

Conference Report



Dining&Death: interdisciplinary perspectives on the 'Funerary Banquet' in ancient art, burial and belief

A two day conference held at the Ioannou Centre for Classical and Byzantine Studies, Oxford, 25 – 26 September 2010

On the weekend of the 25th and 26th of September 2010, the conference “*Dining&Death: interdisciplinary perspectives on the 'Funerary Banquet' in ancient art, burial and belief*” was held at the Ioannou Centre for Classical and Byzantine Studies, 66 St. Giles’, Oxford. It was organised by Catherine M. Draycott of Somerville College and Maria Stamatopoulou of Lincoln College and the Classics Faculty, University of Oxford. The event was funded by the John Fell OUP Research Fund, Somerville College, the Craven Committee, the School of Archaeology, the Faculty of Classics and the Griffith Egyptian Fund at Oxford. Over seventy people attended, and seventeen papers were presented by scholars representing four main disciplines: Egyptology, Near Eastern Archaeology, Classical Archaeology (including Greek and Roman Archaeology, and Etruscology) and Chinese Archaeology.

The focal question of the conference was: “When is a ‘funerary banquet’ a funerary banquet?” The aim was to assess the prevailing approaches to and interpretations of banqueting images shown on tomb monuments in different regions, periods and disciplines, and especially whether scholars felt there was scope for interpreting the images as specifically eschatological or funerary subjects, such as images of the afterlife and/or funerary rites. The need to address this question had become apparent through discussions with colleagues in other disciplines, who for various reasons seemed less inclined to eschew eschatological or ‘religious’ interpretations than many Classical archaeologists.¹ The fact that banqueting images are a part of the funerary art of so many regions and periods in the ancient world and often present related interpretative problems makes it an excellent topic for cross-disciplinary comparison.

Overall, the conference proved to be a very successful forum. The audience and speakers comprised a happy balance of disciplines and scholarly statuses, with eminent professors, emerging younger scholars, graduate students and interested non-academics. One of the great pleasures of the conference was the consistent level of engagement of all participants, stimulated by a set of truly high quality and interesting papers. The fact that, as anticipated, the papers managed to maintain focus on such a seemingly narrow topic without redundancy is a testament to both the extent of relevant material – indeed, this conference barely even scratched the surface of possible case studies through the disciplines – and the extent of the interpretative problems epitomised by the so-called ‘funerary

¹ A general move away from eschatological interpretations in Classical archaeology has been a response to earlier universalising interpretations that assumed art in tombs should be funerary or death-related in subject. The issues are clearly laid out in: J.-M. Dentzer, *Le motif du banquet couché dans le Proche-Orient et le monde grec du VIIe siècle avant J.-C.* (Paris and Rome, 1982), and B. Fehr’s review of that book in *Gnomon*, 56 (1984), 335 - 42; O. Murray, “Death and the Symposium,” *Archaeologia e storia antica* 10. *La parola, l'immagine, la tomba* (Naples, 1988), 239 – 257; J. Fabricius, *Die hellenistischen Totenmahlreliefs. Grabrepräsentation und Wertvorstellung in ostgriechischen Städten* (Munich, 1999). Note that Dentzer, while tending to dismiss eschatological meanings in Greek cases, had left open questions about eschatological meanings in places such as Etruria. A sensitive exploration of related issues, but favouring some level of eschatological content can be found in: K. Friis Johansen, *Attic Grave Reliefs of the Classical Period. An essay in interpretation* (Copenhagen, 1951).

banquet'. Much unpublished material was shown, and participants remarked that it was very helpful to see how scholars studying different civilisations, distant in time and space, grappled with the same issues. As had been hoped, the conference enabled them to isolate and think about aspects of approach, such as the use of archaeological, epigraphic and ethnographic evidence, away from the details of their own case studies.

One major result of the conference was a reconsideration of eschatological meanings, especially in Classical archaeology. With reference to an image type traditionally and rather ambiguously termed 'Totenmahl' (German for 'meal of the dead'), which typically comprises a single figure reclining on a couch holding drinking vessels and with a table of food, the keynote speaker Johanna Fabricius effectively summed up three main interpretative paradigms:

- 1) the eschatological or afterlife paradigm (the banquet images show the deceased banqueting in a happy afterlife);
- 2) the funerary ritual paradigm (the images show a funerary or mortuary feast of the family, with or without the participation of the deceased); and
- 3) the social-historical paradigm (the images show ideals relevant to the lives of the deceased, either purely aspirational or actual).

This provided a yardstick against which the approaches favoured by the other speakers could be measured. Fabricius herself favoured the third type of explanation, based on a low level of written and archaeological sources attesting belief in a happy afterlife and funerary feasting in ancient Greek society generally, including her case study areas in Hellenistic Asia Minor.² The opinions of other scholars, however, ranged between those who felt they had good evidence to support one of the first two explanations, or those who felt that the evidence was utterly ambiguous. For instance, the question of whether the images were specifically funerary subjects was a non-issue for the Egyptologists, who felt that written evidence securely identified scenes in Egyptian tombs as offerings to the dead or mortuary banquets, enabling them to concentrate on other questions. Gay Robins focused on the various complex symbolic meanings of foods and other attributes shown in Old Kingdom offering scenes, where single figures are shown seated before tables of food. Nicola Harrington examined New Kingdom tomb paintings depicting large group mortuary banquets with relatives, friends and the deceased, and how they may have functioned to consolidate community networks following a death. In the case of later Iron Age Syro-Hittite funerary stelai with solo or paired, seated banqueters, Eudora Struble showed a tension in the evidence. The recently discovered Kuttamuwa Stele from Zincirli, dated to c. 740 BC, is the first one found with an extended inscription explicitly detailing eschatological beliefs (the soul of the deceased is said to be *in* the stele) and prescribing a mortuary rite.³ However, it is not clear how exceptional this stele would have been, and the food shown does not correspond with the rite described.

Turning to Western Anatolia, Elizabeth Baughan showed that the equation of wooden and stone couches furnishing tomb chambers with feasting couches may not be so simple. Ethnographic comparanda, for instance, suggests that they could equally have symbolised resting places – to choose one interpretation over the other, in the face of so little other evidence, would be arbitrary. Sean Lockwood illustrated how in Lycian paintings and reliefs supposedly showing 'banquets', food and drink is often not even shown; they can be read more as depictions of family groups in an ideal interior setting, characterised by desirable furniture – the couch. Whether such family groups are to be imagined in the afterlife or in 'life' is not clearly indicated by the reliefs, although if the former were intended, one might expect some specific indications.

The session on case studies from the Hellenic world included some new and unpublished material. Maria Tsouli and Aristeides Papayiannis presented very recent and surprising archaeological finds from Sparta testifying the practice of funerary feasting, including some finds which may impact

² Articulated in Fabricius's book, see n. 1, above. See now also her article: "Zwischen Konvention und Tabu. Zum Umgang mit Heroenehrungen in hellenistischen Poleis," *Helden wie sie. Übermensch - Vorbild - Kultfigur in der griechischen Antike*, ed. By M. Meyer and R. von den Hoff (Freiburg, 2010), 257 – 293.

³ Preliminary publication of the stele: E. Struble, V. Rimmer Herman, "An Eternal Feast at Sam'al: The New Iron Age Mortuary Stele from Zincirli in Context," *BASOR* 356 (2009), 15 – 49.

views of long-known reliefs from the area:⁴ the Laconian ‘hero reliefs’, which show large scale seated couples approached by miniature worshippers, often with snakes in the background. Large *kantharoi* cups of the type held by the ‘heroes’ in the reliefs, appear to have been actually used in grave rites (and possibly as markers), and this opens up the possibility that some of the ‘hero’ stelai could have been used as grave markers. Their potential relationship to the Classical period Attic votive reliefs to heros, which show reclining figures with ‘heroic’ symbols such as snakes and horse heads, as well as to those Hellenistic funerary stelai which incorporate similar ‘heroic’ symbols, is unclear; the Laconian ‘hero’ stelai retain the same seated iconographic formula from the archaic through the Roman period.

Further to the Hellenistic examples presented by the keynote speaker, Myrina Kalaitzi and Maria Stamatopoulou considered ‘Totenmahl’ images on largely unpublished Hellenistic tombstones from Macedonia and Demetrias, a Macedonian foundation in Thessaly. The Macedonian examples that Kalaitzi examined included those symbols mentioned above –snakes and horse heads – usually understood as symbols of heroisation. While Fabricius had argued that such symbols could metaphorically allude to secular honours – ‘heroic honours’ were often accorded to people by the city or by clubs at the time – Kalaitzi argued that one could not *exclude* the possibility that such imagery was not merely secular, and was connected to the idea of heroisation in death. In the case of the painted tombstones of Demetrias, which are slightly earlier in date, Maria Stamatopoulou’s close examination showed that some ‘heroic’ symbols so far overlooked could also be included in that corpus, although overall, the tone of the ‘banquets’ differed from the later Hellenistic Macedonian ones in tending to exclude such symbols. In Demetrias, Stamatopoulou acknowledged the frequency of the banquet theme among tombstones of foreigners, but questioned whether it was used only by this limited social group, and whether this was due to their not feeling as bound to behave according to social norms, as has been suggested by Fabricius in her book.⁵

In two Etruscan case studies, Antony Tuck and Tina Mitterlechner both felt that there was supporting evidence that the banqueting theme in tomb paintings was connected to eschatological beliefs. Tuck argued that one could see a continuum of imagining the dead banqueting in perpetuity from burial rites as early as the Villanovan period, when anthropomorphised cinerary urns could be arranged as if seated at a table, and he stressed an intentional ambiguity between the idea of afterlife and funerary rite (recalling interpretations of the Egyptian images).⁶ Mitterlechner’s study is part of the larger “*Bankett und Grab*” project at the University of Vienna, the aims of which coincide with that of the conference, and which had been explained earlier in a paper by the project director, Petra Amman.⁷ In her paper, Mitterlechner echoed ideas of continuity and ambiguity; concentrating on tomb wall paintings of the sixth through fourth centuries BC, she highlighted the transition from depictions of single ‘banqueters’, to group banquets, and finally, in the fourth century, to depictions of banquets specifically located in the underworld, sometimes including afterlife family reunions. While eschatological meanings are only clear in the fourth century paintings, she stressed the importance of not *denying* eschatological meanings for the more ambiguously located archaic banquets. Thus, there could be eschatological meanings from the Villanovan Period on, but only fully expressed in the fourth century images.

By the Roman period, if not earlier, the ‘banquet’ theme, and in particular the ‘Totenmahl’ formula seems to have been so bound up in funerary art that it can be considered a ‘funerary’ theme regardless of whether it specifically shows afterlife, funerary rite or worldly aspirations. Katherine Dunbabin illustrated the variety of banquet types which appear in Roman funerary art, some of which may allude to lifetime achievements of the tomb owners, such as the staging of a feast, others called ‘banquets’, but which suggest more ‘resting’ on a couch, and others which are non-specific, and seem to use a very generic ‘reclining’ motif with no implication that it refers to the life of the deceased or an

⁴ On the excavations, see further: M. Tsouli, "Ανασκαφή κλασικού νεκροταφείου στην πόλη της Σπάρτης" ("Excavation of a Classical cemetery at the city of Sparta"), *Griechische Grabbezirke klassischer Zeit - Normen und Regionalismen* (forthcoming).

⁵ See n. 1.

⁶ See Tuck’s earlier article: “The Etruscan seated banquet. Villanovan ritual and Etruscan iconography,” *AJA* 98 (1994) 617 – 628.

⁷ Project website at the Institut für Kulturgeschichte der Antike, Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften (ÖAW): <http://www.oeaw.ac.at/antike/index.php?id=26> (last accessed: 1 Nov. 2010)

afterlife – just that it is a fitting image for a memorial monument.⁸ Questioning of the ‘reality’ of the images was taken further in Peter Stewart’s paper, in an examination of how closely the ‘Totenmahl’ reliefs on tombstones from the northwestern Roman provinces may have matched real experiences of such settings and activities.⁹ Eric Smith, on the other hand, looked at the possibility that early Christians may have made slight adaptations to standard Roman banquet scenes in order to indicate their faith and corresponding hopes of an afterlife – for example, the inclusion of figures whose labeled names could identify them as either slaves or personifications, such as “Agape” (Love).

Two papers on burials and banqueting imagery in Han China exemplified how Chinese archaeology shares concerns and methods of interpretation with Classical archaeology. As mentioned above, Michael Nylan discussed how the three main interpretative paradigms appeared in the literature on the Chinese ‘funerary banquets’, and concluded that the evidence was too ambiguous to pinpoint any one explanation. Lukas Nickel, on the other hand, concentrating on the region of Luoyang, suggested that burial assemblages with miniature and actual size tableware and other equipment (a model-size, but functioning water well, for instance) indicate that at least in that area there existed a belief that the dead dined, or presided over a banquet with imaginary participants, within the tomb.¹⁰

Oswyn Murray concluded the conference by summing up some of the ideas which had emerged over the two days: first, he reiterated the point that three source types, texts, images and archaeological evidence, provide different kinds of evidence, the texts being more articulate about eschatological beliefs and the tomb remains indicating burial practices. Concerning the images, he recapitulated the fundamental idea expressed by Jean-Marie Dentzer in his very influential book, that the ‘banquet’ was a *motif*, which gained meaning when applied in certain contexts.¹¹ It might be said that the images themselves do not actually gain meaning here, *per se*, but, as Fabricius has noted, they are a part of larger meaningful constellations; they complement ideas which are also expressed through rites, tomb construction and sometimes accompanying texts within whole burial packages. In that sense, the images themselves may not have been made to communicate beliefs (let alone a single set of beliefs), and that is why attempts to use them to answer questions about beliefs are often frustrated. For this reason, scholars such as Fabricius and Stewart advocate an approach which assesses and compares what is actually visible in the images, such as differences in interiors, furniture, clothing and tablewares, inclusions of symbols and the realization and crafting of the images, rather than dwelling on trying to assess the beliefs of the users, about which the images may be ambiguous.

That having been said, there is still a tension between a perceived need to transcend such questions about eschatological value in images and at the same time to acknowledge potential eschatological beliefs and symbolism. Even though Fabricius herself felt there was little evidence to support seeing eschatological symbols (as opposed to metaphors for heroic honours) in her Hellenistic sample, the very ambiguous nature of the images stressed by both her and other scholars, means that one has to allow for equivocal meanings among which may be eschatological ones.¹² Indeed, Robert Parker, in the audience, noted that there may be greater support in the epigraphy for eschatological beliefs in late Classical and Hellenistic Greek settlements than has so far been recognized in the literature. Oswyn Murray noted that the conference had made him reconsider his earlier opinion that the term ‘Totenmahl’ was misleading, and going further, he mooted the idea that mystery cults, which brought with them eschatological ideas, might have been more wide spread than even surviving evidence would indicate.¹³ In this sense, Fabricius’s third ‘socio-historical’ paradigm should be thought of not as a third explanation, to the exclusion of the other two, but an alternative approach, within which one can allow for greater or lesser emphasis on, or visibility of, attitudes toward death. For instance, the Egyptian images, while in some ways a world apart from the later reclining banquets, exemplify the extent to which these images can make sophisticated plays on words and ideas which poetically express the very complex and confusing feelings about the transition from life to death. According to Myrina Kalaitzi, the ‘heroic’ symbols on some Hellenistic stelai might work in a similar

⁸ For further on this, see Dunbabin’s book: *The Roman Banquet: images of conviviality* (Cambridge 2003).

⁹ See Stewart’s article: “Totenmahl reliefs in the northern provinces. A case-study in imperial sculpture,” *JRA* 22 (2009) 253 – 274.

¹⁰ See further Nickel’s book and article: *Gräber der Han-Zeit in Luoyang* (Stuttgart, 2010); “Some Han-Dynasty Paintings in the British Museum” *Artibus Asiae* LX, no 1, 2000, 59 – 78.

¹¹ See n. 1.

¹² Cf. Friis Johanssen in n. 1.

¹³ See Murray’s earlier opinion on the ‘Totenmahl’ in his influential article cited in n. 1.

way. Other images offer less potential for reading such meanings, while they might offer plenty of information on other more 'mundane' aspects of social practice.

As has been clarified by a number of the speakers, both before and at this conference, the so-called 'Funerary Banquet' has no universal 'meaning', but rather a range of 'meanings', which fluctuate between worldly and otherworldly aspects, difficult to control for the modern viewer – and possibly the ancient viewer as well. On the other hand, there is another tension to be noted. One of the interesting things about the 'banquet' as a general motif, or setting, is that it seems to have served as such a useful common framework for different contexts and for a spectrum of ideas. Indeed, although he had explored changes in the banquet motif through time and place, Dentzer had also sought an explanation for its widespread use, which he felt lay in its ability to continually epitomise a princely life. Is there a universal explanation for human attraction to the concept of feasting, underlying widely fluctuating relative meanings?¹⁴ Just as interesting and not so much addressed at the conference is the issue of absence – why did some cultures not use such images, and what did they choose instead?

The conference successfully highlighted two main issues: limits of interpretation and the need, at the same time, to maintain an open mind about secular and esoteric meanings embodied in ancient art. Debates about individual readings will undoubtedly continue. A publication of conference papers and some extra commissioned papers, is planned, which will enable further consideration and clarification of issues raised and articulation of additional research questions.

This report and other documents relating to the conference are archived in the Oxford Research Archive (ORA): <http://ora.ouls.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid%3A102dd3b5-8f68-45d2-8a98-abf426536d2f>

Conference Webpage: <http://www.arch.ox.ac.uk/dininganddeath.html> (last accessed 2 Nov. 2010)

A web gallery complementing the conference was created and initially placed on Facebook:

<http://www.facebook.com/album.php?aid=2399314&id=36816341>

An abbreviated version of the web gallery was picked up by BBC Oxford (01/10/10):

http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/oxford/hi/people_and_places/history/newsid_9044000/9044634.stm

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¹⁴ Renewed attention to universal human aesthetics is exemplified for instance in: D. Dutton, *The art instinct: beauty, pleasure, & human evolution* (Oxford, 2009).