

THE GRECO-ROMAN BANQUET AS A SOCIAL INSTITUTION

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Prepared for the
Meals in the Greco-Roman World Consultation
AAR/SBL Annual Meeting
Atlanta, November, 2003

In defining the Greco-Roman banquet as a social institution, my emphasis will be neither on the types of foods people ate nor on the various meals that fit into a normal day, though each of these categories has social value in its own right. Rather I wish to identify and single out for study the specific form of meal that the ancients themselves saw as an occasion for significant social meaning. It is my contention that there was one form of meal that served as the basic model for all formal meals of significance in the Greco-Roman world. I define this meal model as the Greco-Roman banquet, and I view it as a complex and highly influential social institution.

1. THE BANQUET AS SOCIAL FORM

The first point to emphasize is the form of the meal itself. By the term Greco-Roman banquet I am referring primarily to the reclining banquet. The practice of reclining was virtually universal throughout the Greco-Roman world as a marker for the formal banquet of significance. Such a banquet had two main courses. The first course was the *deipnon*, the eating course proper, a term which we translate "dinner" or "banquet." The second course was the *symposium* (Greek: *symposion*). It was during the symposium that the entertainment of the evening would take place while the diners lingered over

cups of wine (but wine mixed with water, which allowed for a full evening of "lingering").

Among the common features of the form of the banquet are the following:

- a) Invitations to the meal were commonly sent out by the host. Some written invitations have survived among the 2nd-3rd century CE Greek papyri from Egypt.
- b) The couches were positioned according to sliding scale of social rank, from the highest to the lowest at the table. The positions were usually assigned by the host, based on the relative social rank of the guests.
- c) The guests were provided with a servant who would remove their sandals and wash their feet as preparation for reclining.
- d) Often a perfumed oil would be provided for the diners.
- e) In most dining rooms, food would be served on removable trays.
- f) There was an elaborate ritual marking the division between the deipnon and the symposium, which included removing the tables, sweeping the floor, and mixing the wine.
- g) A symposiarch would be chosen from among the guests to lead in the festivities connected with the drinking party. The symposiarch would often choose the mixture of wine to water and offer the libation to the deity with which the symposium would begin.
- h) Entertainment of some kind would be provided at the symposium.

2. BANQUET IDEOLOGY

The banquet was a social institution of the first order, and as such was a carrier of a social code, the ideology of the banquet. Banquet ideology provided

a model for creating community, defining behavior within the community, sharing values, and connecting with the divine.

I define the categories of banquet ideology as follows:

- a) **Social Boundaries:** The defining of boundaries is primary to the social code of banquets. That is to say, who one dines with defines one's placement in a larger set of social networks. The social code of the banquet can be seen to represent a confirmation and ritualization of the boundaries that exist in a social situation.
- b) **Social Bonding:** The act of dining together was considered to create a bond between the diners. It was inherent in the ritual practice of the banquet that social bonding was taking place. This is what made the banquet the central event for groups, because it provided a culturally established means to solidify their group identity.
- c) **Social Obligation:** Sharing a meal created a sense of ethical obligation of the diners toward one another. While we tend to view meal etiquette as a convention of culture without significant connection to morality or ethics, the Greeks addressed banquet rules in the context of serious discussions about social ethics. These philosophical discussions provided for the ancients a set of rhetorical categories that were utilized in banquet discussions in a variety of contexts throughout the Greco-Roman period.
- d) **Social Stratification:** The banquet provided a significant means for one's status in society to be formally recognized and acknowledged. Two aspects of the banquet especially carried this symbolism. The first was the custom of reclining itself, since it was originally reserved only for male citizens and marked

off the diners from others who ranked under them. The second prominent mark of social stratification was the custom of ranking places at table, which marked off the guests from one another. All guests were to be placed at the table in a ranking order that corresponded to their social rank.

e) Social Equality: Co-existing and contrasting with the concept of social stratification was that of social equality. Those who dined together were to be treated equally. The idea is that a meal that was shared in common and that created a sense of community among the participants should be one in which all can share equally and with full participation. In essence, then, a meal conceived in this way had the potential to break down social barriers and allow for a sense of social ordering internal to the group.

f) Festive Joy: As a "serious" event, by which I mean not a "trivial" event, a banquet was an occasion of what I call "festive joy," otherwise defined in the data as "good cheer" or "pleasure." Or, to put it more bluntly, a banquet was a time of serious fun. Thus a "proper" banquet could be judged by how well it promoted festive joy. Festive joy was viewed not as an individual experience but rather as a social experience inherent to the overall communal function of the banquet.

3. THE BANQUET AS LITERARY FORM

A third component of the banquet tradition, besides the form of the meal and the ideology of the meal, is the literary form within which both form and ideology were communicated. Literary descriptions of banquets, which purported to describe the meal as practiced, were actually idealizations based on literary

models. As such, they defined the ideal form of the “proper meal” as understood by the culture.

Literary descriptions are rich with data about meal ideology and cultural values. But they do not provide an exact description of how meals were practiced. Rather they provide descriptions according to literary prototypes. We must extrapolate from these descriptions in order to get at the actual practice of meals. This is the distinction I loosely define as the “narrative world” versus the “real world.” This perspective provides an important qualification for historical reconstruction of meal practice and a more appropriate means to assess the real value of literary descriptions as sources of information about meal ideology.

The foundation resource for banquet tradition is the symposium. To be sure, the symposium as a *social* institution had a distinct place in Greek culture. However, one can also trace the influence of the symposium *literary* form upon banquet tradition. Plato’s *Symposium* alone was of enormous influence as a model for the form and ideology of the banquet as well as for the literary form in which a banquet was to be described.

Symposium literature as a genre began with Plato and Xenophon and continued on until at least the fourth century CE. It provided a model for describing a meal, as noted by Plutarch, who, when describing the meals of his family and friends, admitted that he was following the model of the literary symposium.

The symposium model had a narrative component, in which the meal was described using stock figures such as the uninvited guest, the late-arriving guest,

and the drunkard, and stock plot structures, such as the discourse couched in a competitive framework. These narrative components show up in later literary works of various kinds, some of which simply continue the genre, as is found in Plutarch and Lucian, and some of which respond to the components of the genre without fully adopting the genre itself, as is found in Philo's description of the Therapeutae or in the earliest written form of the Passover haggadah or in the organization of the discussion in 1 Corinthians 11-14. Echoes of the genre also occur in motifs derived from what I would call popular storytelling tradition. For example, the motif of the late arriving guest, which was part of the symposia of Plato and Xenophon, was utilized in a variety of forms in the popular meal tradition and came to be included as well in the Jesus tradition in Luke 14:8-11, the parable of the late-arriving guest.

In addition to the narrative component of the symposium genre, there was also a discourse component. This tradition is traced especially to Plato's archetype where the decision was made to dismiss the flute girl and spend the evening in philosophical discourse. Following Plato's lead, philosophical discourse became a substitute form of banquet entertainment. It is important to note, however, that the setting is still the banquet. Consequently, the discourse at table was expected to follow patterns that fit the ambience of the occasion, such as a shared conversation and a topic appropriate to a table discussion. Among those topics were the features of the meal itself. Thus it was here where the form and values of the meal were discussed according to philosophical

categories. Plutarch especially devotes many of his table talk discourses in Quaestiones convivales to meal customs and etiquette.

The symposium genre called for such philosophical discussion to take place in discourse form. The philosophical discourse on meal etiquette was influential beyond the genre, however. The values connected with the meal as defined in the philosophical tradition provided a standard for discussions of meal etiquette in a variety of other forms and genres, ranging from the statutes of clubs and associations to the rules for Christian worship outlined by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14. What especially connects this data with the symposium tradition is the way in which the rules for banquet behavior are based in ethical principles that are parallel to those of the philosophical tradition.

Traditional entertainment at the symposium was provided by a flute girl or by party games, such as kottobos, or dramatic presentations, or by even more prurient activities. But the philosophical symposium, as described in the symposium literary tradition, centered its banquet entertainment on enlightened philosophical discourse. From this tradition, there developed variations in a number of contexts, especially in the Jewish and Christian traditions, in which discourse on the law or the Biblical tradition was designated as the appropriate topic for table fellowship gatherings.

Here is found the foundation for early Christian worship. Early Christians met in homes, hosted by those who served as patrons of the Christian community. The dining room is the one area in the ancient house where one offered hospitality to one's guests, that is to say, hospitality took place at table.

Consequently, early Christians met and worshipped at table, and when they did so, they utilized the already existing patterns for the form and ideology of the meal.

The banquet also provided the ideology for social boundaries. For clubs and associations, and similar groups such as the Essenes at Qumran, the boundaries of the community were defined by membership at the table. To be expelled from the table was to be expelled from the community. Such groups often had membership rolls and dues to indicate membership boundaries. The Essenes had even stricter boundary markers, including purificatory rites before entrance into the “pure meal.” But the experience of community formation and solidarity was when the community was gathered at table. Similarly, the New Testament texts are imbued with references to the boundary-making function of the table, from Paul’s discussions of the distinctions between “the table of the Lord” and “the table of demons” to the elaborate development of the literary motif of the boundary of the table in the gospels.

To share bread and wine together at a formal banquet was considered a powerful form of social bonding. Plutarch spoke in the highest terms of the bonds created by the shared wine bowl. His words are echoed by Paul who spoke of the sharing of bread and wine as the act that created the one body, that is to say, it was a community-creating ritual. The power of the ritual was not contained in the essence of the bread or wine, but in the context of the meal and the accompanying ritual by which it was shared. Indeed, it was in the context of the meal that the earliest Christians experienced the bonding event that made

them into a fictive family, in which they could call one another brothers and sisters and think of themselves as part of the family of God. In this sense the meal became the means for community formation, or, to put it differently, the theology of community came to be intertwined with and brought to experience by the ritual.

The meal provided a resource for elaboration on social stratification versus social equality. On the one hand, the meal was built around the social stratification of the day, whereby each individual was assigned a position according to rank. On the other hand, there was an inherent pull toward equality at the banquet dating from at least the time of Homer, and this was remarked on in great detail in the philosophical discourses as well as in popular morality, as evidenced in satire. The meal was an occasion when the outside world was to be set aside and a new community of equals to be established. Indeed, significant components of meal ideology, most especially the etiquette or social obligation at the meal, required that equality be present. Without the aura of equality, it could not be a proper meal. And so, like yin and yang, there was a constant debate between the two opposite values of social stratification and social equality. Early Christian groups joined this debate and utilized the resources from banquet ideology to develop their own discourse on these themes.

The philosophical discourse on behavior at the meal, based in such ethical principles as friendship and pleasure, was quite complex and influential across a wide spectrum of the ancient world. In essence, one was to conduct oneself in

such a way as to think of the other first and put the good of the community first. The principles for such behavior were based on the idealized proper meal. Since the meal was an occasion in which the community was the focus, behavior was defined according to that which enhanced the community as a whole. Categories such as friendship and pleasure, both basic components of the proper banquet, were invoked as the basis for appropriate behavior. The ideology of social obligation at the banquet became the foundation for all banquet rules of order, from clubs and associations to Ben Sira to Paul. It was a prime component of social ethics discourse per se, since it was a primary and singular context in which the principal ethical category, friendship, functioned. Paul's ethical discourse was also primarily about social ethics, and his theology of community followed the logic of the friendship discourse in philosophical ethics.

Another basic "value" connected with the banquet is what I have called festive joy. As a *value* connected with the meal, it defined behavior as well. That is to say, one should conduct oneself in such a way as to enhance the "festive joy" of the community as a whole. This category shows up especially in meals connected with religious festivals and is viewed there as a prime religious value, as a gift of the god. It is paralleled in the ancient Biblical definition of the festival meal in which one was commanded to "rejoice before the Lord." It can be seen as a parallel term to "pleasure" in philosophical discourse.

The category of festive joy is also represented in the Jewish and Christian tradition by the messianic banquet tradition. In this tradition the joys of the end-time are symbolized as a great and bountiful banquet. For example, in the

Gospels, whenever Jesus dined, the messianic banquet lay somewhere in the background. One of the more interesting meals of Jesus is the wedding feast at Cana, found only in John's gospel. What is remarkable about the story is what the miracle consists of. What Jesus does by changing water into wine is, in effect, to guarantee that the festivities will continue, and for a long time too, considering how much wine is provided. The value being reinforced here is the festive nature of the messianic banquet.

The banquet as social institution provided a social form, an ideology, and a literary model for a rich and ubiquitous banquet tradition. If we apply this model to the issue of Christian origins and ask the question, "Why did early Christians gather at table," the answer is simple. Early Christians gathered at table because that is what groups in the ancient world did. Christians were simply following a pattern found throughout their world. And in following that pattern, early Christian communities were being formed sociologically and theologically by table ritual and banquet ideology.