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# TOWARD A TYPOLOGY OF ROMAN PUBLIC FEASTING

JOHN F. DONAHUE



*Abstract.* The categories associated with modern French commensality help to illuminate various forms of Roman public dining, most notably, meals linked to events of the life cycle and religious festivals, as well as those sponsored by *collegia* and by the emperor himself. A comparative approach of this sort brings into sharper focus the nature of this social practice by underscoring the propensity of meals in the ancient world both to unite and to separate diners by social rank.

## INTRODUCTION

THE PURPOSE OF THIS ESSAY is to examine Roman public feasting during the Principate (where the sources are most plentiful) within the context of modern typologies of commensality in order to understand more fully the nature of this ancient social practice. The study of food has attracted much scholarly attention over the past decade. In the field of classical studies alone, much useful work has been done on upper-class dining and social relations, food in Roman literature and art, and in the related areas of the Roman food-supply system, public distributions, and food crises.<sup>1</sup> Even so, while certain types of Roman feasts, such as the formal dinner (*cena*) and public banquet (*epulum*, *convivium publicum*) have received treatment,<sup>2</sup> little attempt has been made to study Roman

<sup>1</sup> The bibliography on food and dining is too vast to be included here; instead, the works below represent the most useful studies of specific areas. On upper-class dining and social relations, see D'Arms 1984, 327–48; food in literature: Gowers 1993; Hudson 1993, 204–19; art: Dunbabin, 1993, 132, fig. 19 (Bardo mosaic of a feast in progress; for its identification as an *epulum*, see Slater, 1991, 136, and n. 102); Dunbabin 1999, 26–27 (for a mosaic depicting food remains, probably second century C.E.); food supply system: Aldrete and Mattingly 1999, 171–204; food and money distributions: Mrozek 1987; van Berchem 1975; food crises: Garnsey 1990, 126–46; Garnsey 1988.

<sup>2</sup> On the formal *cena*, see D'Arms 1990, 308–20; on the *epulum*, see, e.g., Pudliszewski 1992, 69–76. See also Dupont 1999, 113–27.

public banquets in a way that will bring them into sharper focus by explaining not only their form but also their deeper social function. The approach examined here has the advantages of weaving a wide cross section of Roman *testimonia* into a coherent (if imperfect) framework of festal typologies, while using a cross-cultural approach that can enrich our understanding of the ancient evidence.

Specifically, I will examine Roman public feasting in light of the typologies recently offered by Claude Grignon.<sup>3</sup> A sociologist with research interests in the food habits of modern France, Grignon has proposed categories into which various forms of French dining can be placed. Based largely on the recognition that the sharing of food inevitably leads to the forming of social relationships, which, in turn, help to determine the morphology of a particular dining experience, his analysis offers a useful starting point for exploring various types of Roman feasting as well.

At the same time, it is necessary to note some important qualifications. First, Grignon's focus is limited to modern France. The result is a work that is "probably oriented (and limited) by my own preoccupations."<sup>4</sup> Consequently, any larger connections to be made must be drawn from other times and cultures. Second, as a sociologist, Grignon is primarily interested in studying processes of interaction and patterns of collective behavior; he is less concerned with my present objective of fitting the dining experience into a larger historical framework, as a classicist or ancient historian might be. Even so, his emphases have much to offer in a Roman context and will receive careful consideration in the analysis to follow. Third, Grignon has appealed to his colleagues in other disciplines, historians and anthropologists, to "criticize and broaden" his analysis.<sup>5</sup> The present essay will attempt to take a step in this direction, with the ultimate goal of underscoring the important place of the public feast in Roman daily life.

## SOCIAL MORPHOLOGY AND TERMINOLOGY

Before I examine the proposed typologies, I want to make two preliminary points. First, Grignon closely links commensality, the act of consum-

<sup>3</sup> See Grignon 2001, 23–33. For a fuller discussion of much of the evidence for Roman public feasting cited in support of Grignon's typologies in this paper, see Donahue 2004.

<sup>4</sup> See Grignon 2001, 25.

<sup>5</sup> See Grignon 2001.

ing food and drink together, with pre-existing social groups. According to this view, a given society comprises any number of such groups, which, in turn, are typically based on diverse criteria: age, gender or ethnicity; voluntary associations that are religious or political in nature; lineage or local origin; and, status or position within the social hierarchy. Furthermore, the multiplicity and diversity of these groups directly account for the wide variety of festal forms observable in any culture; hence, we have the presence of family dinners, meals that cluster around certain holidays or events of the life cycle, and meals open only to certain exclusive groups. As Grignon sees it then, the study of commensality is really about the study of “social morphology” in any given society.<sup>6</sup> In other words, in determining a particular typology of festal expression, we need to look at groups.

On the surface, this may strike the reader as rather self-evident. After all, how can one talk about sharing the table without talking about a group? It is in a Roman context, however, where this characterization becomes especially pertinent. Collectivist activities, after all, were a defining feature of the Romans, who routinely bathed and exercised, watched spectacles, and transacted business in each other’s company. As we shall see in greater detail below, the Roman feast reveals a similar emphasis, as it was able both to bring people together in the Roman world and to amplify social differences among the diners. This set of circumstances is critical to understanding the dynamics of the Roman feast and, when examined in conjunction with elements such as the time, place, and participants of a particular eating event, it greatly enhances our understanding of the nature of social relations in the ancient world.<sup>7</sup>

Another issue is the distinction between commensality and conviviality. Grignon views the latter as the “manifestation of euphoria” that can accompany group eating, not as something synonymous with commensality itself. According to this interpretation, conviviality must be understood as the actual *result* of commensality, even if it is often times the more interesting and colorful of the two activities. In essence, it is simply a by-product of the larger process of sharing food and drink, with its characteristic emphasis on internal hierarchies and social groupings. Grignon argues that the two terms must not be confused, as is often the case.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See Grignon 2001, 24–25.

<sup>7</sup> On time, place, participants, etc., see Farb and Armelagos 1980, 4.

<sup>8</sup> See Grignon 2001, 24.

Although Grignon offers no exempla to underscore this claim, it is instructive to assess it within a Roman context. Here, what is most striking is the fact that, as in many modern instances, the Romans, too, sometimes displayed a certain imprecision over festal terminology. A simple case in point would be the apparent overlap (and even interchangeability) in meaning between *convivium*, the Latin term for a festive gathering, and *epulum*, the most common term for feast, seen most often in the usage of *convivium publicum* and *epulum/epulum publicum*. A further complicating factor is that terms such as these appear most frequently in epigraphic form within honorary and dedicatory inscriptions, where they tend to be used formulaically with few or no accompanying details. As a result, it is often difficult to distinguish one type of meal from another, or even whether a term signifies a meal or a cash handout to purchase a meal.<sup>9</sup> While the Romans may have been aware of shades of meaning among such terms, from a modern perspective one is hard pressed to detect substantive differences, and we are inevitably led to wonder if the ancient writers employed such terms interchangeably to designate meals that were essentially similar. When assessed in light of the Roman evidence, Grignon's observations about imprecision over festal terminology suggest that we are dealing not with an isolated modern phenomenon but one that persists across time and cultures and that we must remain mindful of the distinctions—as well as the possible ambiguities—among the terms for different kinds of festal activity.

In turning to the proposed typologies, we find five categories of dining: (1) institutional, (2) domestic, (3) exceptional, (4) segregative, and (5) transgressive. Institutional commensality, which Grignon associates with hospitals, nursing homes, barracks, jails, convents, and boarding houses, does not readily fit with the Roman evidence, while Roman domestic commensality, linked to family and private life, falls outside of our purview. Rather, I wish to focus on the latter three categories, since they more readily find analogues in the Roman evidence. Here, we shall be dealing primarily with public meals, that is, those to which the *populus* at large or specifically designated groups from the community were invited.<sup>10</sup> This survey will encompass meals across a broad spectrum of settings and circumstances and, at the same time, confirm the function of the shared meal both to unite and to classify its celebrants by social rank in the Roman world (a key component of modern typologies as well).

<sup>9</sup> On the issue of meals versus cash handouts, see Slater 2000, 107–22.

<sup>10</sup> Of course, the question of public and private in the Roman world is quite complex, meriting further treatment than can be reasonably offered here. For a fuller discussion, see Riggsby 1997, 36–56; more generally, Wallace-Hadrill 1994.

## EXCEPTIONAL COMMENSALITY

*Meals Associated with Events of the Life Cycle*

Group eating has long been associated with ritual ceremonies of the life cycle.<sup>11</sup> Among the modern evidence, such occasions include Christmas, New Year's Day, or Easter meals, as well as celebration meals for births, comings of age, marriages, and funerals. Here, too, we find those meals associated with the world of work—occasions such as meals or parties to celebrate promotions or departures.<sup>12</sup> But while Grignon restricts this “intensive and remarkable commensality” to the extended family and their friends,<sup>13</sup> the Romans frequently attached a public aspect to these sorts of feasts that was perfectly consistent with the larger scheme of Roman social relations during the Principate. We see this in the coming-of-age ceremony (at which boys assumed the *toga virilis*), most notably when Octavian provided a festival for the citizenry at public expense, or, for the same type of occasion, when a certain priest of Tiberius provided a more modest repast of pastry and sweet wine (*crustulum et mulsum*) to the *populus* of Surrentum.<sup>14</sup> Marriages, too, were linked with public feasting (*cena nuptialis*). When Elagabalus married in the third century C.E., he invited the entire population of the city to drink freely.<sup>15</sup> Closely related to this ceremony was the birthday (*dies natalis*) of the emperor, on which occasion the *fratres Arvales* offered a sacrifice and feasted. That the larger *populus* feasted, too, is evident in Augustus' enactment of 12 B.C.E., which allowed unmarried men and women, who had been previously excluded, to partake in banquets on his birthday.<sup>16</sup>

And then there is death. We note especially the public funeral

<sup>11</sup> On ritual ceremonies of the life cycle, see Myerhoff 1982, 109; Cressy 1997; in a Roman context, see D'Arms 1984, 337.

<sup>12</sup> See Grignon 2001, 27–28.

<sup>13</sup> Grignon 2001, 27.

<sup>14</sup> On Octavian, see Dio Cass. 48.34; priest of Tiberius: *CIL* 10.688; for similar evidence, see *AE* 1994.345.

<sup>15</sup> On Elagabalus, see Dio Cass. 79.9. Equally significant is the *cena aditalis*, a meal offered by a priest upon assuming office. See Macrobius *Sat.* 3.13.10–12 and Taylor 1942, 385–412. The extravagance of this meal is well documented. Varro (*R.* 3.6.6) records that the orator Quintus Hortensius served peacocks for the first time on this occasion, and Seneca (*Ep.* 95.41) remarks that this *cena* could cost a million sesterces even for the stingiest of men. This sum need not be taken at face value, of course; nonetheless, the sentiment is revealing.

<sup>16</sup> On the *fratres Arvales* in general, see Scheid 1990a, 1990b; Beard 1985, 114–62; Syme 1980; on Augustus's enactment of 12 B.C.E., see Dio Cass. 54.30.5.

(*funus publicum*), a popular occasion for public feasts and games and, as a consequence, a tool to increase aristocratic competition and power. More than two hundred inscriptions and a handful of literary sources record public funerals in Rome and the West.<sup>17</sup> The evidence goes at least as far back as 328–27 B.C.E., beginning with a *visceratio*, a distribution of meat from a sacrificial carcass.<sup>18</sup> Over time, the benefactions for the *populus* increased, and the custom continued throughout the Republic and into the Principate, when such funerals were restricted to the emperor and members of his family. In this context, we must also include meals related to the *dies violaris* (day of violets) or the *dies rosalis* (day of roses). Named for the memorial flowers left on graves, these occasions typically involved an annual family gathering to remember a departed member. They took on a public aspect, however, when an individual established an endowment to provide a public feast each year on the anniversary of the deceased.<sup>19</sup>

In all this evidence, feasting underscores the relationship between benefactor and beneficiary, whether it is the interaction between the emperor and the urban *populus* or a wealthy patron and his townsmen. The primary motive of such benefactions was not public charity (although this was often the result of such largess) but the continual need to confirm publicly one's status. These occasions of the life cycle provided a convenient setting for fulfilling such aims. This is not to suggest, however, that these occasions completely lost their private aspect. But what becomes clear is the way in which these types of meals were monopolized by the emperor at Rome<sup>20</sup> and, following his lead, by elites in the surrounding municipalities.

### *Meals Associated with Religious Festivals*

Within this sphere of exceptional commensality we must also include feasts linked with religious ceremonies. As was true in Greece, Roman religion was always more concerned with integrating its rituals within the

<sup>17</sup> For the most recent study, see Wesch-Klein 1993. In general, *RE Suppl.* 3, s.v. “*funus publicum*,” cols. 530–32.

<sup>18</sup> On the *visceratio*, see Kajava 1998, 109–31.

<sup>19</sup> *Collegia* were especially popular as beneficiaries. See, e.g., *CIL* 5.2176, 11.126, 11.132 for instances related to the *dies rosalis*.

<sup>20</sup> Of course, this is true of the emperor's role in alimentary programs as well. See Garnsey 1968, 367–81; *OCD* 1996, s.v. “*alimenta*,” 63.

broader patterns of everyday life than with the personal fulfillment of its followers. We find this to be the case in the various celebrations of the annual calendar, celebrations that offer great insight into the intersection of eating and ritual in Roman society. Even so, with regard to banquets at these celebrations, the Roman evidence is less enlightening than we would like.

Feasts connected with modern holidays such as Christmas and Easter recall several Roman celebrations offered on similar occasions throughout the year. No fewer than eight festivals of the Roman religious calendar included feasts among their activities, although of these, only two, the Saturnalia and the Compitalia, offered feasts that were truly open to the public at large. Opening with a great sacrifice at the temple of Saturn, the Saturnalia concluded with a banquet (*convivium publicum*) for all.<sup>21</sup> The Compitalia included a feast whose Roman version during the early Principate consisted of a procession, sacrifice, and *ludi scaenici* hosted by each of the city's neighborhood districts. The banquet itself was characterized as a "greasy crossroads feast" with "unappetizing fare" and "slimy water," a vivid reminder of its modest plebeian origins.<sup>22</sup>

Several additional Roman religious festivals included banquets that were restricted to certain political or social groups. Two of the most ancient and widely recognized of all Roman festivals, the *Ludi Romani* and *Ludi Plebeii*, included not only processions, sacrifices, and games but also the *epulum Iovis*, a feast in honor of Jupiter.<sup>23</sup> This was celebrated on the Ides by the *septemviri epulonum*, a special class of priests, who sacrificed purified oxen in the presence of the images of Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva resting on a couch (*lectisternium*). The accompanying banquet was restricted to senators, who shared in the feast by virtue of

<sup>21</sup> On the Saturnalia, see Beard, North, and Price 1998, 50, 80, 261 (vol. 1), 124–26 (vol. 2); Scullard 1981, 205–207. This celebration was also marked by temporary role reversal in which, for example, masters and slaves traded social roles. This inversion of social rank persisted in the post-classical world as well. See Stallybrass and White 1993, 284–92; Babcock 1978.

<sup>22</sup> On the Compitalia, see [Verg.] *Catal.* 13.27–30 (for text and commentary, see Westendorp Boerma 1963, 2:73–92). Augustus reorganized the festival in 7 B.C.E. as part of his program of religious restoration at Rome. See Beard, North, and Price 1998, 184–86 (vol. 1); also, Liebeschuetz 1979, 71.

<sup>23</sup> On the *Ludi Romani*, see Beard, North, and Price 1998, 40–41, 66–67 (vol. 1), 137–39 (vol. 2); Scullard 1981, 183–87; for the *Ludi Plebeii*, see Beard, North, and Price 1998, 40–41, 66–67 (vol. 1); Scullard 1981, 196–98.



having the “right of eating at public expense” (*ius publice epulandi*), a significant entitlement.<sup>24</sup>

A similar tendency to equate eating with political status is seen in the *Feriae Latinae*, a moveable feast in honor of Jupiter Latiaris, originally celebrated by the Latin League on the Alban Mount. Representatives from the forty-seven member cities took part in the festival and sacrifices over which the Romans exercised hegemony. According to our sources, each member city received one bull, which was to be sacrificed in common.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, each city brought different graded portions of food to the common feast while receiving differential portions of meat from the sacrificial bull. Furthermore, the more powerful cities received larger portions of meat than lesser members. A city that had shrunk to political insignificance could be denied a portion altogether.<sup>26</sup> Clearly, the *Feriae Latinae* featured both inclusion and hierarchical ordering, as it celebrated the political unity of the Latin League but also, through the careful controlling of food, the differences in rank among its members.

Exclusive dining marked two other well-known feasts, the *Ludi Megalenses* and *Ludi Cereales*. The *Ludi Megalenses*, held from 4 to 10 April to commemorate the arrival of the Magna Mater in Rome in 204 B.C.E., was noteworthy for the mutual exchange of hospitality and lavish meals (*mutitationes*) among patrician families.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, the *Ludi Cereales* of 12 to 19 April, which celebrated the return of Persephone to earth, also included *mutitationes* (19 April), but they were available only to the plebs. The festal details remain sketchy, but we can suppose that the *Ludi Cereales* was clearly an opportunity for plebeians to enjoy their own exclusive feasts in the same way as did their patrician superiors earlier in the same month.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> On the *ius publice epulandi*, see Suet. *Aug.* 35.

<sup>25</sup> Dion. Hal. 4.49.3.

<sup>26</sup> In general, see Scullard 1981, 111–15; Wissowa 1912, 35, 109–10; Latte 1960, 144–46; Lincoln 1985, 15–16.

<sup>27</sup> On *mutitationes*, see D’Arms 1984, 335–336 and n. 25. In general, see Beard, North, and Price 1998, 97, 102 (fig. 2.6 [d]), 138, 164 (vol. 1); 65, [Calendar from Praeneste], 68, [Calendar of Filocalus] (vol. 2); Scullard, 1981, 97–100.

<sup>28</sup> The *Ludi Cereales*, *Ludi Romani*, *Plebeiï*, and *Ludi Megalenses* all survived at least into the mid-fourth century. See Salzman 1990, 120–30. We might also include in this category of restrictive public banqueting the Feast of the Ovens, or Fornacalia, a moveable, mid-winter celebration held not long after the Saturnalia. Although many of the details are obscure, it involved bread baking and feasting among the *curiae* of Rome, each of which had its own assembly hall. In this respect, the Fornacalia recalls the meals of the deme or phratry in Greek society. See Scullard 1981, 73; Latte 1960, 143.

Finally, public feasting in a ritual context cannot be entirely separated from drinking together in large numbers, especially since both activities were similar in their desire for camaraderie. At the feast of Anna Perenna on 15 March, plebeians celebrated the traditional Roman New Year by singing, drinking, and dancing near the Tiber. Here, men and women typically drank as many cups of wine as the number of years they prayed to live, a practice that surely must have led to the celebration getting out of hand from time to time.<sup>29</sup> The Parilia, similar to the Compitalia, began as a rural feast that likewise ended up in Rome, where it was especially known for drunken crowds jumping over heaps of burning hay. The meaning of this practice is not fully understood, but the inclusion of a large, open-air meal as part of the celebration remains at least a possibility among scholars, and at least one modern interpretation has argued for celebrations organized by the thirty *curiae* of the city.<sup>30</sup>

Two additional festivals have connections with group drinking, although there is less evidence for them than for the festivals mentioned above. The festival of Fors Fortuna, held on 24 June at the temple of Fortuna, was thought to appeal to plebeians and slaves, who drank upon flower-strewn riverboats. The Vinalia of 23 April may well have involved sampling of the previous year's wine harvest, thereby providing a ready-made opportunity for general feasting and drinking.<sup>31</sup>

In sum, the Roman religious calendar offered a rich diversity of commensal opportunities. Feasting or drinking occurred in the name of various divinities and at different places and times throughout the year. What is equally apparent is that, however much these festivals retained their religious character,<sup>32</sup> they placed an important emphasis on the sharing of food and/or drink. Furthermore, it is readily apparent that the Romans preferred to dine in distinct groups, whether priest, senator,

<sup>29</sup> See Ov. *Fast.* 3.523–32. The festival may also have been associated with sexual excess, perhaps indicated by Martial's characterization of Anna's grove as "delighting in virgin blood." See Sullivan 1991, 66, n. 25, and Harmon 1978, 1461, and n. 119.

<sup>30</sup> See Beard, North, and Price 1998, 174–76 (vol. 1), 116–19 (vol. 2); Scullard 1981, 103–105. On the possibility of a public meal, see Ogilvie 1970, 81–82.

<sup>31</sup> On the festival of Fors Fortuna, see Scullard 1981, 155–56. On the Vinalia, see Beard, North, and Price 1998, 45 (vol. 1) and designation on various calendars at 63–67 (vol. 2); Scullard, 1981, 106–108.

<sup>32</sup> On the religious nature of the sacrificial banquet throughout the Principate, see Scheid 1985, 193–206. For the traditional interpretation that these ceremonies became popularized (and hence, less religious) over time, see Daremberg and Saglio 1875–1919, s.v. "epula," 736–38.

plebeian, patrician, or *curia* member. Most notably, this feature of dining by groups persisted outside of religious festivals as well, as the evidence to follow will confirm.

## SEGREGATIVE COMMENSALITY

### *The Meals of Roman Collegia*

In sociological terms, segregative commensality is characterized as a means of setting up or restoring a group by limiting its membership to certain individuals through the act of sharing a meal. In some respects, this can often be a kind of therapy, a way for a group to gain self-identity, to keep tabs on its members, and even to confirm internal divisions or hierarchies. By its very nature, such an arrangement also strengthens the “We” against the “Not We,” since the decision to invite some to a meal necessarily involves excluding others. The sharing of food contributes to this process by allowing for group exaltation, what we might commonly refer to as “blowing off some steam” or “dropping one’s guard.” Enhancing this feeling of euphoria is the satisfaction in knowing that others, i.e., the excluded, are “missing out” on something special.<sup>33</sup>

This kind of dining is most common in highly class-bound societies, the most striking example being modern India, where each caste is obligated to protect the purity of its food, even if this means that the members hide themselves while eating. Class-based societies, while less extreme than the caste-based model, also offer ample opportunities for restrictive eating, most apparent in the club-restaurant meals restricted to the upper elite of the central government, national research institutes, and corporations in France.<sup>34</sup> In America, too, we can observe this phenomenon in meals served at country clubs and social clubs, in which membership (and hence dining) is determined by wealth and status. We might even go so far as to include as less status-bound, but still segregative, the meals served in a college dining hall, especially in British universities or at most American faculty clubs and student dining halls, where faculty eat a more appetizing meal than the students.

When we turn to the ancient evidence, the segregative model would seem to fit especially well with those meals enjoyed by the many *collegia* of the Roman world. Comprised of free men and/or slaves and com-

<sup>33</sup> Grignon 2001, 28–29.

<sup>34</sup> Grignon 2001, 29–30.

monly centered around a specific deity or trade, the *collegium* met a strong desire for exclusivity in Roman society among the lower orders. Additionally, these clubs included their own benefactors (*patroni*) and administrative hierarchies, thereby allowing them to imitate in many ways the social and administrative organization of the larger society.<sup>35</sup>

To a great extent, the most distinguishing feature of these *collegia* was communal eating and drinking. A primary example is the *lex collegii* of the *cultores Dianae et Antinoi* from Lanuvium (C.E. 136), many of whose rules directly address banqueting on festal occasions. Here, we find that festal requirements are carefully detailed. For example, each supervising *magister* was required to provide “good wine,” bread worth two *asses* for all the members, sardines, a single place setting, and warm water and utensils. Such specificity confirms the importance of the communal meal among groups of this sort.<sup>36</sup>

More revealing are the feasts associated with the college of Aesculapius and Hygia. The relevant text, dated to 153 C.E., records seven annual gatherings, a number that does not even include other likely feasts, such as those that celebrated the birthday of a patron or that were provided at a college’s monthly business meeting (*conventus*).<sup>37</sup> Of the seven gatherings, five record food distributions for banquets. Among these were the bread, wine, and *sportulae* (presumably cash to purchase additional items) received by members on two funerary feast days, the *dies violaris* of 22 March and the *dies rosalis* of 11 May. The *Cara Cognatio*, the day of the family, or love feast, of 22 February, and the *natalis collegii* on 8 November also involved the distribution of bread, wine, and *sportulae*. Additionally, the *quinquennalis* (leader of the college) offered an annual *cena* to the membership, although it seems that a *sportula* could be substituted instead.<sup>38</sup> Most striking in this evidence is the importance of

<sup>35</sup> For the political nature of Roman *collegia*, see Cotter 1996, 74–89. The slaves of the emperor and of private households also formed *collegia*. See, e.g., *CIL* 6.10237.

<sup>36</sup> *CIL* 14.2112 = *ILS* 7212; Waltzing 1895–1900, 3.642–46. For a complete translation in English (reduced to extracts in the third edition, 1990), see Lewis and Reinhold 1966, 2.273–75.

<sup>37</sup> *CIL* 6.10234 = *ILS* 7213; Waltzing 1895–1900, 3.268–71; Gordon 1958–65, 2.90–94, n. 217; Gordon 1983, 148–50, with text also in Appendix 2.

<sup>38</sup> In chronological order, the feasts included: (1) 8 January: *strenae*; (2) 22 February (*Cara Cognatio*): *sportulae, panis, vinum*; (3) 14 March: *cena* furnished by *quinquennalis* Ofilius Hermes; (4) 22 March (*dies violaris*): *sportulae, panis, vinum*; (5) 11 May (*dies rosalis*): *sportulae, panis, vinum*; (6) 19 September (*dies natalis Antonini Pii*): *sportulae*; and (7) 8 November (*natalis collegii*): *sportulae, panis, vinum*.

rank in determining the amount of food and money received by each of the college's sixty members. Typically, the *quinquennialis*, along with the patrons, received the largest amount of food or money. Next came the dues-exempt members (*immunes*) and then the *curatores*. Rank-and-file members (*populi*) received the smallest shares.

Elsewhere, the evidence is quite similar: seven annual feasts for the ebony and ivory workers; three for the fishermen and workers of the bed and banks of the Tiber; five for the college of Silvanus at Lucania; six for the funerary college of Diana and Antinous at Lanuvium.<sup>39</sup> In all these instances, we can suppose that the administrative procedures were similar, as was the simple desire for fellowship and escape from the tedium of daily life through the sharing of food and drink.

Given this mindset, these gatherings sometimes breached the boundaries of decorum, a reality evident in the punishments recorded for bad behavior among the festal celebrants.<sup>40</sup> More importantly, these banquets provided a setting not only for social interaction but also for creating hierarchies that could not be found outside of the *collegium*. Only in this context, for example, could a common cult worshipper become a leader and confirm his status through his access to the largest amount of food and drink. As this type of evidence suggests, food played an undeniable role in shaping and reinforcing Roman attitudes toward rank and status. As both a perishable good and critical commodity, food was readily open to control and manipulation of all sorts. In this respect, it was both a unique and highly effective substance whose potential for purposes beyond the simply nutritive was well understood by the Romans.

## TRANSGRESSIVE COMMENSALITY

### *The Cenae of Domitian*

The final category to consider is transgressive commensality. Characterized by Grignon as the opposition between social groups and the borders that separate them, this type of feasting both recognizes these borders and allows them to be crossed temporarily in order to provide a relationship of exchange between parties of different social or economic status.

<sup>39</sup> On the ebony and ivory workers, see *CIL* 6.33885; on fishermen and divers of the Tiber, see *CIL* 6.1872; on Silvanus, see *CIL* 10.444; on Diana and Antinous, see *CIL* 14.2112.

<sup>40</sup> For ancient criticism of this type of behavior, see Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 2.145–46.

It is precisely by crossing such borders that transgressive commensality maintains them.<sup>41</sup> Extreme examples of this form of dining are typical of hierarchical societies. They might include the “invitation au chateau” (invitation to the manor) or a politician lunching with workers at the factory. In modern sociological terms, three features are common to this activity: (1) the asymmetry of the relationship between the superior and the inferior diners; (2) the need for the dominant host to be recognizable among his guests, offering himself in the process as a “gift” to the diners for a certain period of time; and (3) the requirement that the dominant party eat the same food as everybody else in order to show that he recognizes common needs and tastes.<sup>42</sup>

Given these features, this type of commensality is especially characteristic of monarchical societies, where the social and political gulf between ruler and subjects is vast. The most extreme and ultimately tragic example of this reality was the coronation banquet of Nicholas and Alexandra in nineteenth-century imperial Russia, where the royal couple dined extravagantly among their seven thousand guests but were well removed from them. The populace, prohibited from entering the palace, was entitled to drafts of beer at a military training field, only to die by the thousands in a stampede that followed rumors of diminishing supplies.<sup>43</sup>

In a Roman context, transgressive commensality finds its fullest expression in the imperially sponsored formal dinner, the *cena*.<sup>44</sup> Especially favored by Domitian in the later first century, the *cena* is praised by the likes of the court poet Statius for its lavish food, social mix of diners, and the active presence of the emperor himself. Quite rightly, Statius’ exuberance about Domitianic court life has attracted its share of scholarly skepticism.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to examine this meal in light of Grignon’s criteria for what it can tell us about transgressive commensality among the Romans and the nature of social interaction on such occasions.

In the first place, Domitian’s feasts illuminate quite dramatically Grignon’s first feature of transgressive commensality, which calls for an

<sup>41</sup> See Grignon 2001, 30–31.

<sup>42</sup> Grignon 2001, 31.

<sup>43</sup> For an account of this tragedy, see Massie 1967, 56–57.

<sup>44</sup> The meal is sometimes referred to as a *cena recta*, a term whose origin and meaning are not entirely clear. See D’Arms 1990, 309.

<sup>45</sup> See Stat. *Silv.* 1.6.43–50; on scholarly skepticism, see D’Arms 1990, 310, and Millar 1992, 79.

asymmetrical relationship between the host and his guests. In the first place, by the later first century C.E., emperors' feasts were nothing new. As with so many things, they had begun with Augustus, with the ancient sources tending to equate the tone and tenor of such feasts with the character and personality of the emperor who sponsored them. In this setting, social distancing was inevitable. Nevertheless, this aspect was especially pronounced under Domitian, who not only preferred to be addressed as *Dominus et Deus* ("Master and God"), but also arranged the dining room (*triclinium*) of the *Domus Flavia* with an eye towards underscoring the realities of social asymmetry. This latter feature is most apparent in the disposition of the flat apse of the dining room's end wall, where the emperor himself either sat or reclined on a *triclinium*, well removed from but still in full sight of his hundreds of guests. By using the apse in this way, that is, by personalizing it with his presence, Domitian ensured that his feasts took on the character of a theatrical performance in which his guests became both spectators and participants at the same time.<sup>46</sup>

This arrangement dramatically emphasized the distance between the emperor and his guests, both in physical and social terms. The grandeur of the *triclinium* itself surely enhanced this reality.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, by positioning himself in this way, Domitian became immediately recognizable among his guests, thereby fulfilling Grignon's second feature of transgressive commensality as mentioned above. It seems then that already by the later first century C.E., the process that would eventually lead to the complete sequestering of the monarch at table had taken root in the shimmering opulence of the Palatine palace.

Finally, while the *cenae* of Domitian seem to fulfill Grignon's first two criteria for transgressive commensality, the ancient evidence is much less clear on Grignon's third requirement that all in attendance eat the same food. On the one hand, the ancient sources praise Domitian for inviting all orders of Roman society to eat the same fare at the same

<sup>46</sup> Bek 1983, 90–94.

<sup>47</sup> Statius claimed that the room was "more spacious than an open field" (*Silv.* 4.2.23–24) and allowed guests "to recline together at 1,000 tables" (*Silv.* 4.2.32–33). The height of the dining room itself was also spectacular, with Statius proclaiming that the dome of the palace was so expansive that it appeared to cover a large part of the sky. On this latter aspect, see Coleman (1988) at *Silvae* 4.2, 1.24 (*operti*). Similarly, Martial proclaims the *triclinium* as a place worthy of the gods; see 7.56, 8.36. A recent treatment of the *triclinium*, suggesting the presence of a timber roof 33 meters high, lends perspective to these poetic depictions. See Gibson, DeLaine, and Claridge 1994, 77–87.

table.<sup>48</sup> In fact, based on evidence from elsewhere in the Roman world, it would seem that the social distancing present on these occasions was reinforced by the differences, not the similarities, in festal fare. We witness this most clearly in a feast offered by Domitian on one occasion in the Flavian Amphitheatre, where the upper classes received higher quality fare than the *populus*. Furthermore, Martial confirms this same custom among *cenae* sponsored by wealthy private Romans in which, as a humble *cliens*, he was denied the oysters, mushrooms, turbot, and turtle doves that his social superiors enjoyed.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, similar social distinctions were a part of provincial dining practices as well, as evident in the differences in meals based on rank at various statue dedications and public events in the Roman West.<sup>50</sup>

Much as we witnessed earlier in the instance of *collegia*, the picture at the emperor's table, then, is one of social differentiation reinforced by the manipulation of food. On the other hand, even if the fare differed on these occasions, it did not seem to dim the appeal of banqueting with one's superiors. On the contrary, Suetonius' mention of a wealthy provincial, who once offered 200,000 sesterces for the chance to dine with the emperor Caligula, vividly underscores the value attached to such a meal in the socially competitive world of first-century Rome.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> The relevant passages read as follows: *una vescitur omnis ordo mensa, parvi, femina, plebs, eques, senatus: libertas reverentiam remisit . . .* "Every class eats at one table, children, woman, plebeian, knight, senate: freedom has relaxed the sense of reverence . . ." (Stat. *Silv.* 1.6.43–45); *iam se, quisquis is est, inops, beatus, convivam ducis esse gloriatur.* "Now, whoever he is, poor, rich, boasts himself a dinner guest of the emperor" (1.6.49–50).

<sup>49</sup> On Domitian's feast at the Colosseum, see Statius's reference to the "more luxurious fare" delivered by handsome attendants (*Silv.* 1.6.28–34), surely an indication of the food designated for elites. Social distinctions were further underscored, of course, by separate seating sections by class within such venues. See Claridge 1998, 276–83; also, Richardson 1992, s.v. "Amphitheatrum Flavium," 48; Kolendo 1981, 301–15. Similar distinctions prevailed at other entertainments in the Colosseum as well. See Coleman 1990, 44–73. For Martial and inferior fare, see 3.60. Here we have to wonder too, based on the first line of the epigram (*non iam venalis ut ante . . .* "I am no longer on the payroll") if perhaps the poet is someone else's client now, and therefore even less deserving of high-quality food.

<sup>50</sup> See the decurions and their sons at Iuvanum (*CIL* 9.2962) receiving a *cena* while the *plebs* are offered an *epulum*; or at Spolegium (*CIL* 11.4815 = *ILS* 6638), where a bequest of 250,000 sesterces provided an annual public *cena* for the decurions (*in publico cenarent*); other groups on the same occasion were invited only "to eat in public" (*in publico vescerentur*).

<sup>51</sup> Suet. *Cal.* 39.



## CONCLUSION

Commensality, by definition, is based on the collectivist consumption of goods exclusively reserved for members of a group. The typologies examined in this paper help us to categorize this particular brand of collectivist behavior in a manner that confirms its universality while compelling us to look more carefully at some of its most prominent features in a Roman context. To sum up, two points are worth emphasizing.

First, the Romans' or any other festal peoples' behavior tends to confirm the modern sociological observation that recognizes in festal activity the need of establishing and maintaining group identity—in short, of “fitting in.”<sup>52</sup> In the Roman world, this played itself out on any number of public occasions and on several levels—between emperor and his subjects, municipal benefactor and his beneficiaries, or the *quinquennalis* of a *collegium* and his fellow members. This impulse is especially characteristic of hierarchical societies. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the impulse to “fit in” found ready acceptance not only in Rome but throughout the municipalities of the West, which were eager to reduplicate on the local level all that the imperial city had to offer.

Second, it is not so surprising that food played such a prominent role in this social process, given that it simultaneously allows for communal participation and social separation. The Romans recognized this aspect as readily as any other culture, ancient or modern. Thus, they were able to incorporate large-scale feasting among a broad array of collectivist activities that helped to define what it meant to be truly Roman, or more specifically perhaps, what it meant to be truly Roman within the rigid class structure of ancient society.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Grignon 2001, 31.

<sup>53</sup> I wish to thank the editor and anonymous readers for their very helpful comments and suggestions. Any errors, of course, remain my own.

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