The Roman Banquet

Images of Conviviality

Dining was an important social occasion in the classical world. Scenes of drinking and dining decorate the wall paintings and mosaic pavements of many Roman houses. They are also painted in tombs and carved in relief on sarcophagi and on innumerable smaller grave monuments. Drawing frequently upon ancient literature and inscriptions as well as archaeological evidence, this book examines the visual and material evidence for dining throughout Roman antiquity. Topics covered include the relationship between Greek and Roman dining habits, the social significance of reclining when dining in public, the associations between dining scenes and death, the changing fashions of dining at the end of antiquity, and the use of banquet scenes in the art of early Christianity. Richly illustrated, *The Roman Banquet: Images of Conviviality* offers a full and varied picture of the role of the banquet in Roman life.

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For

William
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My involvement with Roman dining customs began when my husband, organizing a conference on symposia, demanded that I contribute a paper on Roman dining rooms. At the time I was beginning a book on mosaics and did not entirely welcome the interruption, being in some doubt as to whether I would have enough to say. The path on which I then embarked led eventually from the layout of mosaics and the function of the rooms they decorated, to the illustrations of dining scenes, and to the relationship, often far from straightforward, between these scenes and the evidence for actual dining practice. In the process, I found myself learning much about the development of Roman iconography and taking a new look at the social role of Roman art. Subsequently, it has become clear how well adapted was the theme of dining to an approach that would bring the visual and artefactual material together with the evidence of other sources, both literary and epigraphic. The study of ancient dining is fashionable today, as classicists have followed anthropologists and sociologists in recognizing the central place of food (and drink) and foodways in the structure and fabric of society. But this recognition is not a discovery of the New Historicism of the late twentieth century, but a revival of a scholarly interest that can be traced back to the Renaissance, and which drew, not only on the extensive literary sources that deal with dining in antiquity, but also on the artefacts and works of art that illustrate its practice. My own aim in this study has been twofold: to explore how art can be used as evidence for social and cultural history, while giving due weight to the conventions and pressures that governed the production of the images themselves.
The genesis of this book was an invitation from the Department of the Classics at Harvard to deliver the Carl Newell Jackson Lectures there in 1998. The original four lectures have been expanded into six chapters, but I have maintained the basic format and division of the subject matter, and resisted the temptation to try to include a much wider range of material and to cover topics outside the scope of the lectures. The week that I spent in Harvard in October 1998 was a memorable experience, combining productive academic discussions with frequent practical demonstrations of the importance of convivial commensality. I am grateful to the department, not only for making that week so enjoyable, but also for its subsequent interest in the publication and especially for the contribution of a generous subvention, which has made possible the inclusion of the colour plates. My thanks go especially to the successive Chairs of the Department, Greg Nagy and Richard Thomas, and to Kathleen Coleman, for continued encouragement and assistance.

Much of the writing of the book took place in another distinguished institution of higher learning that appreciates the role of dining in collegial life. From January to June 2001, I was fortunate to hold a Visiting Fellowship at All Souls College, Oxford; it would be difficult to imagine a more congenial atmosphere and surroundings in which to accomplish the task of finishing work on a manuscript. Much help has been provided in Oxford over the years by the staff of the Ashmolean Library, now the Sackler. In Rome, I benefited from the hospitality of the British School and the American Academy, as well as from the facilities of the German Archaeological Institute Library and Fototeca.

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