

TASTE AND SPACE
Archaeology and Adaptation in Roman Dining Practice

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At the opening of Book VII of his Quaestionum convivalium, Plutarch offers the following observation on a cultural idiom of dining practice in his day:

The Romans, my friend Sossius Senecio, are fond of quoting a refined and sociable (*philanthropou*) man, who said once, after taking his meal alone, "I have eaten today, but not dined," as the 'dinner' always requires fellowship and friendly affections (*koinonian kai philophrosune*) for seasoning. ... But the most truly godlike seasoning at the dining-table is the presence of a friend, an intimate and well-known companion – not merely because he eats and drinks with us, but because he participates in the give and take of conversation, at least if there is something profitable and reasonable in what is said.... Wherefore, it is right that just like friends, subjects of conversation should be welcomed to the dinner only if of proven quality. (Mor. 697C-E)

Plutarch's comment shows that admission to the hospitality of the dinner-table was no idle consideration. It required careful regulation of the fellowship there engaged, owing to the particular circumstances and the guests. Plutarch here touches on a basic principle regarding communal meals in the Graeco-Roman world, namely that there was an implicit grammar of etiquette which regulated the patterns of fellowship and

social interaction that such meals fostered. But if this “grammar of etiquette” regulated the social patterns, it was also inscribed in the physical space as well.

In this presentation I shall examine the archaeological evidence for aspects of dining practice in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. In particular, I shall focus on patterns of architectural adaptation of dining spaces that reflect trends in social and religious practice as well as in cultural “tastes” associated with dining. I hope to demonstrate that a growing climate of social dining was stimulated by Roman cultural ideals of patronage, and that these were encoded architecturally through adaptation and renovation into both the plan and the practice of dining in social and religious contexts.

In order to show this subtle shift in both practice and attitude, we shall begin by looking (*very* briefly) at the traditional layout of the Greek *andron*. Modeled as the *triclinium*, it was the basis for most social and cultic dining practice in the pre-hellenistic period, even though some variations are attested, such as that practiced by women in association with the Thesmophoria. The analogous spatial model in early Roman practice was that associated with the *tablinum* of the traditional Roman atrium house.

With the advent of the Hellenistic age notable changes are observed, not the least of which is the influence of Hellenistic peristyle architecture on both Greek and Roman housing. We see this especially in the adaptations of Republican domestic architecture at Pompeii and Herculaneum.

Another innovation that came with the Hellenistic age was the custom of cultic dining particularly associated with the Egyptian cults of Isis and Sarapis. One of the earliest and best examples of the process of adaptation to create dining space comes from Sarapeion A on Delos.

By the early imperial period, the “taste” for elaborate dining had increased, in large part, one must guess, from the growth of patronal relations and ideology. One place this becomes most visible is in the Roman domestic sphere. [Pompeii: Casa degli Amanti (Reg. I.10.11); Casa del Menandro (Reg. I.10.4). *NB: these two houses are contiguous and show patterns of adaptation at the top and bottom of the social ladder.*] Other examples from Pompeii show the intricate architectural planning and adaptation that was involved in “scripting” both the layout and the social impact of dining.

In the remainder of the presentation, then, I shall examine four cases from the later Roman period where we can see the further extensions of this new cultural code for dining space as reflected both in religious and in social situations. The four cases are:

- (1) The multiple adaptations of Hanghaus II at Ephesos for both private social dining and semi-private (?) cultic dining activities. These include adaptation of a dining room off the main peristyle as well as the creation of a cultic facility dedicated to Dionysus with associated dining/social space.

Date: Antonine period.

- (2) The adaptation of three traditional atrium/peristyle houses from Ostia to form the Sanctuary of the *Fabri Navales* (Reg. III.2.2) and its collegial facility across the street, better known as the *Schola Traiani*, (Reg. IV.5.15). Date: late Antonine to early Severan periods.
- (3) The installation of three successive dining facilities in the Ostia Synagogue (Reg. IV.17.1), as demonstrated through the 2002 field season of the UT OSMAP project (under my direction). Date: IInd to IVth centuries.
- (4) The adaptation for multiple dining rooms in the “new” form of Ostian domestic architecture from the late antique period (date: late IIIrd to IVth centuries).

I shall conclude with reference to the recent work of Katherine Dunbabin regarding the proliferation of a “new” aesthetic to dining space in the Late Antique period that involved apsidal architectural forms and her attendant caution against misreading all apses as signs of Christianity.