The Roman Banquet

Images of Conviviality

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Introduction

An obscure Roman named C. Rubrius Urbanus, probably at some point in the first or early second century AD, ordered a handsome grave monument, the upper part carved with a figured scene, the lower with a long inscription (Fig. 1).[1] The monument was intended, the inscription states, for himself, Antonia Domestica his wife, and Cn. Domitius Urbicus Rubrianus his son, as well as for his freedmen, freedwomen, and their descendants. What made it unusual was not so much the figured scene but the verse inscription below, by which he sought to explain and describe its significance:

> While life was granted him, he always lived sparingly
> saving for his heir, mean too with himself.
> Here he bade himself be artfully sculpted by skilful hand,
> merrily reclining after his own demise,
> so that at least he might rest recumbent in death,
> and enjoy assured repose there lying.
> His son sits on his right, who followed soldiering
> and died before the sad funeral of his own father.
> Yet what good does a merry image do the dead?
> This is the way they ought rather to have lived.[2]

To the modern observer, these verses, composed or commanded by the deceased, strike a discordant note. A gravestone should not be a 'merry image', yet it is so described; and it is the futility of its very cheerfulness which engenders the pessimism of the final lines, and devalues the thriftiness

and self-denial of the opening. Rubrius Urbanus clearly thought a great deal about the significance of what was carved on his tomb. The figured scene showed the father reclining on a couch beside a table, holding in his hands a wreath and a cup; while the son, in military uniform, is seated and holds out his hand to his father. For a Roman observer of the time, both image and verses spoke a familiar language, but one capable of evoking a wide range of associations. The stone makes use of a visual theme well known in funerary contexts, which will be discussed in Chapter 4 of this book: the single banqueter reclining on a couch, a scheme known to modern scholars as the Totenmahl motif. The verses themselves emphasize by repetition the concept of reclining, both at a banquet and in the repose of death; and open with a Horatian theme, the futility of saving what one's heir will enjoy, only to invert it poignantly with the death of that heir, and end with the further paradox that one's own tomb should teach one to enjoy life.[3]

As this stone shows, a picture of a banquet could mean many different things to a Roman viewer. Convivial eating and drinking formed one of the most significant social rituals in the Roman world, inextricably interwoven into the fabric of public and domestic life. Communal banqueting played an essential role in the relationships of members of the elite with their dependents, with their potential supporters, or even with their entire community, as well as in their interaction among themselves; it marked the humbler gatherings of the nonelite, of freedmen, and even sometimes slaves, in their guilds and religious associations. The banquet recurred in several different guises in funerary rituals and the commemoration of the dead; and it characterized religious festivals, large and small.[4] If we know little about the normal family meal in antiquity, at least as we understand it today, we have a great deal of information from written texts about the dinners at which the rich entertained their friends, associates, or clients. Such texts are found in works as diverse as the letters of Cicero, Pliny the Younger, or at the end of antiquity Sidonius Apollinaris, describing (with approval or otherwise) dinners they have attended or given. Juvenal or Martial satirize inhospitable and arrogant hosts; Martial composes epigrams on the gifts of food, tableware, and other objects that might be distributed at the Saturnalia; and Statius or Martial provide sycophantic accounts of imperial banquets. Horace's sympotic poetry celebrates the very ambience of its purported performance; the dinner of the rich and vulgar freedman Trimalchio is the setting for Petronius' extravagant fantasy; and the recipes preserved under the name of Apicius recall the complexity of the cuisine. Greek literature has in the

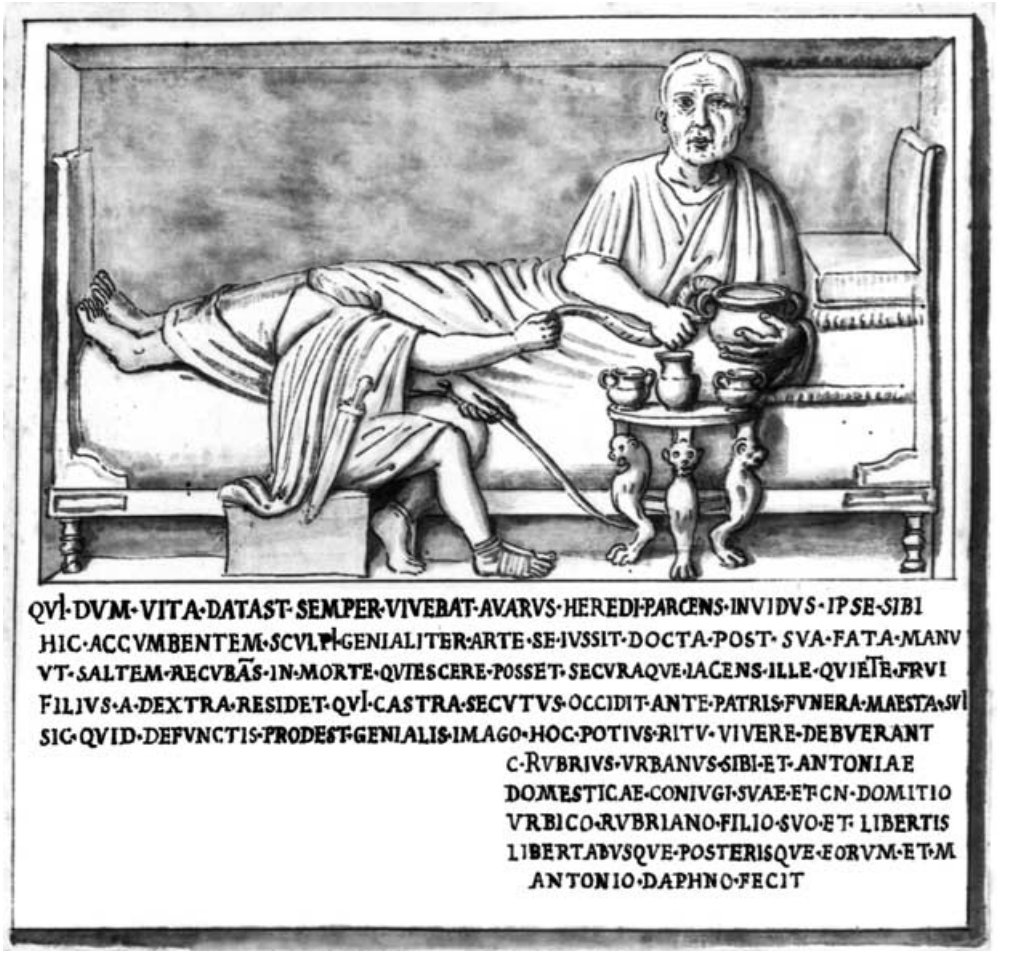

Figure 1 – Funerary relief of C. Rubrius Urbanus, drawing from collection of Cassiano dal Pozzo. London, British Museum, Franks 364. ©Copyright The British Museum.

unwieldy tomes of Athenaeus and the chatty table-talk of Plutarch preserved material about the customs, lore, and culture of dining from the previous centuries. These sources, and the many others that survive, can naturally tell us much about actual dining practices and the cultural ideals and expectations inherent in banquets of this type, but they have inevitable limitations. They are often misleading as sources for contemporary practice, filled as they are with satirical exaggeration and with archaizing and idealizing references; and all authors, even those that give the greatest appearance of objectivity,

write with their own biases. Moreover, all write from the viewpoint of one particular section of Roman society, the educated upper-class male.[5]

Other types of evidence can offer more varied insights. Many hundreds of inscriptions, mostly on gravestones like that of Rubrius Urbanus or on the bases of honorific statues, allude in one way or another to the banquet; their lack of detail and often conventional formulation are compensated by the light they cast on the assumptions and ideologies of a much wider circle than those who produced the written texts. In addition, the archaeological record provides a wealth of material evidence: architectural remains of rooms that appear to have been designed for dining, evidence for their furnishing and layout, and vessels and apparatus used at the banquet. Many works of art illustrate scenes of dining and drinking, and these form the primary focus of this book. The analysis and interpretation of these scenes cannot, of course, stand alone; they need to be combined with the evidence of the archaeological material and with that of the written sources, both literary and epigraphic, to provide a fuller picture of the social and cultural context.

I choose to use the word 'banquet' as a generic term for the festive consumption of food and drink in Roman society, although in English it has implications of a grand formal occasion that does not always correspond to the events under discussion. The more neutral 'dining' might seem preferable, except that it seems to place the emphasis predominantly upon the consumption of food, to the exclusion of the drinking party. Although the latter played a much smaller role in the Roman world than the *symposion* had in the Greek, the Greek tradition nevertheless had a profound impact upon the iconography of Roman art, and many of the figured monuments represent drinking rather than eating. The most general Latin term is *convivium*, which means literally 'living together'; it conveys associations of festivity and conviviality, with the consumption of food and drink implicit but not overtly stressed, for which 'banquet' seems the best English equivalent. Similar associations can also be conveyed in Latin simply by the use of words meaning 'to recline', as Rubrius Urbanus does in describing the image on his tombstone. The Romans, like the Greeks, lay down to eat and drink in good society, or on formal and ceremonial occasions; and this characteristic position was sufficient in itself to identify the convivial context to which the words refer.[6]

Modern interest in the dining customs of Greek and Roman antiquity began with the antiquarians of the Renaissance. Several scholars of the sixteenth and seventeenth century left learned works with titles such as *Antiquitates convivales* or *De Triclinio*, in which the literary sources were

exhaustively combed for information about ancient, predominantly Roman, dining practices.[7] The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers of handbooks about Roman private life also compiled detailed studies of Roman behaviour on these occasions, on the basis almost exclusively of information in the literary texts, supplemented only occasionally by that of inscriptions, and in a largely synchronic form that took little account of variations over time, or of practices outside the circles which produced the texts.[8] Much twentieth-century classical scholarship, however, relegated these matters to the marginal position of studies of 'daily life' and the like, or left them to the sensationalist re-creations of the cinema or television. Not until the 1980s did the influence of anthropologists and modern social and cultural historians awaken a new realization among classicists of the potential contribution of the study of dining customs, of commensality, and of the consumption of food in general, to the understanding of ancient society and culture. The result was a sudden awakening of interest, concentrating in particular on the Greek *symposion*, which elevated sympotic studies to the status of a fashionable subject. A series of interdisciplinary colloquia brought together contributions from classical philologists, social, political and religious historians, archaeologists, and art historians, together with specialists from other cultures of the ancient world, from Mesopotamia to Judaism and the New Testament. These demonstrated the diversity of aspects involved in the study of the subject and their potential for mutual illumination; one approach can no longer suffice for the study of a phenomenon so complex and many sided as ancient dining.[9]

II

The images of dining and drinking in Roman art, which offer the starting point for the studies in this book, appear in a wide variety of media. They show groups of banqueters or single participants, or present cognate subjects or extracts from larger scenes: the servants, ready to attend on the guests; food and drink that might be set before them; and the entertainment that they might be offered. The theme appears to have become established in Roman art around the turn of the first century BC to the first century AD; it disappears, apart from some specific uses in Christian iconography, in the fifth to sixth century AD. The great majority of examples come from two types of context: domestic or funerary. Within the house, scenes of the banquet and related themes are found on wall paintings (most of

those that survive come from Pompeii and Herculaneum, and therefore date before AD 79), and on mosaic pavements, from a much wider geographic and chronological range. In a funerary setting, these scenes also occur as wall paintings in tombs and less often on mosaic pavements; the decoration of Christian catacombs belongs in this category. Banqueting themes were also used for funerary sculpture: as statues in the round or carved in relief on the fronts or lids of sarcophagi, on smaller monuments such as urns and altars, or on stelae to be erected over the grave. Other uses are more exceptional. Objects destined for use at the banquet, such as drinking cups and other vessels, not infrequently contain some allusion to that function in their decoration; full-scale scenes of the banquet occur on two huge silver plates, inlaid and gilt, of the fourth century AD, luxury objects designed as much for display as for use. Also from Late Antiquity dates the appearance of illuminated manuscripts, both pagan and Christian, where banqueting scenes in the contemporary manner are used to illustrate episodes from epic or from the Old or New Testament.

These images have often been used as illustrations in discussions of the Roman banquet derived from literary sources. Learned scholars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, seeking to explain the references in the written sources to Roman customs, such as the habit of reclining to dine, turned for illustration to the figured monuments that were discovered in the excavations of their time, or that were available for study and observation in the collections of the great.[10] More recent works have often continued to draw on the visual material in similar unsystematic fashion, as casual comparison for studies whose principal material is textual. In this book, the images are treated instead as primary sources to be analyzed in their own right and within their own conventions and traditions, and to be compared with the evidence offered by architectural remains and artifacts.

From such sources, much information can be derived that illuminates the patterns of behaviour at the banquet and the social intercourse of the diners, more clearly often than any surviving written material. Thus the monuments not only provide clear examples of the layout of the three couches in a traditional Roman triclinium, and of the single semicircular couch known as a *sigma* or *stibadium*, which became the regular pattern for formal dining in the later Empire, but they also give vivid illustrations of the way that such arrangements must have affected communication and contact between the various participants. Images and artifacts can cast light on the practices of mixing and serving the wine; they can represent not only the types of vessel that might be used, but also the manner of

their use. Questions such as these are of much more than antiquarian interest. The changing patterns of behaviour over time, in different geographic and cultural settings, and in varying contexts of use, reflect variations in the banquet's role in society, and in the atmosphere and ethos that characterized it.

Nevertheless, any approach to the visual material that looks on it primarily as a source of information about actual practice in real life is both limited and potentially misleading. The images are in no way intended to act as mirrors of reality. Like all artificial constructs, their form and content are the products of a combination of social and cultural factors. The artisans who created them were the heirs of a long tradition, and followed long-established conventions. At times, it is likely that earlier models were deliberately followed or adapted because they were seen as imbued with desirable associations or evocative force. More often, however, the ancient artisans drew from training and habitual practice on a common stock of motifs and figures, which they varied and adapted to suit the immediate purpose, and which could persist with little change for centuries. Insofar as the scenes were intended to evoke a contemporary event, as opposed, for example, to a scene from mythology, it might be desirable for some details to conform to recognizable current practice. However, these could coexist with others traditional to the genre and remote from contemporary experience. In any analysis of the images, it is necessary to take these conventions into account and to distinguish as clearly as the material allows the part played by tradition in their formation.

Yet the images were also produced for a specific context. They had to serve the aims of the patrons, such as Rubrius Urbanus, who commissioned or purchased them. Their creators had to adapt them to those aims, either directly in the case of specific commissions or more loosely in producing objects destined for purchase. The ideas that these images were called on to express, and the messages they were required to convey, could range from ideals of the life of culture and affluence, to the self-projection of the wealthy in public and civic life, to beliefs and hopes about death, and even, as we have seen, to a more personal view of all of these. Some contain internal clues to identify the dominant message; a few combine image with written text, like the monument of Rubrius Urbanus (although this is rare, at least in our surviving evidence). Many are more ambivalent; it will be seen repeatedly in this book that the banqueting motif, like much of Roman art, was fundamentally multivalent and owed much of its popularity precisely to its ability to convey a range of significance. Overall, however, the evolution of the iconography, the selection of details to include, the

exclusion of others, and the varying emphasis accorded them, reflect patterns of ideology and cultural values as much as they do changes in actual practice.

III

Some important aspects of Roman banqueting are notably absent from the surviving art. With the exception of one fragment of a relief showing the banquet of the Vestals, the banquet does not appear on the great official monuments of imperial Rome.[11] Nor does any surviving work represent the emperor as banqueter. Accidents of survival must be allowed for; we cannot rule out the possibility that the subject might have figured on wall paintings or mosaic in the decoration of imperial palaces. Nevertheless, our surviving evidence suggests that, despite the fascination shown by biographical sources for the gastronomic and convivial habits of emperors, and the political use of the banquet by many emperors, the banquet did not form part of imperial iconography; there is nothing in art to set beside the awed poems in which Statius wrote of Domitian's appearance at state banquets, or Pliny's praise of Trajan for his unassuming behaviour and condescension to his fellow guests.[12]

Nor were banquet scenes a component of traditional religious iconography. Although the ceremony of the *lectisternium*, at which images of the gods were placed reclining on couches as if participating in a banquet, had been an important part of Roman religious ritual at the time of the mid-Republic, neither it nor the related *pulvinaria* appear to have been represented in art.[13] Mythological banquets of the gods are also seldom represented in Roman art or in Greek. The main exception is Dionysus, constantly represented as engaged in drinking parties with his companions and followers; Hercules also appears as banqueter and carouser, both alone and in company and competition with Dionysus. Their iconography undoubtedly overlaps and melds with that of contemporary banquet scenes, both in the sense that 'real' human figures are shown in the poses or with the attributes of figures from the Dionysiac world, and that objects and practices familiar in contemporary life can be introduced into the mythological setting. More broadly, Dionysiac associations were inseparably interwoven with the ideology and ambience of the banquet, for the Romans as for the Greeks: Dionysus, his followers and his attributes, appear repeatedly on the floors and walls of dining rooms, and decorating the couches, vessels, and other apparatus used at the feast.

Nevertheless, I have not included these scenes of Dionysiac and Herculean festivities in this study. Discussion of them cannot be divorced from the much longer and more complex tradition behind them, iconographic and religious, and would require the study of questions that go beyond the scope of this book.[14] In the later Empire, banqueting scenes figure, although in a minor role, in the iconography of some of the mystery religions popular at that time, such as Mithras's banquet with the Sun god, or the monuments of the Danubian rider gods: these too raise questions outside the limits of the present work.[15] Christian uses of banqueting scenes will be discussed in Chapter 6.

A mainly chronological organization is adopted in the opening and closing chapters. Chapter 1 looks briefly at the Greek and Etruscan traditions, at the evidence for dining in early Rome, and at the differences that separate Roman practice from that of the Greeks. Chapter 2 turns first to the architectural evidence for Roman dining, from the Republic and early to mid-Empire, and compares it to the Greek and Hellenistic material; then the focus shifts to the representations of the banquet in the art of the early Empire at Pompeii and Herculaneum, and the extent to which these were indebted to Hellenistic tradition. The two central chapters have a more thematic structure. Chapter 3 is devoted to the role of the banquet in Roman public and civic life, and the artistic and archaeological remains that illustrate this role. In Chapter 4, the focus is on the banquet motif as funerary decoration, the reasons that made this imagery so frequent in funerary contexts, and the close links in Roman thought between death and the *convivium* of the living. Chapter 5 then turns to the development of the banqueting theme in the art of Late Antiquity, the late third and fourth centuries AD, and Chapter 6 to the adoption of the theme in Christian art, and to the end of Antiquity.

In the earlier chapters, I concentrate mainly upon the evidence from Rome and Italy, with only occasional examples drawn for comparison or amplification from other parts of the empire. This has necessitated the (reluctant) omission of numerous works of outstanding intrinsic interest, but which have features that appear characteristic of their locality: for example, the mosaic of the Bulls and the Banquet from Thysdrus in North Africa, with its reference to the amphitheatre associations apparently peculiar to Africa, or the scenes on the great funerary monuments of Igel and Neumagen in Augusta Treverorum [Trier] near Gallia Belgica.[16] A fuller study of the differences between Rome and the various provinces, of the adoption of some elements of Roman (or Graeco-Roman) iconography

in other parts of the empire and of the maintenance, or the development, of distinctive local traits, would require a book in itself. In Late Antiquity, however, a greater degree of uniformity prevailed between Rome and many regions of the empire, at least in the art commissioned or patronized by the wealthier classes; my examples in the two final chapters, therefore, draw more freely from a wider geographic range.