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The Eschatological Banquet: Hidden Transcripts in the Funerary Banquet Scenes of the Christian Catacombs

Introduction

One of the most fundamental questions in the examination of any work of Christian art in the pre-Constantinian period is that of the image's relationship to similar images in the broader Greek and Roman context. This question arises in the interpretation of a broad range of images made by Christians from the late second to the early fourth centuries; this is true of the interpretation of the κριοφόρος or 'Good Shepherd,' or the interpretation of the orant, or of Jonah in the mode of Endymion. When confronted with nearly any example of a pre-Constantinian Christian image, questions of continuity and change arise. This paper will focus on one selection of early Christian images, the banquet scenes of the pre-Constantinian Roman catacombs, and their relationship to the long tradition of funerary banquet imagery. Seeking to add to and improve upon the range of interpretive options for these images, this work will propose a new paradigm for viewing these banquet scenes. Using James C. Scott's theory of "hidden transcripts," this paper will contend that the Christian images, while in iconographic continuity with the pagan scenes,

are in fact communicating an eschatological Christian world-view and solidarity in the face of Roman cultural norms and power.

The Evidence and its Problems

Banquet scenes are common in the Christian catacombs of Rome. Even when limited to images that can be dated confidently as pre-Constantinian, the number of banquet scenes extant in the Roman catacombs approaches two dozen.¹ Although the catacomb scenes vary somewhat in their particularities, they all share basic iconographic features that align them with the tradition of banqueting images that prevails in other Roman locations. Typically, the images of the catacombs depict people, both men and women, gathered on chairs, cushions, or couches, oriented to face the viewer. Food is on the table, although occasionally elements that would be expected in pagan images, such as servants or drinking cups, are absent. In a few instances, the servants are called by what seem to be symbolic names—Agape and Irene, Greek for “love” and “peace.” Conspicuously present in the catacomb images are large baskets, containing bread, placed in the foreground of the images.² Despite the sometime absences of drinks and servants, and the presence of the baskets of bread, however, the banqueting scenes of the catacombs are immediately recognizable as belonging to the family of Roman banqueting images. Although the

¹ Katherine M. D. Dunbabin, *The Roman Banquet: Images of Conviviality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 175.

² Since there is no good organized collection of catacomb images, here I rely on the descriptions of Dunbabin and Jastrzebowska. Ibid., 175-76. Elisabeth Jastrzebowska, "Les Scenes De Banquet Dans Les Peintures Et Sculptures Chretiennes Des Iii Et Iv Siecles," *Recherches Augustiniennes XIV*(1979): 8-13.

images have been adapted by Christians, they nevertheless retain many signs of their origins in the broader artistic tradition.³

The question for interpreters, then, has been why banquet imagery should have been taken up by Christians, and why Christians should have changed the imagery in the ways they did. Four main possibilities have been suggested: that they reproduce particular stories from the Christian scriptures, such as the feeding of the five thousand; that the images are a depiction of an actual or imagined funerary banquet held for the deceased; that the images represent a proto-Eucharist or the communal *agapē* meal; and that they depict a future, eschatological banquet held in heaven.⁴ We will briefly consider each of these interpretive schemes, before taking yet another approach to understanding these images that seeks to take account of the best insights of each.

The first possibility for interpretation, that the images reproduce scenes from Christian scriptures such as the multiplication of loaves and fishes, is quite problematic. Depiction of New Testament narratives is rare in the catacombs; nearly all of the images derive from Hebrew Bible stories. Furthermore, there is nothing iconographic to suggest the presence of Jesus in any of these images, and it is difficult to imagine what role text such as “Agape, mix the wine” might play in the telling of a biblical story. This possibility seems unlikely.⁵

³ Jastrzebowska, "Les Scenes De Banquet Dans Les Peintures Et Sculptures Chretiennes Des Iii Et Iv Siecles," 88.

⁴ The history of interpretation can be found in Jastrzebowska, and is well-summarized in Dunbabin. *Ibid.*: 8-13; Dunbabin, *The Roman Banquet: Images of Conviviality*, 177.

⁵ Graydon Snyder suggests that the roots of Christian table fellowship, or the *agapē* meal, lie in the account of the multiplication of loaves and fishes. If this is the case, then it is possible that the images depict both the *agapē* meal (see the paragraph below) and represent an informal account of the multiplication story. If this is so, however, the image is still primarily a depiction of a communal meal,

The second way of interpreting the catacomb banqueting scenes is by understanding them as depictions of the graveside meals known from both pagan and Christian Roman burials.⁶ These meals seem to have been common among Christians in the pre-Constantinian period.⁷ If banqueting was a central feature of funeral activities, and a central feature of the religious life of early Christians, then it is reasonable to assume that funerary images depicting banqueting were associated with the practice. What is less clear is that there is necessarily a relationship between those funerary meals and the banquet scenes in the catacombs. Those scenes seem to depict indoor meals with couches and tables and the like, and not the outdoor *refrigerium* typical of funerary meals. The possibility that the images depict actual funerary meals seems unlikely.

The understanding of the banqueting scenes as proto-Eucharistic is one of the most common interpretations of the images, with the banqueters understood to be recapitulating the Last Supper as presented in the gospels, a view that might be informed by a reading-back into the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th centuries the illustrations of gospel books and mosaics produced in the 5th and 6th centuries, such as *Codex*

and only secondarily a depiction of the multiplication of loaves and fishes, mediated through tradition. Graydon Snyder, *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life before Constantine*, 2nd ed. (Mercer, 2003), 124.

⁶ The funerary banquet tradition includes both banquets accompanying interment and subsequent birthday or anniversary visits. Ramsay MacMullen, *The Second Church: Popular Christianity A.D. 200-400* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 72.

⁷ These banquets were so common by the 4th century that they drew the disapproval of church leaders like Ambrose, who sought to curtail the practice and the pagan connotations it evoked. The practice of funerary banqueting proliferated in the 3rd and 4th centuries, so much that some scholars have begun to see the funerary banquet as the primary religious expression of the great majority of early Christians. Although there is little evidence that banqueting took place inside the catacombs themselves, there is a great deal of evidence that it took place above-ground, in fields and later in the structures that stood above the catacombs. *Ibid.*

Rossanensis.⁸ In popular Christianity up to the 3rd century, however, it was the aÓgaçph meal that held sway as the primary remembrance celebration, not a stand-alone Eucharist, and the frequent presence of fish in the catacomb banquet imagery suggests an full and actual rather than token or symbolic meal.⁹ While the Eucharist would seem to be excluded on iconographic and chronological grounds, reading the images as a form of the aÓgaçph meal does hold some promise, as we will see in a later section.

The final possibility, that the images depict a heavenly banquet, is difficult to assess. The iconography of the images is decidedly this-worldly, with little to suggest that we are witnessing anything other than a typical meal. No divine figures populate the meal, and at first glance there is not much about the furniture, surroundings, food, or clothing to suggest anything other than an earthly gathering.¹⁰ This makes an identification of the catacomb banqueting scenes as “heavenly” banquets unlikely on iconographic grounds. Furthermore, the catacomb images fail to highlight any of the participants as the deceased, and none of the inscriptions typical of catacomb memorials, such as the simple phrase “*in peace*,” as in, “rest in peace,” is present. As we will see, however, these objections to the paintings does not automatically disqualify them as heavenly, and in fact, their

⁸ Codex Rossanensis gloriously illustrates the Last Supper, among other narratives, and its Last Supper has Christ reclining with his disciples in a manner that bears more than a passing resemblance to antique banqueting scenes.

⁹ Hans Leitzmann, *Mass and Lord's Supper: A Study in the History of the Liturgy* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 271-4.

¹⁰ As another possibility, Snyder points to those who see the meals depicted in the catacomb paintings as examples of the “*refrigerium interim*,” the “in-between state” occupying the time between the present and a future, eschatological reality. Snyder, *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life before Constantine*, 125.

mimicry of banqueting scenes current in the broader culture might point the possibility of eschatological settings, if not heavenly settings, after all.

It is these last two possibilities, that the banquet scenes depict an ἀόγαϕ meal and that they depict a heavenly meal, that hold promise when viewed within the rubric of this paper. We will return to these ways of understanding the catacomb images, but first we turn to the work of James Scott to inform our interpretation.

James Scott and the Hidden Transcript of the Subordinate¹¹

In his 1990 book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, James Scott described the relationships between dominant and subordinate groups, particularly as they are expressed in the accounts of those groups' interactions. Scott identified three "transcripts" that comment upon social dynamics and events: the "public transcript", the "hidden transcript" of the dominant group, and the "hidden transcript" of the subordinate group.¹² These transcripts, Scott says, are operative whenever two groups share an environment with an unequal distribution of power. All three transcripts are efforts on the part of one party or the other to express a view of the relationship. Of particular interest to us are the public transcript and the hidden transcript of the subordinate, since these transcripts correspond to important groups in the period of the catacombs.

The public transcript is the account of things as the more powerful party wishes them to seem, without particular regard for "the whole story," which is

¹¹ I am indebted to James Murphy and Micah Saxton for helping me think through this section, and to Saxton for suggesting Scott's work.

¹² James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Transcripts* (Ann Arbor: Edwards Brothers, 1990), 4-5.

“unlikely” to be conveyed.¹³ In the context of a government and its subjects, the public transcript may exist as a monument, coin, edict, official cult, or official mythology. Scott’s public transcript is in operation wherever a powerful party wishes to cast itself as benevolent, necessary, and just. The corollary is that powerful parties are not always in fact benevolent, necessary, and just.

The public transcript is not simply the record of what the powerful say about themselves, however. The subordinate have a role to play in this transcript as well. Their public words and acts will likely reinforce the dominant group’s image of itself. Behind the outward fawning and adherence to the “party line,” however, is often an altogether different understanding of circumstances on the part of the subordinate. Thus, they create for themselves hidden transcripts—hidden, in that they are visible only to the subjugated group, and not to the powerful one, and “transcripts” in that they “represent discourse—gesture, speech, practices”—and here we can add art—“that are ordinarily excluded from the public transcript of subordinates by the exercise of power.”¹⁴ Put simply, the hidden transcript is discourse containing things that the subordinate could not say in front of the dominant. From here, we will analyze depictions of the banquet in terms of these dueling transcripts, and attempt to understand what the ubiquity of this early Christian motif might have meant for both Christians and their Roman dominators.

The Banquet as Public and Private Transcript

Because of the imbalance of power in the relationship between Christians and more normative segments of Roman society, namely the upper classes and

¹³ Ibid., 2.

¹⁴ Ibid., 27.

aristocracy, the conditions required by James Scott's theory of hidden transcripts were in place. One group—normative Roman society—held power over another group—the nascent Christian movement, whose activities were disapproved of and curtailed by the former.

The banquet images under consideration here were all created in the period prior to time Constantine brought some measure of acceptance to the church; they were all, therefore, created in a time when Christians were less than free to express their religion publically. The Christians were already by the end of the first century notorious as offenders of sensibilities and the status quo, and are obvious subordinates. They wielded nearly no power, had few possessions as a group, and faced both official and popular opposition to their religious practices. The dominant group is only slightly more difficult to identify. While the first instinct might be to point to the imperial power structure as the dominant group, in this case it is more useful to think of the dominator as idealized Roman pagan culture—a culture that likely never existed in any pure and unadulterated form, but that nevertheless formed the basis of the Roman self-concept, and of a great many appeals to return to ancient ways by casting out foreign religions. It is this way of thinking—the way of thinking that sought to distill Roman-ness by driving out or marginalizing foreign influences—that was held over the early Christians, and that led to their persecutions in both official and unofficial ways. Of course, Rome could at times be a remarkably open and upwardly mobile society, with avenues to power and prestige for immigrants, slaves, and provincials. It is undeniable, however, that Christians

and other groups found themselves singled out as deviant and even harmful, and it is this dynamic that is instructive in light of Scott's theory.

Having identified the dominant and subordinate groups, we can now turn to their respective transcripts. Texts are not the only kinds of transcripts. Art too is a transcript, particularly in a semi-literate society; art communicates meaning as surely as words, and art too can be manipulated to be "visible" to some and "invisible" to others. This much is clear from an examination of the public transcript that was operative in the Empire at this time, which included a great many non-textual elements, including monuments, coins, sculptures, and the like. The public transcript, which we recall is the agreed-upon account of things when the dominant and subordinate speak to one another, spoke of the genius of Rome, her leadership, and her institutions. The public transcript placed the responsibility and the credit for Rome's success in the hands of divine figures, by this time including the emperors themselves, and demanded fealty to those divinities in exchange for the assurance that things would continue on as they were. The public transcript spoke of an orderly, just, and divinely-sanctioned society, which brought peace and comfort to Rome's citizens.

Banqueting played an important role in this public transcript. Banqueting is notably absent from extant imperial iconography from this period, with no images of an emperor banqueting surviving.¹⁵ There are a number of literary sources that speak of imperial dining, most notably Suetonius,¹⁶ and with the recent discovery of

¹⁵ Dunbabin, *The Roman Banquet: Images of Conviviality*, 8.

¹⁶ Suetonius, *Suetonius II*, trans. J.C. Rolfe, II vols., vol. II, Loeb Classical Library (London: Harvard University Press, 1979), 137.

the foundations of Nero's famous rotating dining hall, there is new impressive archaeological evidence of the culture of banqueting at the highest levels of Roman government.¹⁷ The broader culture too partook in the largesse and joviality of the banquets, and the practice was an important strand in the web that was Roman social interaction. The practice saturated the upper and middle levels of Roman society, as aristocrats and those on the make alike adapted banqueting as a way of demonstrating a cultured sense of taste, the capacity for leisure, and goodwill towards clients, patrons, and associates.¹⁸ In perhaps the surest sign of its cultural currency, the banquet found its way into the life of Petronius' Trimalchio, whose ambition is surpassed only by his ridiculousness, and for whom the banquet is a valuable way of demonstrating his aspiration to belong in the upper classes.¹⁹ The public transcript is here fairly easy to identify: banqueting was both a tool and a symbol of Roman society, representing the realities and aspirations of the middle and upper classes, while also constituting one of the rungs on the social ladder.

The hidden transcript of the subordinate—the speech of the subordinate regarding the dominant when they are not present—is more difficult to discover. It is, by its very nature, *hidden*. In order to discover it, we must examine the speech of the subordinates for language (or in this case, symbolism) that would be intelligible to other subordinates, but not to the dominant group. We must look for speech, and in this case imagery, that is disguised in some way, and we should be vigilant for

¹⁷ Nick and Claire Bates Pisa, "Roman Emperor Nero's Legendary Rotating Dining Room Uncovered by Archaeologists," *Daily Mail* 2009.

¹⁸ Dunbabin, *The Roman Banquet: Images of Conviviality*, 12-13.

¹⁹ Petronius, *Petronius*, ed. G.P. Goold, trans. Michael Heseltine, Loeb Classical Library (London: Harvard University Press, 1975), 45ff.

images and motifs that are simultaneously visible to the subjugated group and invisible to the more powerful group.

Banquets and Transcripts

This is precisely the situation we find when we examine the banqueting scenes of the catacombs. The banquet, as we have seen, was a common image (and actual occurrence) in Roman culture, with its own set of meanings, associations, and references. Christian artistic depictions of banqueting certainly would not have been hidden in any conventional sense; on the contrary, they would have been obvious and recognizable to any Roman with much social awareness who happened to see them. This is very likely what Christians meant for other Romans to see: an image that seemed to include Christians in the broader culture, without seeming out of the ordinary in any way. Such “hiddenness” would have worked to the Christians’ advantage, since identification with the dominant culture likely afforded a higher reputation for “normalcy,” and allayed suspicions of their practices and motives.

For insiders, however, the banquet imagery would have meant something altogether different. For Christians, the banqueting scenes were not scenes of demonstrative excess,²⁰ as they were for other Romans, or tools for social climbing or announcing one’s magnanimity. For Christians, the banquet had an entirely different set of meanings and associations. They were, in the Christian world-view, expressions of solidarity and hope in the midst of the official and unofficial persecution that Christians endured. Likely modeled on the *agape* meals that were central cultic and social events in the Christian church, the meals in the

²⁰ Dunbabin uses “conviviality,” which is nearly ideal for describing the function of the banquet in Roman society. Dunbabin, *The Roman Banquet: Images of Conviviality*.

catacomb paintings set forth an idealized community—the social world as they wished it to be.

For Christians, the banquets depicted in the catacomb images were eschatological. They were anticipatory and aspirational, expecting rather than depicting a time when Christian suffering would be at an end and when the “powers and principalities” (to use Paul’s phrase) would be defeated by God. These eschatological banquets, dressed in the clothing of Roman banqueting customs, functioned as speech from Christians to Christians, bypassing other Romans, articulating a hope in the future victory of God. This victory—this eschaton—was envisioned by Christians not as the end of the world, but rather the end of the ways of the world. Christian eschatology in this period envisioned a world where Christ reigned on Caesar’s throne, where justice was no longer perverted and the people of God were no longer oppressed. Christian literature, beginning with the canon of the New Testament and continuing through the third and early fourth centuries, abounds with visions of a world where God is acknowledged and the people of God live in peace. Christian rhetoric in this period, especially early in this period, is strikingly egalitarian, echoing the Christian baptismal creed that Paul cites more than once: “In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free.” This is the early Christian eschaton—not the end of the world, but a world profoundly changed by the will of God being done on earth as it was in heaven.

Since the banquet images of the catacombs were meant to hide their full meaning from those not in the know, we cannot expect to find much evidence of their hidden transcripts; we cannot expect to see much of this eschaton within the

images themselves. A few possible pieces of evidence do present themselves, however. The first is the frequent presence of a number of large baskets of bread in the foreground of the image. This large quantity of bread, more than could possibly be required by the number of diners present, has confounded interpreters, who have seen it as symbolic, or associated it with distributions to the poor that accompanied funerals. When seen in an eschatological light, however, these baskets of bread evoke a plenty and freedom from want that could not have characterized the everyday lives of the majority of lower-class, lower-income Christians. The baskets are in fact evocative of a section of one of early Christianity's most-used prayers, the Lord's Prayer, which asks God to "give us this day our daily bread," or in an ancient translation of the ambiguous Greek, "give us this day our bread for tomorrow."²¹ While the bread baskets in the catacomb images are not likely a literal rendering of the prayer, they may well be an expression of the same Christian hopes and longings that animate the prayer.

Another possible bit of evidence is the presence in some of the images of symbolically-named servants attending to the meal's guests. Many banqueting scenes from other Roman contexts include servants, who are directed to mix wine, refill cups, fetch water, and the like. Such servants do not always appear in Christian images, but when they do, they are sometimes called by the names Agape and Irene, love and peace. These names were Christian names in the period, but their assignment to servants for the banquets has aroused suspicions from scholars that

²¹ The Greek word is *επιουσιος*, which is otherwise nearly unattested. In *The Gospel of the Hebrews*, the equivalent word is *מחר*, which means "tomorrow," suggesting that at least some ancient readers understood *επιουσιος* to mean future time. Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (Crossroad, 1999), 116.

something more symbolic was going on. The communal meal of early Christian communities was called the *agape*, and of course both peace and love were important concepts in early Christian rhetoric. It is possible, then, that the servants may be Peace and Love personified, attending to the faithful in the community that is to come.

A final piece of evidence is the presence of women. Women are conspicuously present in the Christian banqueting images, as servants, but more importantly as diners. Women are certainly present in images from pagan contexts, sometimes as full participants, sometimes to the side as wives, and sometimes as erotic adornment for the scene, shown nude or in sexually charged ways.²² In Christian images, women seem to be full participants in the meal, maintaining as much dignity and decorum as the men, and in some images comprising more than half the diners. This sort of egalitarian stance may be further evidence that the banquets take place in the sort of eschaton imagined by Paul and other early Christians, who repeatedly declared that “in Christ there is neither male nor female.”²³

Conclusion

Ultimately, the mark of any interpretation is its explanatory value. This is why the meaning of the banqueting scenes of the catacombs is still an open question; none of the explanations so far advanced has been able to account for all of the evidence. Seen as an early Eucharist, the occasional lack of drinking vessels and presence of other food, such as fish, are unexplainable. Seen as depictions of

²² Dunbabin, *The Roman Banquet: Images of Conviviality*, 67-8.

²³ Galatians 3:28, *inter alia*.

biblical scenes, the lack of certain elements (such as Jesus) is difficult to understand. Seen as a funeral banquet, the settings and characters of the paintings are problematic. Seen as a heavenly banquet, the lack of heavenly figures is confounding, and it is difficult to reconcile the fact that no one character seems to be highlighted, and inscriptions that characterize other catacomb memorials, such as the ubiquitous "*in peace*," are absent.

But seen as hidden transcripts of the subordinate, the banquet scenes of the Christian catacombs begin to make sense. They are in this scheme a persecuted community's expressions of anticipation and solidarity in the face of despair—an otherworldly message wrapped in the iconography and symbolism of the culture that oppressed them. Seen as hidden transcripts, these images are expressions of hope in a future when the Christian god will have triumphed, and when the faithful will dine together in equality, peace, and love.

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