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DINING AND DEATH:
INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES
ON THE ‘FUNERARY BANQUET’
IN ANCIENT ART, BURIAL AND BELIEF

Edited by

CATHERINE M. DRAYCOTT and MARIA STAMATOPOULOU



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THE BANQUET IN PALMYRENE FUNERARY CONTEXTS

Lucy AUDLEY-MILLER

Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the range of sociocultural significances that banqueting reliefs had for the people of Palmyra, who commissioned and saw these images, in the first three centuries AD. The paper commences by exploring the various interpretations of what the iconography of reclining to dine meant at Palmyra. It then examines how and why the social level of patrons represented in these reliefs changed over time. These alterations in use are outlined here, because who was represented in the banquet, as well as what was represented, reinforced and informed the social resonance of the image. The Palmyrene banqueting motif was used as a prestigious expression of ancestry with each client adjusting and personalising this established iconographic template to present a selective view of their own family history. In order to examine these personal receptions and reinterpretations in action, the final part of this paper focuses upon the case study of Bôlhâ's tomb. This monument shows the important role that the banqueting motif played in the familial competition of two groups of descendants, and allows examination of how standardised banqueting images could be made personal and relevant for different individuals.

DEATH AND DINING IN PALMYRA'S TOMBS

The first thing a visitor would have seen, after crossing the deserts of Roman Syria's interior and reaching the oasis town of Palmyra, was its tombs. These monuments surround the city, dominating the skyline, and were the products of significant financial, cultural and emotional investment. The representation of the deceased was an important priority in this context and tombs could be crowded with large numbers of images of the dead, staring out at visitors, with short epitaphs that called out the subjects' names and lineage. A range of image forms were employed here: burial slots (termed *loculi*) were sealed by busts on plaques or stelai representing the deceased and a few tombs contained freestanding statues, but the most esteemed commemorative form was the banqueting image. This iconography was the principal means of representing collective family groups and dominated the rich visual landscape of funerary representations in Palmyra's tombs.

Banquet reliefs were a ubiquitous feature in Palmyra's necropoleis and appear in all of the tomb types present at the site.¹ The motif was constantly redefined and subject to continuous adaptation in use, moving from being displayed as a prominent symbol set in a niche on the outside of the tomb to being employed in a variety of different scales and locations within the tomb by an increasingly varied clientele. While the iconographic template shares some features seen elsewhere in the Roman Empire, it was strikingly reformulated here in terms that clearly articulate local body ideals and cultural values. The people of the city were manifestly eager to commission reliefs showing subjects reclining in local dress, cup in hand, and surrounded by family members (see, for example, Figs. 1–2). The following discussion explores this important banquet image phenomenon at Palmyra, and seeks to examine the significance of this image for local patrons and audiences. Such images would no doubt have evoked an assortment of expectations and understandings for different viewers about the families depicted in this way.² The intention here is to gain a broad sense of the contemporary resonances that this prized iconography had in this particular cultural setting.

In order to examine what banqueting images in tombs 'meant'³ to the people of Palmyra, the following discussion is divided into four parts. The first section introduces the banquet reliefs; from there, the paper takes a three-pronged approach to reconstructing contemporary perceptions of this image. The first line of enquiry focuses closely upon the iconography of the image and reviews the various interpretations advanced in the literature regarding the type of feasting depicted: from funerary meal, festivities in the afterlife, to cult feasts held in the city's temples, or high status dining in more profane contexts. The next section moves the focus from interpretations of the iconography to sketch broad changes in the patronage and use of the banqueting image at Palmyra. This approach to understanding the images is adopted because local perceptions of its significance were not static; the resonance of the banquet motif changed over time because its contemporary impact was partly informed by changing patterns in who was shown in this fashion. The final

¹ For Palmyra's different tomb types, see Gawlikowski 1970b; Schmidt-Colinet 1992; Henning 2001. On trends in tomb type, see Gawlikowski 1970b, 51, 129–46; Colledge 1976, 58–61; Schmidt-Colinet 1987, especially 216; Bounni and Al-As'ad 2000, 94–103. For the relationship between these monument forms and developments in banquet image typology, see Makowski 1985b.

² On the importance of the viewer, see Elsner 1995.

³ The idea that images might communicate set 'meanings' has been criticised (for example, Gell 1998, 6–7, 14–15); however, the use of replicable iconography as a 'technical system' which encouraged a set of culturally defined understandings about subjects represented in this way is difficult to disregard (Stewart 2007, 166–75; Tanner 2007, 82–83, 91).

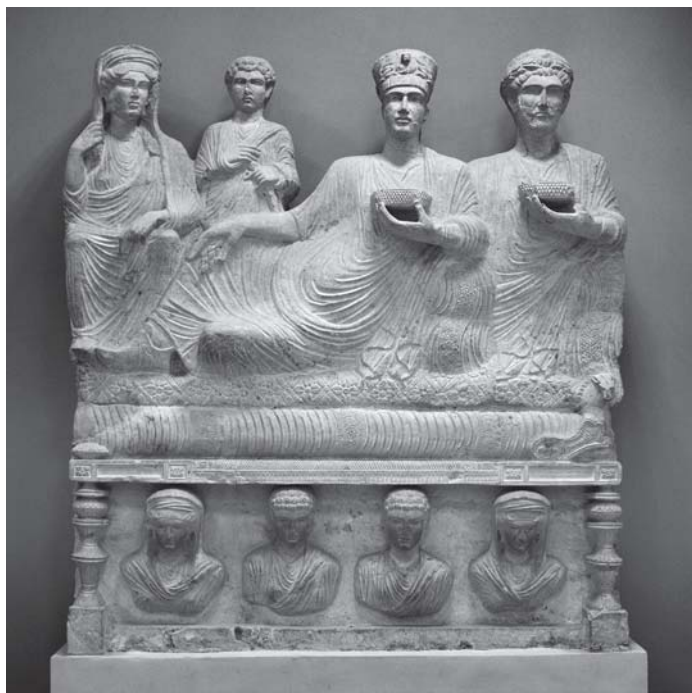


Fig. 1. Banqueting relief set on a sarcophagus from the tomb of Šalamallat, Palmyra. Palmyra Museum 1785/6608 (*kline* base) 1786/6609 (banquet lid). H. 1.87 m (*kline* h. 0.74 m, banquet lid 1.13 m). Limestone. Late 2nd–early 3rd century AD.
Source: photograph by author.



Fig. 2. Banqueting relief set on the Sarcophagus of Bôlbarak, from the tomb of Bôlbarak, Palmyra. Palmyra Museum 1796/6645 (*kline* base) 1795/6644 (banquet lid). H. 1.43 m (*kline* 0.63 m, banquet relief 0.80 m). Limestone. AD 239 (dated by inscription).
Source: photograph by author.

part of the paper examines the importance of these images as vehicles for family representation by focusing upon one case study where two large banquet images are preserved *in situ* in a family tomb. The examination of a single case study is not adopted to suggest that this example is in some sense 'typical', but rather to use this monument as 'a particular case of the possible'⁴ and to explore how this family group used a standard iconography to meet their specific requirements.⁵ It is hoped that these three approaches enable an understanding of what the representation of banqueting festivities in funerary contexts suggested to Palmyrene audiences.

THE RELIEFS

The banquet motif was used at Palmyra as a flexible template with the number of participants varying from rare depictions of single subjects⁶ to large groups reclining in a series of reliefs arranged to evoke elaborate dining rooms.⁷ However, the format generally includes one to three male figures reclining on a *kline*, or richly decorated mattress (see, for example, Figs. 1–2). While other images at Palmyra show men in a wide range of clothes, which draw upon styles embraced in the Graeco-Roman world and the Parthian Empire in a locally relevant way,⁸ for those shown in banqueting images a more restricted range of dress choices appears to have been considered appropriate. In this context the toga was not relevant⁹ and client choices tended towards local versions of 'Parthian' tunics and trousers, or various chiton and himation styles, which had been locally adjusted by making the himation less voluminous and adding other decorative elements to both items of dress.¹⁰ The shaven-head and *modius* hat of priests was also a popular choice for reclining men, worn with a range of different clothes¹¹ (see, for

⁴ Bourdieu 1979, xiii.

⁵ The importance of such contextual examination for our understanding of funerary sculpture has been ably demonstrated by Schmidt-Colinet 1992; Bounni and Sadurska 1994.

⁶ For example, Ingholt 1928, 31–33; Will 1951, 91; Tanabe 1986, figs. 224–226; Ploug 1995, 56–65.

⁷ For example, Sadurska 1977, 37–48; Tanabe 1986, figs. 238–246.

⁸ Stauffer 2010, 209–10; 2012.

⁹ The toga of the Roman citizen is rare at Palmyra. It features on the base of a sarcophagus worn by a subject shown sacrificing and surrounded by banquet attendants, but the same subject shown reclining as a banqueter above wears full 'Parthian costume'. See, for example, Schmidt-Colinet 1995b, fig. 48. For togate figures in the city, see Parlasca 1995, 67, n. 13.

¹⁰ Stauffer 2012, 90–95.

¹¹ The precise significance of the details on each *modius* type is uncertain (Kaizer 2002, 235–37).

example, Figs. 1, 7 and 10).¹² The body language of these male figures is formalised and repeated with subtle variations. Men are usually depicted reclining on their left side with the lower left leg bent forwards, and the upper right leg bent upwards at the knee, so that details of dress and the sometimes elaborately decorated shoes are fully visible. The right hand usually rests on the raised knee either touching the clothes or holding an attribute such as a garland, fruit or small jug, while the other hand holds a cup or drinking bowl (for example, Figs. 1–2).

Women are shown reclining in very few reliefs¹³ and it was far more common for the prestigious female figures to be shown seated on a chair at the foot of the bed,¹⁴ or occasionally seated on the bed itself,¹⁵ modestly adjusting a veil (see, for example, Fig. 1).¹⁶ One seated female was usually honoured in this way, but occasionally another was also included in the image (see, for example, Fig. 2). All women are shown as youthful with smooth skin, and large, sometimes kohl-lined, eyes. They wear carefully rendered local dress that usually comprises a local himation fastened at the left shoulder with a brooch and then wrapped about the body and drawn up over the head (see, for example, the seated women in Figs. 1–2). Under this is a tunic or shirt; in other contexts it became increasingly fashionable to adorn this with embroidered panels either side of the chest and sometimes also at the sleeves, but such additions were kept to a modest minimum in banqueting imagery.¹⁷ Many women wear a rich range of jewellery and a veil with their hair drawn into a range of different fashionable head-coverings.¹⁸ The female dress code emphasises the subject's conformity to traditional ideals while the amount of jewellery worn by the subject conveyed relative degrees of importance in family hierarchy.

Variable numbers of male or female subjects are depicted between the reclining banqueter and seated woman on a smaller scale than the central protagonists. The small table of food, which is so commonly included elsewhere,

¹² I am grateful to Prof. Stauffer for sharing some of her unpublished research on dress with me. For a full treatment of the complex range of dress and textile choices attested at Palmyra, see Al-As'ad *et al.* 1995; Stauffer 1995; Schmidt-Colinet *et al.* 2000, especially 49–50; Stauffer 2010; 2012.

¹³ For example, Colledge 1976, 79, fig. 107; Tanabe 1986, figs. 424–446; Charles-Gaffiot *et al.* 2001, no. 255.

¹⁴ For a full presentation of Palmyrene banquet typologies, see Colledge 1976, 64–66, 73–79; Makowski 1985a–b.

¹⁵ Will 1951, 90; Colledge 1976, 74; Bounni and Sadurska 1994, nos. 153, 155, figs. 228–229.

¹⁶ One of the most common gestures in Palmyrene female portraiture (Heyn 2010, 634–36).

¹⁷ Stauffer 2012, 95.

¹⁸ On the various female dress forms and their significance, see Finlayson 2002–03; Stauffer 2012.

rarely features in these images.¹⁹ Smaller sized servants are shown occasionally beside the banqueters or between the legs of the *kline*, carrying jugs, garlands and other banqueting equipment.²⁰ Food consumption is occasionally alluded to: some reclining men hold fruit, or an attendant may proffer food to the reclining subject,²¹ but the emphasis is upon the display of men shown drinking. A body ideal of small but pronounced paunches developed amongst some reclining men, probably to convey the sense that these individuals were consummate in the art of dining well.²²

The text accompanying many of the figures gives their name and details of their ancestry.²³ The position that figures occupied in the banqueting relief was used to convey a nuanced sense of family hierarchy: the principal male subjects were shown reclining in the company of other important males, while a favoured female relative, often a mother or wife, sat at the base of the bed.²⁴ The male and female subjects standing between them represent more junior relations,²⁵ and those allocated a less central role in this family portrait were depicted in bust format between the legs of the *kline*. Most of the figures labelled in these reliefs were blood relatives but, as we shall see, this was not always the case; the iconography offered subjects the opportunity to construct and define their own notion of 'family'. The relative positions occupied by figures within the reliefs offered a sophisticated means of manipulating how the founder wished to show degrees of family importance, rather than strictly reflecting its realities.²⁶

The participants are usually represented in frontal poses with stylised faces that rarely portray the subjects' personal features (see, for example, Fig. 1). This mode of depiction is found in much of Palmyrene art, but is emphasised,

¹⁹ Seyrig 1951, 33–35. For an exceptional instance where the table is present, see Colledge 1976, 77, fig. 105. On tables lacking in Lycian Classical period reliefs, see Lockwood, this volume. On the contrasting importance of the table of food in Attic votive reliefs with banquets, see Lawton, this volume. Otherwise, on tables of offerings in Egyptian and Syro-Hittite images, see Robins, Harrington and Bonatz, this volume.

²⁰ Will 1951, 96–99; Colledge 1976, 76; Tanabe 1986, figs. 420–421, 432–439.

²¹ For example, Bounni and Sadurska 1994, no. 121, fig. 246, nos. 13–14, figs. 251–252.

²² This physical ideal is also attested in Ionian archaic banqueting contexts, see Baughan 2011, 35–37.

²³ Varying degrees of complexity are attested in these family genealogies. See, for example, Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 37–38, 86–90, 146–48.

²⁴ For a recent examination demonstrating the potential power of family imagery in Roman art, see Kampen 2009.

²⁵ Colledge 1976, 74; Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 189–91.

²⁶ For example, Artaban's son, Oggâ, used the image to assert piety, and the dynastic claims of his branch of the family, by putting his own wife and children in the key positions beside his father (Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 23–26, 37–39, no. 41).

with particular consistency, in banqueting scenes.²⁷ A range of explanations for this style of representation have been proposed, including the idea that it results from the merging of figurative and earlier aniconic traditions²⁸ when people were commemorated with ‘*nefeš*’²⁹ (a term interpreted to mean that some essence of the subject continued to reside within the stone, so that the monuments or images became ‘dwelling-places’).³⁰ The significance of these non-individualising personal style preferences, and the reason they are so frequently attested in banqueting images, will be examined more fully in the final section of this paper. It is worth noting here, however, that the absence of naturalism does not equate to a lack of personal information about the subjects. The banqueting relief could efficiently communicate information about the individual through position in the relief, hierarchy in scale, gesture and dress.

The Banquet

The reliefs depict men reclining in prestigious local dress with their female family members clad in clothes that emphasise their conformity to traditional mores; these subjects are represented in a scene that places the emphasis upon men drinking, rather than eating. This much is comparatively clear and uncontroversial. However, the type of banquet in which families are shown participating has long been the subject of debate. The scene has been identified as representing the deceased at a temple feast, enjoying a banquet in the afterlife,³¹ showing the family in a prestigious context in life,³² or as directly depicting the funerary banquets within the tomb.³³ More recently, Gawlikowski has highlighted the multivalency of the images, suggesting that they could relate to the afterlife while also conveying the high status of the subject’s lifetime

²⁷ Sadurska 1988, 82; Schmidt-Colinet 1992, 139–40.

²⁸ It was first identified as characteristic of ‘Parthian art’ (Rostovtzeff 1935), or typical of the east (for example, Seyrig 1950, 4), while others have regarded it as the product of cultural fusion (for example, Drijvers 1976, 7–8; Ploug 1988, 138). Interpretations have often focused upon its presumed ‘spiritual’ resonance (for example, Drijvers 1976, 7–8; Pietrzykowski 1985).

²⁹ This term is usually applied to aniconic monuments or architectural memorials (Gawlikowski 1970b, 40–43; 2005, 46), but it does occur in figurative contexts. Early stelai, both aniconic and figurative, were inscribed with this word and at least two relief busts are described this way (*CIS* 2, 4328 and 4597; Cantineau 1930–33, nos. 6, 8, 37; Gawlikowski 1970b, 34–40; 1972, 8–9; Colledge 1976, 275, n. 183). A comparable notion is suggested in the text of the 8th century BC Katumuwa Stele from Sam’al/Zincirli (see Pardee 2009; and Bonatz, this volume; also further references on that stele in the Introduction to this volume).

³⁰ Colledge 1976, 61–62; Piacentini 2005, 249.

³¹ Cumont 1942, 421.

³² Seyrig 1951, 37.

³³ Parlasca 1995, 68.

achievements.³⁴ The idea that the images could gain some of their appeal through their ability to evoke and connect elements from various banqueting contexts is persuasive and merits further consideration.

Cult Banquet

Cumont proposed a link between funerary images showing banqueters and the feasts held in the city's sanctuaries. He suggested a comparison with Bacchic cult, arguing that the banquets held in Palmyrene temple precincts were a necessary preparation for the eternal festivities depicted in funerary reliefs.³⁵ This proposed connection between the two contexts was developed further because of iconographic similarities between funerary reliefs and images on the small tokens, now termed *tesserae*, which served as tickets giving access to feasts in the city's temples (see, for example, Fig. 3).³⁶ The *tesserae* are varied but some showed local priests, identifiable by their dress, reclining in similar poses.³⁷ Later work suggested that the *marzeah* (sacred meals)³⁸ to which the *tesserae* gave access were themselves funerary banquets, and interpreted the iconography in both contexts as conveying the heroisation and resurrection of the deceased.³⁹

These explanations were criticised by Seyrig who argued that the presence of female family members in the funerary reliefs made it clear that the images did not show cult banquets.⁴⁰ Contrary to earlier suggestions, he stressed that there was no evidence that the images necessarily showed the deceased in the afterlife, and observed, correctly, that in some cases the figures represented individuals who were still alive when the image was dedicated.⁴¹ The argument that there is scant evidence for connecting the sacred meals held in Palmyra's temples with funerary cult has found considerable support.⁴² Not only do the *tesserae* lack the family members found in banqueting images,

³⁴ Gawlikowski 1990.

³⁵ Cumont 1942, 421.

³⁶ On the *tesserae*, see Drijvers 1976, 6; Al-As'ad *et al.* 2005; Kaizer 2008, 187–88. On the evidence for banqueting halls associated with temples at Palmyra, see Will 1976; Tarrier 1995, 165–66.

³⁷ For example, Ingholt *et al.* 1955, nos. 728–736, 760–797; Charles-Gaffiot *et al.* 2001, nos. 170a, 171–172.

³⁸ On this term, see Alavoine 2000, 12–13; Kaizer 2002, 229–34; also, Stamatopoulou, this volume, especially n. 123 on association of the *Totenmahl* at Demetrias in Thessaly with the *marzeah*).

³⁹ For example, Du Mesnil du Buisson 1962, 512.

⁴⁰ Seyrig 1951, 37.

⁴¹ Seyrig 1951, 38.

⁴² Kaizer 2002, 231.



Fig. 3. Drawing of one of the tesserae that gave access to banquets held in Palmyra's temples. Cabinet des Médailles de la Bibliothèque nationale de France inv. Froehner 8. H. 2.7 cm. Terracotta. 1st–3rd century AD. Source: drawing by J. Wilkins after photograph published in Charles-Gaffiot 2001, no. 172.

these tokens have never been found in funerary contexts, and are devoid of any clear textual or visual reference to funerary ritual.⁴³ It is implausible, therefore, to argue that the banquets represented in the reliefs and on the tesserae depict the same event. However, the degree of visual similarity between the funerary reliefs that showed groups of reclining priests and those depicted on tesserae may well have had an active appeal.

For some viewers, it perhaps recalled the subject's role at the important sacred banquets to which the tesserae gave access. In the group of reliefs at the Tomb of Iarhai female subjects are present, as usual, seated at the end of each *kline*, but every male subject is shown shaven headed and wearing priestly garb.⁴⁴ Clearly, while this commemoration does not depict a cult banquet in

⁴³ Gawlikowski 1970b, 180–81; Drijvers 1982, 710, 725; Alavoine 2000, 12–14; Kaizer 2002, 231.

⁴⁴ Tanabe 1986, 237–46.

progress, it was designed to convey the sacerdotal achievements of the family.⁴⁵ The desire to emphasise these social positions is not surprising: such office was valued by the community and epigraphic evidence shows that figures acting as symposiarchs of important priesthoods held other eminent civic titles indicating that political power was united with the religious role.⁴⁶ These figures presided over cult banquets and inscriptions state that they paid liturgies including gifts of fine wines or other banqueting costs.⁴⁷ Visual connections with the tesserae may have been useful in emphasising the deceased subjects' priestly role overseeing cult banquets, reminding viewers of their benefactions of wine or food, or loosely recalling their presence at the centre of these important occasions. The images do not represent the same banquet, but for ancient viewers familiar with the tesserae the shared iconographic elements may have served to amplify the expression of piety and rank in the funerary reliefs.⁴⁸

Dining amongst the Living and the Dead

Seyrig's belief that the main purpose of the reliefs was to show the subjects in a prestigious lifetime familial feasting context is difficult to investigate within the existing residential archaeological record of Palmyra. However, the idea does find some support in the use of a closely comparable image painted in a dining room at Dura Europus (Fig. 4).⁴⁹ Dura Europus is situated approximately 200 km to the east of Palmyra, but the images within the dining room are labelled in Palmyrene Aramaic, use typical Palmyrene personal names and make reference to Palmyrene deities, leading to the belief that it was commissioned and used by the Palmyrene community of this settlement. We cannot assume that these two Palmyrene communities were identical, but the parity attested between these banqueting images is striking and suggestive of shared cultural concerns in this context. The similarities between the two may indicate that elements of the domestic dining customs of the region informed the representation of the banquet in Palmyrene funerary reliefs.

⁴⁵ The *Bene Komare* (the sons of priests) were an important group at Palmyra, and groups of priests in banquet reliefs suggest pride in a familial tradition of priesthood, but the office was not necessarily hereditary (Kaizer 2002, 240–42).

⁴⁶ Kaizer 2002, 231–33.

⁴⁷ Kaizer 2002, 229–34.

⁴⁸ Equally, funerary reliefs may have shaped the ways that people viewed the tesserae. Cult feasts held in the city's temples could serve a commemorative role when food and drink were paid for by legacy (Briquel-Chatonnet 1995, 161–62; Kaizer 2002, 242–56; Dirven 2005, 72–74). In such cases, similarity in iconography may have strengthened the idea that the banquet was a memorial event.

⁴⁹ Hopkins 1936, 146–67; Dirven 1999, 281–93.

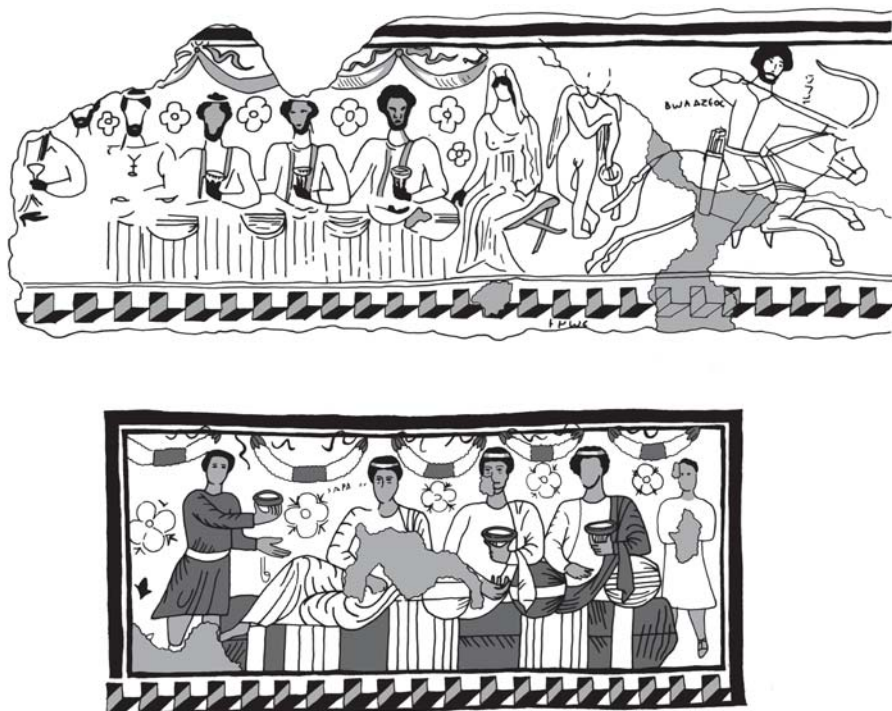


Fig. 4. Drawings of the frescoes from the south (top) and west (below) walls of the Palmyrene dining room at Dura Europus. Paintings now held at Yale University Art Gallery. H. of south wall 0.65, west wall 0.82 m. AD 194. Source: drawing by J. Wilkins after the record of the image published by Hopkins 1936, pl. 42.

The wall paintings at Dura Europus focus on conveying the sort of activities that the participants had enjoyed in that dining room, as well as other high status lifetime pursuits such as hunting. In this representation of refined dining, groups of named men are shown adopting the same pose seen in funerary reliefs from Palmyra: reclining on their left elbow, holding a similar drinking bowl in the left hand, with the top right leg bent upwards and covering the lower limb.⁵⁰ They have short curly hair, usually adorned with a garland⁵¹ and neat, groomed beards. Each wears a chiton with striped bands down the chest

⁵⁰ The abbreviated format of depicting the upper torso of overlapping figures is attested here as on some funerary reliefs (for example, Amy and Seyrig 1936, pl. 48.1; Colledge 1976, 74–75; Tanabe 1986, figs. 420–421; Parlasca 1998, 314; Higuchi and Saito 2001, 34–36).

⁵¹ These garlands sometimes adorn the heads of figures in banqueting reliefs, but are more often held in the hand.

and a himation draped about the shoulder. These clothes and personal styles are also paralleled in some funerary reliefs, though funerary reliefs more often show heightened versions of prestigious personal dress choices, such as the shaven head and hat of priests.⁵² As in the funerary reliefs, there is a veiled woman shown seated on a stool next to a group of reclining men.⁵³ A damaged painting in this room depicts a group of women dining together on a separate wall. These women are shown seated, or reclining with food before them in poses different from those of the men, reinforcing the impression of gendered differences in the proprieties around dining, which are also suggested by the rarity of reclining women in the Palmyra funerary reliefs. As in the funerary reliefs, the table of food is absent in the male drinking scenes,⁵⁴ and the figures are also waited upon by youthful un-bearded figures wearing short girt tunics, one of whom carries a ladle and proffers a drinking bowl of wine.

Although the Dura Europus painting is roughly rendered, it is clear that key features such as the body language of the participants, the emphasis upon male drinking and the form of the drinking vessels are similar to the Palmyra funerary reliefs. These correspondences between the domestic sphere and funerary images suggest elements that the funerary reliefs drew from prized lifetime dining etiquettes. This would indicate that the gendered differences in body languages attested in the funerary reliefs offer an insight into real domestic social customs. While women were shown with food in the Dura Europus dining room, the depiction of men in this context focuses upon showing them drinking. Men presumably also ate in the Dura Europus dining room, but as in the funerary reliefs, drink was the element in male festivities that appears to have communicated esteem most readily, through reference to refined dining habits. It seems plausible that the male 'drinking culture' preference that is proudly depicted in this domestic context was a concern that informed the emphasis on male drinking in Palmyrene funerary images.

Both domestic and funerary images of feasts attest some of the same cultural values surrounding fine dining, but this does not in itself prove Seyrig's hypothesis that the images show the subjects while alive and were unrelated to funerary feasts and festivities in the afterlife. The same attitudes regarding what constituted refined dining could have been relevant in funerary meals, or for showing subjects enjoying a good repast in the afterlife. Seyrig contended that the banquet reliefs could not depict funerary events because a distinctive

⁵² For funerary parallels to this dress, see, for example, Bounni and Sadurska 1994, figs. 220, 244.

⁵³ Hopkins 1936, 146–67; Dirven 1999, 281–93.

⁵⁴ A three-legged table is placed near the reclining women (Hopkins 1936, 151).

dish (resembling the *kollyva* served at modern funerals), which is shown proffered to grieving subjects in a few other types of image,⁵⁵ is not present in Palmyrene banqueting reliefs. As he observed, there is an absence of overt references to funerary cult in the banqueting images. However, the fact that the subjects depicted in these scenes were dead and buried behind these reliefs makes it likely that the funerary context in which the image was displayed shaped the way in which this iconography was perceived.⁵⁶

Feasting is thought to have been part of the funerary rites observed in Palmyrene tombs⁵⁷ and finds of incense burners and offering bowls suggest that the living offered nourishment to deceased relatives, creating a form of commensality through which the living interacted with the dead.⁵⁸ The reliefs often depicted dead subjects alongside those who were alive when the images were created, further enhancing the sense that these tomb monuments served as meeting places between the two.⁵⁹ The stone representation of banquets shown in these tombs might depict feasts akin to those held in dining rooms, but they also enabled the living to interact with dead ancestors through their effigies. While the iconography focuses upon prestigious lifetime norms in dining, with a particular focus upon the family, the physical context and rituals that surrounded these funerary images made the dead participants in the funerary feasts held by the living in these tombs. It is, therefore, difficult to divorce these scenes absolutely from the funerary feasts that seem to have taken place within these monuments.

Eternal Banquets

The language employed within tomb inscriptions sometimes refers to the tombs as *qdš*, 'consecrated' or 'sanctified' for the use of the dead, and loculi within these monuments are described as becoming 'consecrated' by the presence of a corpse.⁶⁰ Milik suggested that this terminology indicated that death moved the deceased into the domain of the divine, and for this reason he interpreted

⁵⁵ Seyrig 1951, 32–35.

⁵⁶ The importance of context in imbuing similar images with different resonances has been convincingly established. See, for example, Stewart 2003, 184–222; Perry 2005, 56–77; Dillon 2006, 38–57.

⁵⁷ Although some have doubted that hypogea were large enough to house banquets (Will 1951, 96), the presence of cooking wares and wells supports the interpretation that the monuments met catering requirements (Gawlikowski 1970b, 179–80; Higuchi and Saito 2001, 135–43, 202–06).

⁵⁸ Gawlikowski 1970b, 179–80; Piacentini 2005, 256; Saito 2005, 158.

⁵⁹ On this, see also especially Harrington and Bonatz, this volume.

⁶⁰ Milik 1972, 193.

the banquet scenes as representing the sanctified subject in the afterlife.⁶¹ Ultimately, though, we know very little about Palmyrene perceptions of what happened to the individual after his or her death.⁶² The significance of these textual references is not without ambiguity, which has meant that research on this question has focused primarily upon using images in tombs to explore eschatological beliefs.⁶³

A small number of reclining images of Dionysos found in tombs at Palmyra have been used to argue that subjects shown reclining in funerary reliefs were invested with a clear religious significance, which allowed viewers to envisage the deceased in the afterlife.⁶⁴ There are, however, important questions remaining as to how far the images of Dionysos can be used as precise symbols correlating to clearly defined beliefs. As Kaiser cautions, it is unwise to dismiss images of Graeco-Roman deities as 'mere decoration',⁶⁵ but it seems equally perilous to equate their presence with precise eschatological convictions on behalf of the tomb owners, and yet more problematic to confidently apply such beliefs to funerary reliefs depicting reclining subjects. A recent examination of Dionysiac images on sarcophagi in Rome has observed their resemblance to the sorts of motifs seen in triclinia, making them appropriate visual material for the dining which also took place in Roman tombs.⁶⁶ As feasting also appears to have been part of the funerary rites in Palmyrene monuments, it seems plausible that reclining images of Dionysos, vines and other such motifs could exercise a comparable appeal here: as generally appropriate visual programmes for feasting contexts.

Images of Dionysos may have been consoling, evoking associations of regeneration and victory over death for some visitors coming to the tomb, but how far this informed the perception of reliefs showing reclining and drinking relatives is difficult to evaluate. Rather than applying a precise set of definitions to the images, it seems safer to accept the possibility of a range of potential associations for different people. Ideas of heroisation or immortality in the afterlife may have comforted some viewers, but we cannot assume that this was the iconography's resonance for all. What seems clearer is that these polyvalent images drew upon contemporary cultural values surrounding prestigious fine dining. They showed male subjects in dress choices that consciously

⁶¹ Milik 1972, 194.

⁶² Kaizer 2002, 244.

⁶³ For example, Drijvers 1982.

⁶⁴ Gawlikowski 1990, 158–61. Cf. Mitterlechner, this volume, on Dionysos and eschatological beliefs for Etruscan 'funerary banquets'.

⁶⁵ Kaizer 2000, 227.

⁶⁶ Zanker and Ewald 2004, 150–54.

evoked their lifetime achievements, surrounded by their families, drinking and reclining. These reclining figures were depicted in a context where bereaved kin visiting the tomb could interact with the dead by participating in parallel feasting activities. Such encounters were probably important events, shaping the visitors' sense of their own family heritage, an idea which will be explored further in the final part of this paper. It seems likely that the banqueting image was valued, in part, because it offered a range of relevant and prestigious potential resonances to its clients, which visitors to the tombs actively constructed and interpreted through their interactions with the image.

USES OF THE BANQUET RELIEF: REINVENTING TRADITION

The contemporary cultural significance of the banquet relief was not only created by what the participants were shown doing, but also by who was shown doing it. Patterns in who commissioned these reliefs changed over time, as did the context of their display, and both of these factors are likely to have informed ancient perceptions of the banquet relief. It is, therefore, worth briefly tracing these developments here.

Although the reclining banquet image is thought by many to have originally developed in Syria around the mid-7th century BC,⁶⁷ Palmyrene funerary representation remained aniconic until the 1st century AD, when the first commemorative figurative images appear,⁶⁸ probably as a direct cultural consequence of exposure to Roman images.⁶⁹ The depiction of reclining banqueters appears immediately within this new figurative repertoire, perhaps indicating that the cultural practice of reclining to dine had long endured in the region. However, the iconographic models used to express this custom at the site are thought to derive from Hellenistic *Totenmahl* reliefs,⁷⁰ with Roman sarcophagi and *kline* monuments believed to have played a part in the image's later development.⁷¹ These prestigious templates, developed elsewhere, appear from the

⁶⁷ Dentzer 1982, 51–69, 229; Collon 1992, 28; but now see the arguments for earlier representations of reclining banqueters on 'Phoenician' bowls in Matthäus 1999; 2000; Amann, this volume. For earlier seated banquet images in the region, see also Bonatz, this volume.

⁶⁸ Colledge 1976, 63–64; Makowski 1985b, 71–72; Sadurska 1988, 79–82, 46; Gawlikowski 2005, 82.

⁶⁹ Sadurska 1988, 79–82.

⁷⁰ Will 1951, 77, 90–95; Gawlikowski 1970a, 82, 85; Makowski 1985b, 108. On Hellenistic *Totenmahl* reliefs, see Schmidt 1991; Fabricius 1999; and Fabricius, this volume.

⁷¹ A full discussion of the origins of the motif at the site is provided in Parlasca 1984; 1995, 68–69; 1998.

first in forms adjusted to engage with local cultural practices and retain an enduring appeal at the site.

The use of this image changed over time, from being employed primarily on the outside of the tomb, to eventual inclusion within the monument to cover the remains of the dead.⁷² Banqueting reliefs first appear on the exterior of high status tower monuments, which were built to house extended family/clan groups.⁷³ This context served to establish them as a prestigious means of commemorating the tomb founder with his family. An example inscribed with the date AD 40 is set in a niche 10 m above the ground on the Tower of Kitôt (Fig. 5). This early version of the image shows the banqueter, with relatives arranged behind him, carved from the tower's masonry blocks with stucco and paint added to improve the finish.⁷⁴ The tower tombs of Ogeilû (AD 73) and Elahabel (AD 103), among others, followed suit, using large banquet reliefs on the outside, which were highly visible to passers-by.⁷⁵

The inclusion of the banquet relief within all types of monumental tomb was later to become a common feature.⁷⁶ It was first employed inside tower tombs by the same elite social levels who had commissioned the images on the outside. Initially, it was positioned in similarly prominent contexts, aligned with the door on the back wall of the tomb, and separate from the burial installations, as at the tower tombs of Jamblichus and Elahabel.⁷⁷ The conspicuous use of these images of tomb founders in monuments that were designed to house hundreds of members of the extended family or clan served to make them emblematic of the whole group's social values and achievements.

Later Palmyrene banquet reliefs are not usually inscribed with a date, but their development has been established approximately through the family genealogies engraved on them and to a certain extent by stylistic analysis. This evidence indicates that it was probably during the first half of the 2nd century that banqueting images moved from occupying prominent points in the tomb that were separate from the burial installations, to being used to cover the individual burial loculus of the deceased.⁷⁸ The banqueting image within the tomb

⁷² Makowski 1985b. A possible exception is provided by a fragmentary relief from around AD 33, which may have been set inside the tomb (Gawlikowski 1970a, 81–85).

⁷³ Yon 2002, 204. On clans and tribal groups, see Piersimoni 1995; and Kaizer 2002, 43–49, 213. On tower tombs, see Henning 2001.

⁷⁴ Will 1951, 70, 74–75.

⁷⁵ Will 1951, 84–86; Parlasca 1984, 284.

⁷⁶ Colledge 1976, 73. The change has been viewed as the result of new tomb building technologies: Makowski 1985b, 74.

⁷⁷ Will 1951, 85; Colledge 1976, 74; Makowski 1985b, 74; Yon 2002, 200; Gawlikowski 2005, 49.

⁷⁸ A more precise date between AD 135 and 150 has been proposed (Ploug 1995, 58).



Fig. 5. The Tower Tomb of Kitôt, West Necropolis, Palmyra. H. of niche set at 10 m above ground level. Coarse limestone. AD 40 (dated by inscription).
Source: photograph by author.

was employed in an increasingly varied manner as sculptors experimented to meet the new needs of their clients. For example, smaller reliefs were made to cover a single or double loculus,⁷⁹ offering less wealthy clients the opportunity to be remembered in the manner in which elite tomb founders had traditionally been memorialised.⁸⁰ While on the tower of Kitôt his wife had been depicted standing beside their children, the formula was altered to show the wife seated at the end of the couch, perhaps serving to emphasise the importance of marital relationships for smaller family groups. Experimentation in the presentation of reclining subjects proliferated, so that they were shown as abbreviated half figures with only the torso depicted above the couch, enabling more figures to be fitted into a smaller area.⁸¹ A variety of other different miniaturised banquet reliefs developed later in the 2nd century.⁸² The general trends in use show that a broader clientele with differing budgets had begun to commission the motif.

Inhumation was the dominant burial tradition throughout Palmyra's history, but the city was not untouched by empire-wide shifts in the treatment of the dead. The 2nd century had seen a rise in sarcophagus use around the Roman world⁸³ and heralded the development of a novel form of sarcophagus at Palmyra. This incorporated the large family banquet relief by applying it to the top front edge of the sarcophagus.⁸⁴ Later, the arrangement of multiple banquet reliefs in groups covering loculi or set on sarcophagi was introduced. These were most commonly arranged in the typical format of the Roman triclinium with three couches arranged in a *pi* shape,⁸⁵ but sometimes larger configurations of couches were arranged around temple tombs⁸⁶ or *hypogea*.⁸⁷ The development of this funerary triclinium coincides with an increase in the sale of sections of funerary monuments, and in some cases appears connected to the desire to make small family monuments within larger complexes.⁸⁸ Reliefs

⁷⁹ For example, the dated example of AD [1]46/7 (square bracket indicating restored part of date in the inscription) (Ingholt 1928, 31–33, no. 8; Ploug 1995, 56–65).

⁸⁰ Gawlikowski 2005, 53.

⁸¹ Amy and Seyrig 1936, pl. 48.1; Colledge 1976, 74–75; Tanabe 1986, figs. 420–421; Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 16–17; Parlasca 1998, 314; Higuchi and Saito 2001, 34–36.

⁸² Will 1951, 89; Colledge 1976, 78–79; Parlasca 1984, 285; Makowski 1985a, 127–31; Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 20; Ploug 1995, 58.

⁸³ Morris 1992, 31–69.

⁸⁴ Colledge 1976, 77–78; Parlasca 1984, 289–90; Gawlikowski 2005, 54.

⁸⁵ Antonine period examples have been identified and they continued in use into the 3rd century (Colledge 1976, 77–79; Parlasca 1984, 290; Makowski 1985b, 95; Parlasca 1998, 312).

⁸⁶ For example, Schmidt-Colinet 1992, 105–38.

⁸⁷ For example, Sadurska 1977, 37–42.

⁸⁸ Yon 2002, 200. The Tomb of the Three Brothers shows how banqueting reliefs could create prominent family monuments within a tomb developed as a commercial endeavour and used

set on a sarcophagus maintained their popularity at Palmyra, but in the 3rd century reclining figures were also occasionally carved in the round on sarcophagus lids.⁸⁹ At this time, there was also increased experimentation in the pictorial field below the *kline*. This area was usually adorned with bust images, but increasingly the space began to feature varied scenes of sacrifice, hunting, servants, or, more rarely myth,⁹⁰ sailing ships, dromedaries, and even other banquet scenes.⁹¹

These changes in typology and use of the banqueting motif were the result of important social changes at Palmyra. The 2nd century saw a rise in the occurrence of different family groups owning portions of one tomb, and also the trading of loculi, both phenomena that have been connected by Gawlikowski with the rise of an urban 'middle class' and the waning of tribal society.⁹² We see high status tomb founders first introduce the banquet relief on clan, or extended kin monuments, which were visible to the large audience that passed below on Palmyra's main roads. These images served in some senses as proxies for the people that they represented,⁹³ allowing these successful representatives of the old clans to continue to be present in the lives of the wider community. This established one sense of the image's local resonance, enshrining it as a prestigious paradigm of family success, on which others subsequently drew. As affluence levels increased,⁹⁴ and the habit of visual commemoration became more widespread in the city, the banquet relief was employed by a broader component of local society. The image offered patrons access to an iconography that could be adjusted to suit their particular needs, while also being imbued with the weight of prestige and tradition.⁹⁵ It did so at a variable price range: from loculus cover images to expensive triclinium forms. Palmyra's middle social levels came to be commemorated with a 'traditional' image of familial piety and power, but processes of social distinction led them to develop new displays of this iconography, as subjects strove to evoke this time-honoured image of the ideal Palmyrene family in fashionable and innovative ways.

by multiple groups (Chabot 1922, 96–105; Cantineau 1936, 354–55; Kraeling 1961–62; Gawlikowski 1970b, 204–06; Tanabe 1986, figs. 221–226; Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 119–21, no. 162; Cussini 1995, 245–46, n. 43; 2005, 31–32).

⁸⁹ Colledge 1976, 77.

⁹⁰ Parlasca 1998, 313.

⁹¹ Colledge 1976, 76–78; Parlasca 1984, 290–94; 1998, 313.

⁹² Gawlikowski 2005, 53.

⁹³ For images as extension of the subject's agency and active forces in social processes, see Gell 1998, 16–21, 52–53, 96–154; Stewart 2007, 159–66; Tanner 2007, 72–73, 81–91.

⁹⁴ On Palmyra's trade and trends in prosperity, see Gawlikowski 1996; Young 2001, 136–86; Luther 2004.

⁹⁵ The potential power of manipulating, or inventing, traditional symbols has been demonstrated in many contexts (see, for example, Hobsbawm 1983a–b; Zanker 1988, 101–263).

FAMILY VALUES: BÔLHÂ'S TOMB

The sort of social processes which saw innovations in banquet relief typology combined with a conscious evocation of the traditional 'cliché' banqueting iconography are perhaps best understood by looking at these images in the context of the family tomb. Standard formulae in tomb foundation inscriptions refer to Palmyrene tombs as *bt'lm* (eternal homes)⁹⁶ and often state that they were built by the founder for his sons and the sons of his sons, forever.⁹⁷ The realities of tomb ownership were frequently more complex, with sections of the tomb, or occasionally the whole monument sold off to unrelated individuals,⁹⁸ but the idea of these monuments as a family concern was an important one at Palmyra. The inscriptions accompanying images trace the lineage of the subjects, usually through the male family line. The texts help define and validate the subjects' inclusion within the monument by evoking their relationships to the tomb founder or other important family figures. As a result, Palmyrene funerary monuments became a form of family history, albeit a highly selective one.⁹⁹

The place of the banquet relief in this landscape was important: its emphasis upon the collective family group offered patrons a particularly useful means of expressing, and negotiating, their position among these interconnected relationships. An early hypogeum¹⁰⁰ in Palmyra's Southeast Necropolis provides the focus for the following discussion of family commemoration through banqueting imagery.¹⁰¹ The tomb's foundation inscription informs us that 'this house of eternity was made for Bôlhâ son of Nebôšûri, for him and for his children forever. In *Ab* the year 400 (August AD 89)'.¹⁰² This tomb is examined here because it offers the opportunity to explore the banquet motif, alongside other memorials, in a monument used by one extended family¹⁰³ for five generations, over nearly 150 years.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁶ Hillers and Cussini 1996, 346.

⁹⁷ Concluding clauses quite often specify male heirs only (Cussini 2005, 30–31, n. 18). The term *bny* (sons) appears to have sometimes been used as a collective designation not necessarily equating to precise genetic ties, but it was also a way of expressing direct descent (Piersimoni 1995, 253–54; Kaizer 2002, 213–27).

⁹⁸ For examination of cession inscriptions, see Cussini 1995; Yon 2002, 201–10; Cussini 2005, 30–36.

⁹⁹ Many subjects buried in hypogea were interred without sculpted memorials (Higuchi and Saito 2001, 49–101; Yon 2002, 198–201).

¹⁰⁰ There is a single Hellenistic example (Fellmann 1970), but apart from this monument the next dated hypogeum appears in the 80s AD (Gawlikowski 1970b, 48; 2005, 58).

¹⁰¹ Al-As' ad and al-Taha 1968, 83; Schnädelbach 2010, 67, no. S123.

¹⁰² Gawlikowski 1974, 37, no. 75.

¹⁰³ It is rare that all of the subjects in the monument come from one single family, particularly in hypogea (Piersimoni 1995, 251; Yon 2002, 198–204).

¹⁰⁴ There is one burial slot containing memorials that may not belong to the family, but their overlap in name choices indicates they were related through women in the family and simply less

Bôlhâ's tomb had a relatively simple façade and access to the tomb interior, where the banquet images were displayed, was restricted. Visitors descended a flight of limestone steps to a locked single leaf stone door¹⁰⁵ opening onto an entrance hall with a well and then took four further steps to reach the earthen floor of the tomb (Fig. 6). Many Palmyrene hypogea were based on a reversed T plan: the door aligned with a long straight gallery flanked by lateral exedrae on either side of the entrance.¹⁰⁶ This was not the case, however, at Bôlhâ's tomb, which was originally built on a modest and irregular plan.¹⁰⁷ Later extensions saw the central exedra collapse before the space excavated for a banquet memorial was finished.¹⁰⁸ This left a monument, which, even after later additions, comprised only a transverse irregular-shaped hall, made by the northern and southern exedrae, with the central gallery only a shallow exedra with four burial slots. The descendants of Bôlhâ were therefore deprived of the usual highly visible main gallery opposite the door.¹⁰⁹ Elsewhere, this area was exploited with banquet reliefs showing the tomb founder, his descendants¹¹⁰ or other figures wanting to appear in this light. Denied access to this key position, Bôlhâ's heirs exploited the two lateral exedrae for their main memorials.

Compared with some examples, this tomb has relatively few funerary images, but the stelai, busts and banquet images that it does contain nevertheless form an articulate expression of shifting interfamily relationships. Two branches of the family are commemorated here: the descendants of Bôlhâ and those of his brother Nebôšûri. The most ancient parts of the tomb are the standing section of the central gallery and the northern exedra,¹¹¹ but the oldest memorial predates the tomb itself. This was a stele depicting Bôlhâ's brother, Nebôšûri, with two of Bôlhâ's grandchildren, which had been used as a grave marker outside the tomb until it was redeployed to seal a locus in the remaining part of the central gallery.¹¹² Such acts of care for ancestral monuments are not unique at Palmyra¹¹³ and this curatorship of the past presumably spoke of the patron's piety. Bôlhâ was posthumously commemorated by his daughter with a bust in the northern exedra.¹¹⁴ His wife and two of their grandchildren

recognisable as kin because they state their male lineage: Bounni and Sadurska 1994, nos. 102–103, 111.

¹⁰⁵ Al-As' ad and al-Taha 1968, 85.

¹⁰⁶ Al-As' ad and al-Taha 1968, 86; Gawlikowski 1970b, 111–25.

¹⁰⁷ Al-As' ad and al-Taha 1968, 84; Makowski 1985b, 78–79.

¹⁰⁸ Al-As' ad and al-Taha 1968, 87.

¹⁰⁹ Yon 2002, 200; Gawlikowski 2005, 52.

¹¹⁰ For example, Sadurska 1977, 35; Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 38–39, 172–73.

¹¹¹ Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 73.

¹¹² Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 72, 74, no. 96.

¹¹³ For example, Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 137–41.

¹¹⁴ Al-As' ad and al-Taha 1968, 94, no. 4; Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 75, no. 98.

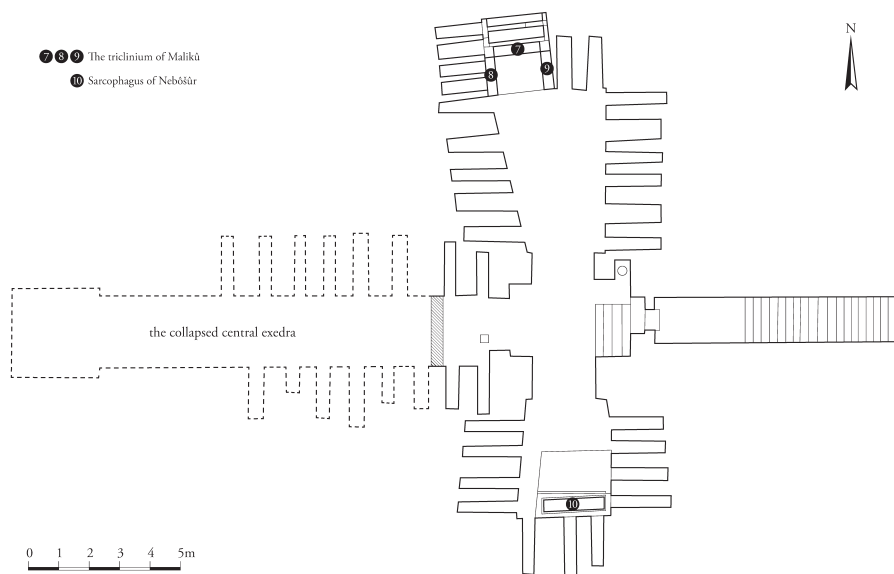


Fig. 6. Plan of Bôlhâ's tomb, Southeast Necropolis, Palmyra indicating the position of Figs. 7–10. Source: drawing by J. Wilkinson after the plan published by Bounni and Sadurska 1994.



Fig. 7. Central relief from the triclinium in the northern part of Bôlhâ's tomb. *In situ*. H. 1.70 m. Limestone. *Ca.* AD 170–200. Source: photograph by P. Grunwald, DAI Berlin (DAI 88.2609).

were buried and commemorated next to him¹¹⁵ and later images were included here, into the fifth generation, by the descendants of both brothers.¹¹⁶ However, the later southern exedra includes only the progeny of Nebôšûri in its memorials, suggesting that this branch of the family owned and developed this part of the tomb.¹¹⁷

The growing prosperity of Nebôšûri's branch of the family was made apparent from the third generation onwards¹¹⁸ in their addition of particularly high quality portrait memorials to cover loculi in the newer southern part of the tomb.¹¹⁹ The general trend in female attire at Palmyra saw increased jewellery use,¹²⁰ but the adoption of these styles here provided a further contrast with the more plainly dressed women in the earlier busts covering the loculi of the older northern exedra, serving to enhance the impression of the relative affluence of Nebôšûri's family. In response to developments in the southern exedra, the older northern exedra was dramatically monumentalised with a triclinium complex of three banqueting reliefs around the end of the 2nd century (Figs. 7–9).¹²¹ The great grandson of Bôlhâ, Malikû, who is shown reclining at its centre wearing a priest's hat (Fig. 7) was probably responsible for building this imposing monument.¹²² In the southern exedra, the descendants of Nebôšûri reacted by commissioning a high quality sarcophagus monument raised on a podium (Fig. 10), which faced the northern exedra's triclinium. A banquet relief set on the sarcophagus showed the great, great, grandson of Nebôšûri (called Nebôšûr) reclining in the centre with his father Ogeilû on his left.¹²³ These sculptures suggest a degree of inter-family competition, or at least the desire not to be surpassed by another branch of the family. The series of sculpture commissioned here sees an escalating level of expenditure on memorials and it appears that in the context of household prestige, banqueting images eclipsed other monuments and could only be equalled or bettered by other banqueting images.

¹¹⁵ Al-As'ad and al-Taha 1968, 94–95, nos. 3, 6–7; Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 74–77, nos. 97, 100–101.

¹¹⁶ Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 70.

¹¹⁷ Nebôšûri's son is buried in a loculus close to the entrance hall here, but the exedra seems to have been substantially enlarged at a later date (Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 71–73).

¹¹⁸ *Ca.* AD 140–230: Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 73.

¹¹⁹ Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 73.

¹²⁰ Mackay 1949, 164, 173.

¹²¹ Makowski 1985b, 89, nn. 55, 95; Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 88.

¹²² Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 88.

¹²³ Both style and family details indicate a date after AD 200, after the construction of the triclinium (Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 90).



Fig. 8. Relief showing the (viewer's) left side of the triclinium in the northern part of Bôlhâ's tomb. *In situ*. H. 1.61 m. Source: photograph by P. Grunwald, DAI Berlin (DAI 88.2605).



Fig. 9. Relief showing the (viewer's) right side of the triclinium in the northern part of Bôlhâ's tomb. *In situ*. H. 1.66 m. Source: photograph by P. Grunwald, DAI Berlin (DAI 88.2604).



Fig. 10. Sarcophagus of Nebôšûr in the southern part of Bôlhâ's tomb. *In situ*. H. 1.90 m. Limestone. Early 3rd century AD. Source: photograph by author.

Client Specifications: 'Happy Families Are All Alike'?

One explanation proposed for the lack of individualised physiognomy attested in Palmyrene funerary commemoration, particularly in banqueting imagery, is that some images were produced as 'standard portraits' by workshops and were made into portraits purely through the addition of an epitaph.¹²⁴ This model has implications for our understanding of the banquet images in Bôlhâ's tomb where the iconographic format employed by both sets of descendants is

¹²⁴ For discussion of this idea, see Bounni 1971, 125; Schmidt-Colinet 1992, 139–40; Texidor and Dentzer-Feydy 1993, 78–80.

similar to other examples at the site, and some of the figures are not personalised with texts. The standard or stock portrait model would suggest that these banquet reliefs were not special commissions, but rather roughly shaped for workshop stock, and purchased with more figures than this family required. This scenario is highly unlikely.¹²⁵ Elsewhere in the Roman world, production of shaped sarcophagi for stock may have occurred,¹²⁶ but such organisation was often not economically viable and a wide range of relationships between client, workshop and quarry were possible.¹²⁷ Palmyrene banqueting reliefs are made of local limestone, excavated from nearby quarries,¹²⁸ and carved by local sculptors¹²⁹ who supplied the city's immediate demands. Palmyra's sarcophagi were roughly worked at these quarries, in order to reduce the weight of stone brought to the city on carts,¹³⁰ but the communication of client specifications to the quarry, over this comparatively short distance, was entirely feasible. It is, therefore, doubtful that there would have been any advantages to blocking out important features without responding to client demand, as this would merely serve to unnecessarily restrict the appeal of an expensive¹³¹ product.

Close examination of the banqueting motif at Palmyra shows that the iconographic model was constantly adjusted and adapted to meet patron requirements and family situations. Physiognomic individualisation was a rare choice in this context, but there were other forms of specification on a spectrum ranging from unique commissions to groups of images that are very similar. The decision as to how 'standard' the image form was did not only correlate to expense level. The Tomb of Alaine contained five of the highest quality banquet images from the city, but although there are some singular components (such as the addition of Roman *bullae*, and the number of couches included),

¹²⁵ Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 191.

¹²⁶ Ward Perkins's important study led to this production for stock model being regarded as the norm (Ward-Perkins 1980a, 23, 27, 40–52; 1980b, 328–37).

¹²⁷ The factors affecting these variable relationships have been outlined persuasively in Russell 2011. See now also Russell 2014.

¹²⁸ Schmidt-Colinet 1990, 88; Al-As'ad and Schmidt-Colinet 1993, 573; Schmidt-Colinet 1995a, 53.

¹²⁹ On local workshops and their various technical styles, see Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 192–95.

¹³⁰ Schmidt-Colinet 1990; 1995a, 53. Roughed out sarcophagi have been found at the quarries and partially worked figures have been recovered from tombs indicating that they were finished *in situ* (Bounni and Al-As'ad 1987, 124–25; Schmidt-Colinet 1990, figs. 13, 16–17).

¹³¹ Even a plain limestone sarcophagus was expensive. Images with sculpted detail or carved in the round were much more time consuming and therefore more costly (Wiegartz 1974, 365–66; Russell 2011, 122, 128).

the iconographic composition draws heavily on a standard format.¹³² There was clearly merit to be had in the evocation of this traditional presentation, which conveyed the subjects' conformity to traditional family ideals in a highly refined technical style. On the other hand, in a large banquet relief that belonged to a man by the name of Bôlbarak, which is rather roughly rendered, the composition was amended to include a second wife as well as the subject's mother and children (Fig. 2). Space had also been made to incorporate a pillar crowned by the *modius* he had worn when a priest.¹³³ The banqueting monuments at Bôlhâ's tomb were of different quality levels,¹³⁴ and each was adjusted to suit the needs of the family in different ways. The tomb, therefore, allows us to examine how sculptors tailored the appeal of a 'standard' iconographic motif to meet individual patron concerns.

The patron of the triclinium in Bôlhâ's tomb commissioned an expensive monument that prioritised monumental scale and a large number of figures over detailed sculptural finish (Figs. 7–9). The reliefs draw heavily upon the established local genre of banquet motifs, but the number of principal figures and dress styles clearly relate to client specification.¹³⁵ All of the subjects here are represented without any indication of personal physiognomy: they have smooth idealised features, which emphasise a collective, group identity. This sense of familial likeness is heightened through similarities in dress choice. Palmyrene men had a wide range of dress options but, with the single exception of one unnamed priest's bust below the central *kline*, all are shown here wearing various forms of the chiton and himation. This was a common dress choice at Palmyra; it probably served, as elsewhere in the Eastern Empire,¹³⁶ as the default costume when emphasising the subject's citizen values.¹³⁷ The monument founder, Malikû, combines his himation with priestly *modius* and shaved head to distinguish his particular social achievements, but the rest of the figures are shown wearing subtly differentiated versions of the same dress.

The seated women in the reliefs depict different generations of Malikû's close female relatives in strikingly similar apparel. The main distinguishing factors are small, but important, variations in the lengths of tunic sleeves and brooch designs, perhaps reflecting the measured pursuit of shifting clothing fashions. The images set between the *kline* legs also closely resemble one

¹³² Sadurska 1977, 89; Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 175.

¹³³ Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 146–48, no. 195.

¹³⁴ Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 88–90.

¹³⁵ For other triclinium examples, see Amy and Seyrig 1936, 247–50, pls. 46–47; Tanabe 1986, figs. 237–46; Higuchi and Saito 2001, 31–36, pls. 5–12.

¹³⁶ Smith 1998, 66–67; 2006, 150–57; 2008, 390–91.

¹³⁷ Will 1992, 109.

another in dress and physiognomy and the single priest bust is an ideal type, similar to others elsewhere.

These reliefs stressed familial likeness and unity, but used text to personalise the figures and to map Malikû's particular network of prized relationships onto a locally defined conception of how a 'good family' should look. This allowed him to negotiate his own status concerns and also to honour cherished bonds. Malikû had himself cast in the central role, reclining beside his deceased father, with his wife seated at their feet and their two sons standing between them (Fig. 7). Beneath the *kline* the four busts show a son of Malikû on the left, with his sister next to him, followed by a cousin.¹³⁸ The final priestly bust is the only subject not identified by an inscription on this relief. The banquet scene on Malikû's right (Fig. 8) posthumously commemorated his two brothers reclining with the dead son of one of them standing between them. On the opposite couch (Fig. 9) the single reclining banqueter is identified as Hermes, a family freedman. At his feet, adjacent to the central relief, was the wife of Malikû's father (presumably the mother of Malikû and his brothers). Between Hermes and this female subject stand three male figures. Two of these are described as Malikû's deceased children, but the third lacks any inscription. Both of the lateral reliefs contained two ideal, unlabelled busts beneath the *kline*.

The application of text transformed these ideal family images into specific personal commemoration allowing Malikû to leave descendants his own visual chronicle of family history dictated by the relationships he prioritised. He constructed and defined here his version of the family unit, which included idiosyncratic personal choices such as the unusual presence of a freedman reclining next to his mother and shown in similar style to his brothers, though with an embroidered rather than a plain chiton.¹³⁹ Palmyrene banquet images can be entirely anepigraphic,¹⁴⁰ indicating that the presence of inscriptions was not essential for them to serve a commemorative role, but texts played a vital role here in interpreting this iconographic format in accordance with the family's needs. There is no evidence to suggest that the unnamed images were ever identified with paint as this is well preserved on the tomb's inscriptions. The fact that not all figures are labelled on such an expensive and personal monument seems somewhat surprising.

¹³⁸ Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 71, 88.

¹³⁹ Family freedmen are shown reclining in Tomb F (Higuchi and Saito 2001, 24–26, pls. 20–25) but inscriptions indicate that tomb owners tended to provide for family members, rather than dependents. Freedmen usually had to purchase portions of other tombs to be included there (Yon 2002, 207–08).

¹⁴⁰ For example, Bounni and Sadurska 1994, nos. 231–234, figs. 232–235, 237.

A range of reasons have been advanced to explain why such anepigraphic images occur: the subjects represented may still have been alive, they may have been buried elsewhere, or the figures were, perhaps, 'purely decorative'.¹⁴¹ These images may possibly represent people buried elsewhere, but whether that would have prevented them being commemorated with text as well as an image here is uncertain. Named subjects could certainly be commemorated by multiple images.¹⁴² It is also possible that the busts are unlabelled because the intended subjects were still alive, but the epitaphs on this monument appear to distinguish between living and dead subjects through the addition of a term of grief (*HBL*) beside the name of the subject.¹⁴³ It seems significant that it is the comparatively 'minor' subjects that are without labels on this monument: the busts underneath the *kline* legs and the smallest standing subject between the freedman and Malikû's mother. While this might suggest that these images were 'purely decorative', this underestimates their importance in enhancing the impression of a large, well-ordered, model family group. In addition, the unnamed images may have been popular because they could respond to changing family situations by becoming specific portraits through the addition of text, if the founder so wished. Text made the commemoration endure so that precise knowledge of the family was not required, but if those visiting the tomb were told that the image represented a specific person, it may still have had the capacity to serve as a memorial. It is possible that the texts' potential to distinguish specific individuals was used as a relative honour to indicate who was particularly worthy of mention. In any case, without inscriptions the figures still served to situate Malikû at the heart of a visual template that implied his central role within a large family group that conformed to local ideals.

Nebôšûr responded to the triclinium monument of the northern exedra by commissioning a high-quality sarcophagus (Fig. 10).¹⁴⁴ The carefully worked relief was also expensive but here the money was not spent on scale, but on a high level of artistic detail and finish. As in the northern exedra, this monument employs the subject's relative position and dress to communicate hierarchies in achievement and importance, but here considerable artistic skill was expended upon the creation of an unusually broad and nuanced range of individualisation. This is attested not only through the differentiation of who is commemorated with text, and a range of distinctions in dress, but also through

¹⁴¹ Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 88, 90.

¹⁴² For example, Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 24, nos. 31, 41.

¹⁴³ This term was not used consistently to indicate the subjects were dead, but in instances where it is applied uniformly, to indicate present and future grief, other elements are employed to differentiate the posthumous commemorations (for example, Gawlikowski 1970a, 77–80).

¹⁴⁴ On assessment of 'quality', see Smith 1994, 261.

different gradations of portrait personalisation to evoke a sense of the subject's real appearance. The resulting formulation stresses different degrees of individual identity through this collective family framework.

Like Malikû, Nebôšûr is depicted reclining at the centre, expressing the attainment of priesthood through his shaven head and *modius*. However, unlike Malikû he wears a tunic and trousers, with a *chlamys* clasped at the right shoulder by a round fibula. An inscription informs us that he had this sarcophagus made for his father, Ogeilû, who reclines to his left. Ogeilû is bearded with curly hair; wearing a similar girt tunic but with a mantle falling from the left shoulder. His inscription states that he died aged 60.¹⁴⁵ Both of these figures have different but equally detailed leaf panels added to their dress. The male dress choices of these reclining figures draw on elaborately embroidered local versions of Parthian styling preferences to assert personal prestige, in contrast with the plainer chiton and himation emphasised in the triclinium. Each of these figures holds a vessel in his left hand and has features that evoke a sense of individual physiognomy through an idealising veneer.¹⁴⁶ Nebôšûr has deep naso-labial furrows and lines between the brows, particularly unusual in a priest's image where the office, rather than the man, tends to be emphasised through an iconic ideal physiognomy (for example, see Fig. 1). Presumably, this choice served to associate the positive traits of the role with this specific individual, as well as conveying a degree of seniority. Ogeilû's facial features have individual physiognomy indicated through the cleft between the brows and the light lines about the mouth, but his face is more ideal and smoother than his son's, despite his 60 years. This difference probably reflects the fact that it was a posthumous commemoration, where an emphasis upon conformity to ideal qualities was more appropriate.

The other figures in the relief are 'stock' ideal types with their social roles defined by refinements in their dress and by their position in relation to the two reclining male subjects. The woman seated on a cushion at the foot of the *kline* is represented with the large eyes, slim brows, full mouth and youthful rounded features that define local conceptions of beauty. Her left hand adjusts the veil covering her head and her hair is pulled into the turban from a centre parting. She wears more jewellery than any other figure in the relief: numerous necklaces, bracelets, a ring, a brooch and earrings. The inscription informs us that this was Aqmê, also a descendant of the founder's brother and probably the wife of Nebôšûr.¹⁴⁷ All the women on this monument wear jewellery, but

¹⁴⁵ An unusual detail in Palmyrene epitaphs (Piersimoni 1995, 258).

¹⁴⁶ Compare, for example, the idealised version of reclining priest and bearded man in the Tomb of Šalamallat (Tanabe 1986, fig. 398; Bounni and Sadurska 1994, no. 231).

¹⁴⁷ Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 72, 90.

the amount appears graded in relation to their visual prominence, further articulating degrees in family honour. Beneath the *kline*, the female busts identified by text wear just necklace and earrings and are depicted in a similarly standardised format that emphasised physical beauty through youthful facial features. The figure to the right represents the mother of Nebôšûr, the one to the left is his sister, Haggâ.

On this monument, four of the nine figures are without identifying texts. These include the two male busts shown under the *kline* on the sarcophagus, which represent an unnamed priest and a young man in himation. The male and female figures standing beside the reclining banqueters are also anonymous, well-dressed embodiments of local ideals. The male is linked with the founder through gesture: his hand rests on Nebôšûr's shoulder.¹⁴⁸ He wears chiton and himation, and has short hair with rounded nondescript features. The female is veiled with hair drawn into a pleated turban. She wears a single beaded necklace, bracelet and earrings. Although not distinguished by text, these two figures occupy more prominent positions than the busts showing Nebôšûr's mother and sister below the *kline*. As we have seen, a range of explanations can be advanced for these unnamed images. Possibly on this monument the unnamed images simply occupied the other end of a spectrum of hierarchies in individualisation from the portrait features and texts used to identify Nebôšûr and his father. Alternatively, Nebôšûr may have used a model that exaggerated the number of figures in his family in order not to be outdone in this regard by Malikû's triclinium display. Figures may have been added in the main relief to imply the important presence of children in the marriage, and a series of busts included beneath the *kline* to convey valued relationships with ancestors, or extended family. Such additional figures may not have represented particular individuals, but instead served as useful accoutrements suggesting that the named protagonists were part of what constituted a 'good family' in Palmyra.

Ideal images have been regarded as entirely distinct from portraiture, perhaps connected to serving a different commemorative role as *nefeš*.¹⁴⁹ However, this division appears artificial and does not reflect the similarity in how both 'ideal' and 'individualised' images were employed on this monument. We see both forms used together here in a spectrum of individualisation and idealisation: the living Nebôšûr is shown with portrait features as is his deceased father, albeit an elevating version, while his wife and mother are

¹⁴⁸ On the use of this gesture to convey dynastic links, see Bounni and Sadurska 1994, 38; Heyn 2010, 639–40.

¹⁴⁹ For example, Colledge 1976, 61–62; Sadurska 1988, 75–76. The idea of the *nefeš* was discussed above (see especially nn. 28–29).

represented by canonical ideal types. It seems likely therefore that the differences in style were not the product of the image serving distinct memorial functions. The cultural choices that dictated the degree of visual individualisation considered desirable were, instead, gendered and hierarchical: the reclining male monument founder and his father are the ones to receive visually specific identities that convey a sense of the 'real' person. This is a pattern that recurs at Palmyra, where principal male figures may choose to draw on Western individualising portrait preferences to firmly connect the ideology of the image form with the individuals in question, as well as conveying seniority and experience. Feminine personal prestige was not constructed in this way. Rather, it is shown through traditional indications of position in the relief, and through dress, accompanied by the usual evocation of youth and beauty. They are immortalised by suggesting their conformity to the model of good wife and mother, rather than through indicating particular individual traits.¹⁵⁰ These differing choices in how to be seen reflect the different gender roles that the community offered.

Both Malikû and Nebôšûr commissioned monuments that show them at the centre of 'standard-looking' banquet reliefs. This iconography was the product of shared cultural ideals about what the model Palmyrene family looked like, and a degree of sameness was therefore inevitable, but real family bonds and hierarchies were superimposed upon this format. Both men used the image's rich associations with prestigious and traditional kinship for their own dynastic ends, conveying their versions of family hierarchy. The triclinium reliefs emphasised the size of Malikû's household and its conformity to a collective archetypal model of family unity. It included reference to Malikû's priestly status through his dress, while also emphasising his own citizen values and those of his male clan. The sarcophagus relief commissioned by Nebôšûr in response showed him and his father in local, artfully adorned versions of Parthian dress, and employed the physiognomic individualisation more associated with portraiture in the western parts of the empire to emphasise particular subjects within his family unit. His relief used this untraditional artistic technology to serve longstanding concerns regarding the differentiation of hierarchy, allowing increased personal visibility to some subjects within a template that stressed collective identity. As from the beginning of their use at Palmyra, traditional concerns and social competition were served by representational formats created elsewhere, but tailored to the needs of this cultural context.

¹⁵⁰ This gender construct is contrasted with social realities by Cussini 2005, 37–39.

THE BANQUET IN ITS PALMYRENE CONTEXT

Banqueting reliefs offered their patrons a highly prestigious mode of commemoration invested with the refined dining etiquettes of the living. They also served to make the deceased participants in funerary feasts held in the tombs alongside the bereaved, and perhaps allowed some viewers to envisage dead relatives enjoying these festivities in the afterlife. Part of the appeal of the image may have been that it offered a visual formulation that was always well regarded because it was rooted in high status lifetime dining display, but was also amenable to these other viewer concerns.

The value of this iconography was also shaped by how viewers perceived the subjects. It was initially emblematic of an elite family ideal, which elevated the leaders of extended families, showing them prominently on their tower tombs. These important cultural associations were then drawn on by the wider community to construct images showing patrons as the head of traditional, ideal Palmyrene families. There was, therefore, a constant interplay between a standardising iconographic template, with its recognisable expression of desirable cultural values, and the patron's adjustment and manipulation of this motif to express personal concerns and relationships.

The use of banqueting imagery in Bôlhâ's tomb indicates some of the processes by which these images could be personalised with text, dress choices, figure arrangement and sometimes by portrait features. The established iconography was used in a dynamic way to articulate a personal version of family history and to negotiate personal status concerns. It was this flexibility that maintained the popularity and prestige of banqueting images in Palmyra's tombs, allowing generations of patrons to map their own selective dynastic claims onto a canonical image, rife with associations of power and prestige.

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Abbreviation

CIS *Corpus inscriptionum semiticarum* (Paris 1881–).

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