When analysing the contents of inscriptions put up by the *dendrophori*, we must remember that we are dealing with a classic example of sources presenting the “narrative of the winners”. In terms of communication, the means used by the *dendrophori* did not differ from those employed by the urban elites (*fasti*, *alba*, honorific inscriptions, etc.). The public nature of these inscriptions was reflected not only in their form and language. The latter, which emulated the style of imperial and local administration – successfully – was one of the most conspicuous effects of the inscription founder’s pursuit of official form. The public context in which most epigraphic inscriptions functioned also meant that their founders only told us what they wanted us to know.

The image of the college and its members obtained in this way must be incomplete. It lacks elements which would shed light on the mutual relations between the *Collegiate*, on everyday corporate life, which must have seemed too banal to mention in inscriptions. On the other hand, events which show successes and prestige of the association and its members are very much highlighted. The construction of a collegial meeting place, the foundation of a monument in honour of an influential college patron, a corporate burial ceremony or celebration were circumstances in which the *dendrophori* were the most willing to present themselves to the wider audience. For many *dendrophori*, the very fact of belonging to the association was a sign of their high social standing.

The only way to confirm the correctness of our ideas about the social context of the activity of the colleges of the *dendrophori* is by means of reliable prosopographic studies. The main principle of studies based on this research method is to pinpoint the group which is the subject of analysis. In our case, this group consists of members of the colleges of the *dendrophori*, although their relatives, patrons and collegial benefactors will also be persons of interest. Collecting basic data about the legal and social status of the *dendrophori* known from epigraphic material may enable us to formulate general conclusions, for instance, about the role which the corporation played in urban life, the type and intensity of relations among college members and their links to the city elite, as well as throw light on issues, such as the *dendrophori*’s connections to the milieu of priests of Magna Mater.

However, it must be stressed that when referring to the quantitative analysis of prosopographic material, we cannot forget that its representativeness is only assumed. Most importantly, we cannot determine what percentage of all the *dendrophori* were those whose names were preserved in the source material, which is a necessary condition for using statistical methods. Therefore, the results we achieve cannot be regarded as proof but merely as an indication, whose interpretation is subject to the general rules of historical research.

It is equally problematic to apply the comparative method to studies on the subject matter in question. In my opinion, in the case of research on the colleges of the *dendrophori*, referencing comparative studies is justifiable on at least two levels. It seems the most obvious to compare the findings of studies on the *dendrophori* with the findings of studies on other Roman private associations. It seems particularly promising to use the findings made by Liu regarding the Roman *centonarii*,³⁰ since both associations are included in the group of *tria collegia principalia*; they were also both very popular across almost the entire area in question. It will be interesting not only to compare the territorial range and chronological scope of the two colleges, but also the functions and social structures of both organisations. It is much more controversial to attempt to conduct comparative studies of Roman private colleges and medieval guilds or religious fraternities. Although the main question, which can be boiled down to the question whether it is possible to compare ancient Roman and medieval corporations, no longer stirs as strong emotions as it did in Finley's times,³¹ historians continue to disagree about the role which these organisations played in urban life (especially in its economic aspect).³² Consequently, it is difficult to tell whether the same factors which impacted the activity of medieval guilds also shaped corporate life in Rome. However, an analysis of these factors allows us to see the broader social context in which the colleges functioned. The image of medieval guilds as a sort of "trust networks"

³⁰ J. Liu, *Collegia centonariorum...*

³¹ M. I. Finley, *The ancient economy. Updated with a new foreword by Ian Morris*, Berkeley–Los Angeles 1999.

³² See esp. K. Verboven, *Professional collegia...*, passim.

allowed historians to take the discussion about them beyond the economic sphere. The fact that employing analytical models long used by medievalists may bring interesting results in research on Roman corporations as well is confirmed by an attempt to look at the phenomenon of commemorations through the prism of medievalist studies on “social memory” (*memoria*). The associations of the *dendrophori*, which were the addressees of numerous commemorative foundations, seem one of the most interesting subjects of research in this context.

A reconstruction of the history of the Roman *dendrophori*, based almost solely on epigraphic sources, is a risky proposition. It seems, however, that an in-depth analysis of the data provided by dozens of inscriptions put up by the *dendrophori* themselves or by persons linked to their associations may become a starting point for a discussion on the history of this corporation. The reliability of the findings achieved as a result depends on considering the character of the sources. It is especially important to link the information found in the inscriptions with their archaeological and social contexts. Interpreting the data obtained in this manner – although quite risky, as is always the case in historical research – will enable us to answer at least some of the questions posed above about the origin, structure, and function of the associations of the *dendrophori*. Employing the prosopographic method and referring to comparative studies may considerably enrich the image of the corporation in question as well as Roman corporations in general.

