

## BOOK REVIEW

*Dining Posture in Ancient Rome: Bodies, Values, and Status.* By MATTHEW B. ROLLER. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006. Pp. xii + 219. Cloth, \$39.50. ISBN 0-691-12457-4.

M.F.K. Fisher, the great 20<sup>th</sup>-century interpreter of food and foodways, once observed that there is a communion of more than our bodies whenever bread is broken and wine drunk. Indeed, in recent years the sharing of food and drink has allowed for all kinds of interpretation, a reality no better confirmed than in M. Roller's *Dining Posture in Ancient Rome*. This book brings fresh insight into a neglected topic, the role of bodily bearing in a convivial setting in the Roman world, and provides a much needed revision of the traditional *communis opinio* on dining posture on convivial occasions.

The traditional view of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century German handbooks holds that dining posture played out along schematic lines: free adult males reclined; free adult females sat during the Republic, but reclined during the Empire; free children, if present, sat; and slaves stood. Recognizing that this interpretation is based on limited literary evidence, R. examines both literary accounts of convivia from 200 BC to AD 200 and visual material, specifically funerary objects and wall murals. R. organizes his study around the participants at convivia—devoting a chapter in turn to men, women and children, and analyzing within each chapter the literary and visual sources. In addition, he draws on contemporary scholarship on the history of the body and nonverbal communication to interpret dining posture.

The first chapter focuses on men, for whom reclining at table was the dominant posture. In the literary sources, reclining was associated not only with leisure (*otium*) and privilege for elite males, but also with escape from the *negotia* of their public lives; in contrast, slaves regularly stood, a posture linked to their servile function on these occasions. Turning to the visual evidence, R. demonstrates that, consistent with the literary texts, standing remained the dominant posture for slaves. His main focus, however, is on non-servile diners. In the funerary monuments, these individuals typically appear as freedmen or fairly low-status freeborn persons (sub-elites) who, on the basis of dress, posture and tableware, nevertheless represent themselves as elite diners; but unlike the elites of the literary texts, they seem to portray themselves so as to solidify their social identity, perhaps even advertising their elite aspirations in the process.

Pompeian wall panels provide additional interpretative possibilities. Within dining rooms likely utilized by sub-elite males, depictions of convivia were centrally located and preserved features of elite dining that would have prompted a host of questions relating to the diners' own social aspirations and dining practices. On the other hand, dwellings likely to have been occupied by local elites con-

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tained less conspicuous and less centrally located dining imagery. R. interprets this evidence as indicating that these elites did not engage in conscious self-reflection about dining practices to form their identity; owing to their social station, they probably felt little pressure to do so. R. completes this chapter with a consideration of contexts (e.g., military and mourning) in which males would have chosen not to recline, as well as with a convincing analysis of the meaning behind sitting, as opposed to standing or reclining, in the urban cookshop or tavern (*popina*).

R. turns next to women and dining posture. His analysis of the literary evidence reverses the claims of Valerius and Varro that women in some unspecified time period dined seated, while the men reclined. In fact, women of every status frequently reclined to dine—a practice which must have mirrored contemporary dining norms. Interpretation of the material remains is more challenging. The funerary materials portray sub-elite women reclining when alone, but seated when in male company. R. interprets the latter posture as suggesting sexual restraint, a value especially important for this class of women, who would have been concerned to advertise their social belonging and to distance themselves from their humble past. R. further claims that this seated posture “works” only if we understand reclining (as depicted on the reliefs of women dining by themselves) as the true “default” posture. Such arguments are indirect, as R. admits. Even so, he is right to claim that ideology can illuminate social practice by challenging our assumptions about material of this nature.

Children, the focus of R.’s third and final chapter, appeared infrequently at *convivia*, especially in a non-literary context. Once again, R. corrects the overly schematic handbook view of children as always sitting on these occasions. In fact, children in the literary sources both stood and reclined, although the latter posture was most likely restricted to elite boys and was closely connected to their functioning as adults. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that the age at which reclining took place was more fluid than the handbooks suggest.

R. is at his best in his analysis of the literary evidence. His correction of the *communis opinio* of dining posture is invaluable, as is his careful analysis of the nature of the *comissatio* in the appendix. The interpretation of the visual sources is more challenging, however, and two points might be usefully raised. First, the corpus for the period under study is not large—45 pieces of funerary material, restricted primarily to Rome and its immediate surroundings, and 31 wall paintings, the majority of which come from Pompeii. To be sure, R. can only work with the evidence at his disposal, and he puts this material to carefully nuanced use; nevertheless, one wishes that the remains were more plentiful and more geographically diverse. Second and more generally, we know that the postures R. examines on

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these grave reliefs were present in the ancient world long before the Romans came to power. One could argue, then, that they reflect a social convention that is even more complex than R. portrays. This reality invites further examination.

Nonetheless, R. convincingly shows that dining postures at Roman convivia were dynamic rather than static. More broadly, he provides a rich interpretative context for understanding the complex ways in which gender, status and social relations played out in the Roman world.

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