

BOOK REVIEW

The Roman Community at Table during the Principate, New and Expanded Edition.
By JOHN F. DONAHUE. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2017. Pp. 394 + 3 drawings, 12 photographs, 9 tables. ISBN: 978-0-472-03695-0. \$39.95.

First published in 2004, this volume shone an important light on Roman feasting practices (e.g. *epulum*, *cena*, *convivium* and *prandium*). With a sharp focus on inscriptions, Donahue was able to provide an insightful and well-argued exploration of banquets in the Roman west. The enthusiastic examination of the evidence, and the willingness to draw upon a wide pool of scholarship, made this an essential work for anyone approaching food and feasting in the ancient world. Although the conclusions were perhaps unsurprising, namely, that feasts served to reinforce social distinction against a backdrop of political and social change, the work nonetheless demonstrated the possibilities of ancient food studies, as a discipline, as well the potential for cross-cultural comparison. Any student of Rome who has looked at Suetonius will be familiar with the differences between his subjects; and this can be seen too in the manner of their relationship to food and feasting. For Augustus, with a moral lens, and an awareness of his public image, food entered the way he wished to be perceived (Suetonius, *Aug.* 76-77). He did not overindulge at banquets and preferred simpler foods in smaller portions: “*Cibi [...] minimi erat atque vulgaris fere [...] Ex hac inobservantia nonnumquam vel ante initum vel post dimissum convivium solus cenabat, cum pleno convivio nihil tangeret*”.¹ The comparison with Suetonius’ life of Vitellius is stark, where feasting, and excess, consume Vitellius: “*Ut autem homo non profundae modo sed intempestivae quoque ac sordidae gulae, ne in sacrificio quidem umquam aut itinere ullo temperavit, quin inter altaria ibidem statim viscus et farris frusta paene rapta e foco manderet circaque viarum popinas fumantia obsonia vel pridiana atque semesa*”.² Donahue’s work was welcome in that he studied not just the height of

¹ Suetonius, *Aug.* 76: “As for food [...] he ate sparingly and generally preferred simple food [...] because of this irregularity he sometimes ate alone either before a dinner party began or after it was over, touching nothing while it was in progress.”

² Suetonius, *Vit.* 13: “Yet characteristically for a man whose appetite was not just insatiable but also immune to time or decency, he could never refrain, even when making a sacrifice, from snatching bits

imperial powers seen in Suetonius, but also wider society and different social ranks. His focus was ordinary people and routine experience: “the goal of knowing in greater detail than had previously been attempted, and largely through epigraphic testimony, the social identity of the *dramatis personae* of the Roman banquet in Italy and the Western provinces during the imperial era” (xxiv). The ability to paint an imaginative image of normal social experiences remains the great value of the work. The arguments can be challenged in part, and certain sections remain more descriptive than analytical, but that does not dilute the overall importance of Donahue’s efforts. In reviewing this work, I will focus on those new elements included in this edition.

The volume opens with a new extended introduction. Here Donahue provides a fast-paced survey of recent trends in the scholarship. This is a difficult task, and one made more so by covering so many different areas in such a small space. Donahue surveys the historical development of public feasting, emperors and elites, donors and diners, the streets and the senses, technology and the future of food studies. In one sense, this is a useful, if fast address on the status of the field. With that in mind, it would have been more useful here to get a stronger sense of how Donahue’s own understanding of his previous work has influenced this direction; or just as important how and where the challenges have been seen, and how his arguments might now change to reflect the many different approaches covered here. There is a good example of this offered by Donahue when thinking about Domitian and how he sought to present himself in his banquets (xix-xx; 72-78). Donahue stresses that Domitian appeared as a god to those in attendance and that the flat apse at the end of the dining room was a “backdrop for the emperor himself,” thus transforming the banquet into a “theatrical performance” (75). Through an imaginative comparison with a modern state banquet at the White House, and brief allusions to Charles I and Louis XIV, Donahue presented the case for social distance between the emperor and those invited to the *Domus Flavia*. This of course could reinforce the separation between diners and lead to a sense of awe towards the host. However, this needed to be examined in greater detail, in particular by engaging more closely with the work Donahue references (Grandjean et al. 2013),³ in particular the chapters by Royo and Crogiez-

of meat and cakes amid the altars, almost from the very fire, and devouring them on the spot; or when he was on a journey, doing the same to titbits smoking hot or else those left over from the day before and half-eaten in the inns along his route.”

³ Catherine Grandjean, Christophe Hugoniot & Brigitte Lion (eds.), *Le banquet du monarque dans le monde antique. Table des hommes* (Rennes; Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2013)

Pétrequin.⁴ Nonetheless, there are some excellent and useful observations made in this section, in particular where Donahue thinks about *tabernae* (bars), street trading and the sensory experience within urban life (xxvii-xxx).

The next additions are a bibliography containing new works in the field (323-334) and an addendum to the collection of inscriptions (241-250). Students interested in food studies will find the two bibliographies (291-334) useful guides to the field and the different directions they could take in their research. The epigraphic addendum provides 36 more sources, from Spain, Dalmatia, Gaul, North Africa and Italy. This builds on the already impressive collection of 316 inscriptions already in the book (163-240). These are well-chosen and provide useful contemporary perspectives, but they are formulaic sources and this could have been examined here more carefully. It would have been more useful for Donahue to provide translations of each, so that students without Latin could examine them in more detail. They remain however a useful collection of sources.

Donahue's central premise remains unchanged: that "the community meal became a highly effective tool for underscoring social distancing among participants," with food becoming a form of communication and the backdrop, the space, attuned to distinction and difference (146). This is still a convincing perspective and one that recognizes the importance of feasting in wider Roman social life. The book places Roman feasting against a wider ancient backdrop, and on reading this volume in its new form I am reminded of the careful way in which Donahue explored the Greek ideas (43-64), the depiction of different ranks of society with the Roman world and festal culture more generally. However, in producing a new and expanded edition, it would have been nice to include at least one new chapter, or a more thorough re-working of some of the sections, in light of the shifts in the scholarship. An examination of the social fabric within urban topography and the role of food and its consumption within this milieu would have added a further dimension to the approaches seen elsewhere, as would a fuller examination of the senses. Food history remains an important and dynamic field of research and one that brings together scholars from widely different schools of thought and academic disciplines. Its great strength is the interdisciplinarity that so defines it and the way in which comparative elements can elucidate

⁴ Manuel Royo, 'Macabre plaisanterie au palais (à propos de Dion LXVII, 9)' 113-128 & Sylvie Crogiez-Pétrequin, 'À la table des grands dans le monde romain tardif: images et réalités', 129-124.

aspects of the ancient world. This is then a useful new edition of what has become the standard route into Roman feasting.

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