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Come and dine with us: invitations to ritual dining as part of social strategies in sacred spaces in Palmyra

Abstract: This article investigates the so-called banqueting tesserae from Palmyra, which were used to gain entrance to religious banquets in Palmyra. In antiquity, banquets, ritual dining and sacred meals were pivotal societal practices through which groups and individuals could situate and regulate themselves and others within broader complex societal settings. Banquets functioned as a cultural practice, which would have been learned and which certain segments of society would certainly have become accustomed to from childhood. Such learning processes would have been part of the general socialization of children in order to shape them into individuals who could participate in the overall range of activities required by adults in order to form part of a broader community. For sure, dining practices would have been important to learn in the Greek and Roman cultural spheres if one belonged to the higher layers of society, where joint meals in domestic, public and religious contexts were a way of practicing accepted social behavior. In the context of this paper, the Palmyrene material is reassessed and examined in order to unlock these tiny items as pivotal objects in broader social strategies in Roman Palmyra.

1 Banquets and their societal meanings

In antiquity, banquets, ritual dining and sacred meals were pivotal societal practices through which groups and individuals could situate and regulate

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themselves and others within broader complex societal settings.¹ Banquets functioned as a cultural practice, which would have been learned and which certain segments of society would certainly have become accustomed to from childhood. Such learning processes would have been part of the general socialization of children in order to shape them into individuals who could participate in the overall range of activities required by adults in order to form part of a broader community.² For sure, dining practices would have been important to learn in the Greek and Roman cultural spheres if one belonged to the higher layers of society, where joint meals in domestic, public and religious contexts were a way of practicing accepted social behavior. Joint dining was not only observed in ancient so-called – for lack of a better word – pagan cults, but was also an essential element in both Judaism and Christianity.³ Furthermore, joint dining could also take place outside of religious contexts. Eating and drinking could bring people together around a topic, namely that of food and drink, and such a setting, with its different sensations of smell and taste and also often sound (music and/or singing), might not only have provided something to look forward to, but might also in the situation itself have allowed for tension to be released and conversation to flow more freely.⁴ Food and drink were also, in antiquity as they are today, social currencies through which status, prestige and societal standing evolved.

Extensive research has been undertaken on the nature of ritual banquetting in antiquity and opinions have differed immensely as to what in fact

1 Fabricius 1999. Also see Dentzer 1982 for a standard work on banquetting reliefs. For recent contributions on banquetting reliefs, see Draycott and Stamatopoulou 2016. In that volume, see especially Fabricius 2016, Baughan 2016, Lockwood 2016 and Audley-Miller 2016, which are of particular relevance to this article.

2 See for example Ochs and Shohet 2006 for an article which deals with mealtime practice as an essential way of socializing children in modern societies. It is interesting to observe that they underline that the cultural knowledge accumulated through understanding how to behave at mealtimes, through practice and language, is expressed even more at special events, such as feasts and ritual occasions (p. 47). It is important to notice that we take for granted that individuals in ancient societies would have known how to conduct themselves in banquetting situations, whereas in fact such practices must have been learned and practiced before one could attend such events together with members outside the immediate family.

3 Also see Nielsen 2014 for buildings in which such groups would have met as well as further references to publications on banquetting.

4 See for example Kleibl 2009 for examples stemming from the Isis sanctuaries across the Roman world. Also see the recently published collected volume edited by Gasparini and Veymiers (2018) for contributions dealing with numerous aspects of the Isis cult, also involving considerations of dining and the senses involved in the religious practices within this cult.

went on at such banquets and what they would have meant to individuals and groups.⁵ Such research into the nature of ancient banqueting is often based on the visual representations of these banquets, which are handed down to us in the shape of reliefs on a variety of monuments – including rock-cut facades, graves, sarcophagus lids and public buildings and through images in wall paintings as well as mosaics.⁶ The banqueting motif was indeed one that was popular in ancient art. The architecture attesting to banqueting shows us that communal dining took place in a variety of societal contexts: private homes, sanctuaries and both publicly and privately owned buildings.⁷ We must assume that a wide range of local and regional traditions existed depending on the specific settings and that some traditions might have spanned across vast regions if, for example, they were transmitted via a particular cult, such as that of Mithras and other so-called mystery cults.⁸ However, what remains common for conclusions made about ritual banquets, which were a wide-spread phenomenon in antiquity across time and space, is that they seem to have been a popular way to celebrate and offer respect to the gods or to commemorate deceased individuals, while also offering people a social space in which to interact with other individuals and, not to forget, also enjoy food and drink.⁹ While on the one hand celebrating the divine or the dead, basic human needs were also remembered at

5 See the recent volume by Draycott and Stamatopoulou (2016) on dining and death, which offers a string of high-quality contributions dealing with a variety of banquets, in particular those that are connected to funerary rites and death in general, spanning from the Mediterranean world across the Levant and as far east as China. Also see Draycott's introduction in the same volume for a thorough overview of the most important literature published on banqueting in antiquity and a strong historiographical contextualization of research already undertaken. Here I mention only a few of the most important works, which have been part of creating turns in the way in which we deal with banqueting in antiquity. These works include Dunbabin 2003; Dentzer 1982 (in French and therefore having received little attention in some newer non-French works on banquets, whereas Fehr's review (1984) of Dentzer's book received a lot of attention).

6 See Dunbabin 2003 and Dentzer 1982 for two standard works on the banqueting motif in Greek and Roman art.

7 Nielsen 2014 for a monograph which considers the architectural remains of constructions belonging to religious groups of various kinds. The bibliography holds a string of useful references and the book does show how it is in fact highly complex and difficult to interpret architectural remains and their original functions. Also see the earlier publication by van Nijf 1997 for primarily non-religious associations in the Roman East.

8 Publications by Benedikt Eckhardt, who has published extensively on ritual dining in ancient societies in broader contexts in recent years, provide a good insight into the various mechanisms and patterns in ritual dining. See for example Eckhardt 2009; 2016; 2017a; 2017b.

9 E.g. Dentzer 1982; Dunbabin 2003; Effenberger 1972; Murray 1988.

these events through the – often regulated – distribution of food and drink. However, not everyone was invited to these events. Banquets, be they *Totenmahle* (meals for the dead) or not, were always in one way or another closed or exclusive events to which one would have been invited for special reasons, e.g. if one was a member of a certain family or of a certain group. Social regulation was inherent to the nature of banqueting in antiquity. The banquet itself as well as the time leading up to it were situations which involved the playing out of complex societal patterns. At some times, these might have been more complex than at others. For closed exclusive groups, it might have been quite clear who was to be invited or not, such as in the case of Mithraic groups. However, in other cases this might not have been completely obvious from the outset, and maybe such ambiguity was even wished for and could be productive in negotiations about societal and religious situations and in circumstances where interaction between different groups had to take place.¹⁰

While it might be too generalizing to say that ritual banquets in principle had the same function in all places across the ancient Mediterranean world and beyond, it is appealing and probably appropriate to conclude that just as celebrating Christmas in Christian contexts is a celebration of one specific event – the birth of Jesus – ritual banquets would also have celebrated one thing: namely the recognition of the supposed existence of the divine, although taking place within a wide variety of contexts and traditions, which might have differed greatly in their details. Coming together around food and drink in structured settings is a basic human practice, which has been developed, changed and refined over thousands of years in numerous cultural settings, and the prevalence of the banqueting motif testifies to this practice.

While ritual banquets often seem to have been connected with death and burials, there were also established banqueting traditions which were not centered around the *Totenmahl*, or funerary banquet. In this paper, such non-funerary banquets that were held in the sanctuaries of Palmyra and their role within Palmyrene society are revisited.¹¹ This is done here primarily through a discussion of the iconography of the long overlooked – but crucial material

¹⁰ I have written about such notions in the context of Palmyrene religious life in Raja 2016a, in particular, 362–366.

¹¹ Audley-Miller's contribution in Draycott and Stamatopoulou 2016 deals with the banqueting reliefs in the graves of Palmyra on a general level, setting them apart from the funerary banquets. See Krag and Raja 2017 for a contribution that addresses the role of women and children in the Palmyrene banqueting reliefs. This contribution shows that a full overview of the material is needed in order to make broader generalizations about the use of these motifs and their original contexts.

evidence – so-called banqueting tesserae, which indeed might be considered one of the most important sources for the study of Palmyrene religion.¹² While the banqueting tesserae of Palmyra have been treated in scholarship for several decades, they have not been considered as objects which held specific meanings in certain and time-limited situations until recently.¹³ Sacred space in Palmyra has been examined in much more detail, and the religious life of Palmyra in general has been treated by a number of scholars over the last century, but the relationship between the physical spaces and the more ephemeral material of the tesserae have not often been connected in order to try to understand the ritual banquet in Palmyra in a more nuanced light.¹⁴

2 Tadmor in the Syrian Desert – an oasis city and a crossroads

We do not know much about Palmyra, an oasis city in the Syrian Desert situated half way between the Mediterranean coast and the river Euphrates, before the Roman period.¹⁵ The name of the site is, however, mentioned already in sources

12 I have dealt with the Palmyrene banqueting tesserae in a number of earlier publications and explained them as objects which hold much and crucial information about the religious life of Palmyra and which remain understudied. See Raja 2016a; 2015a; 2015b. Also see Kaizer and Raja 2018 on tesserae from Palmyra in the journal *Syria*. This contribution deals with a specific sign, earlier called the rain sign, used in the religious symbolism of the city. We show that it was rather a sign which indicated the presence of the divine without using names of deities. Also see the contribution by Schmidt-Colinet 2011 which considers the Palmyrene banquet, as well as Gnoli 2016. An important contribution on the ritual banquet in Palmyra has been published by Kaizer 2008, who also in his 2002 monograph on the religious life of Palmyra addresses the banquet tradition in the city, in particular 198–199 and 213–233.

13 See Raja (forthcoming) for a publication which considers the impact of such interpretations. See the corpus by Ingholt, Seyrig and Starcky 1955 which remains a standard work on the tesserae, but which did not allow for much interpretation as to their significance for Palmyrene religious practices. Also see du Mesnil du Buisson 1944 and 1962. The 1944 volume included only images – among them numerous tesserae. The text volume was subsequently published in 1962. The interpretations of du Mesnil du Buisson are largely outdated and often downright wrong. Other publications which have added invaluable knowledge about the tesserae include Dunant 1959 as well as al-As'ad, Briquel-Chatonnet and Yon 2005.

14 For standard works on Palmyrene religion and religious life, see: Gawlikowski 1979–1980; 2014; Gawlikowski and Pietrzykowski 1980; Kaizer 2002. See Dirven 1999 for a study of Palmyrenes and their religious life outside of Palmyra.

15 For overview introductions to Palmyra see the recent works by Sartre-Fauriat and Sartre 2008; Andrade 2013; Smith 2013; Sartre and Sartre-Fauriat 2014; Andrade 2018. Also see the

from the second millennium BCE, which were found in Mari.¹⁶ The oasis city, which flourished because of the perennial Efqa spring, therefore seems to have gone far back in time and have functioned as a crossroads or focal point in the Syrian Desert. Then, the site was called Tadmor, which was the name it kept also in the Roman period. Palmyra became part of the wider Roman world when Pompey conquered the region in the 60s BCE.¹⁷ However, it is only for the somewhat later period that we truly begin to grasp the archaeology at the site and its development, namely from around the turn of the first millennium. Palmyrene society in the Roman period was structured around tribes, which can be considered large extended family groups.¹⁸ In Palmyra, we know of between 12 and 14 of these tribes. In the Roman period, they seem to have been reorganized into four tribes, but it remains unknown what this reorganization in fact meant to Palmyrene society overall and whether it might simply have been an administrative reorganization and not one which would have had a day-to-day effect on the community. The society must have been tightly knit, and the families must all have known of each other and interacted in a variety of societal spheres.¹⁹ The funerary sculptural material and the graves in Palmyra in general underline the importance of the family to the construction of Palmyrene society, since these graves were family graves financed by one family patriarch or in some cases several Palmyrene men from the same family.

It is widely known that Palmyrenes were active in long-distance trade in the Roman period, and that the city's wealth came from this trade.²⁰ The first three centuries CE were those in which the city flourished immensely and

still important articles Millar 1987; and Sartre 1996 which deal with the history of the region and city in a broader context.

16 Gawlikowski 1974; Klengel 1996, 159–162; Dirven 1999, 18–19.

17 See Kropp and Raja (eds) 2016 for a set of contributions which all focus on the history and archaeology of Palmyra. Also see the standard works by Millar 1993; Sartre 2001. These monographs have colored all research undertaken since their publication and still do. Basically, the authors argue along two opposing lines of understanding of the region. While Millar goes so far as to claim a 'cultural amnesia' in the region between the Hellenistic and Roman periods, Sartre advocates that the region was steeped in a deep-rooted Greek past.

18 See the following publications for considerations on the development of Palmyra and its societal structure: Kaizer 2002; Gawlikowski 1997; 2003; Smith 2013.

19 See now the recent volume edited by Long and Højen Sørensen (2017), which includes a number of articles dealing with representations of city's elite and their trades.

20 For some important contributions on the trade of Palmyra see: Gawlikowski 1994; 1996; Seland 2015; Meyer, Seland and Anfinset 2016; Sartre-Fauriat and Sartre 2008; Kaizer 2015.

rose to fame. When Zenobia took power in Palmyra reigning for her underage son, the Palmyrenes tried to break free from the Roman Empire, and for a short while, the Palmyrene territory extended and included Egypt and large parts of Anatolia.²¹ In 273 CE, the city fell to the legions of the Roman Emperor Aurelian, who for the second time sacked the city. After this second attack, the city did not rise again, and Zenobia was captured and her fate remains unknown to us despite the speculations and stories told in the sources. Although the city never fully recovered or regained its status as an important trade node, it did live on in some form, and more scholarly emphasis has in recent years been put on understanding the site in the post-Zenobian era.²² The city, although only very partially explored, remains mostly known for its monumental architecture, which includes colonnaded streets, large sanctuaries, temples, and public spaces as well as the well-known hypogea and tower tombs, which are visible from anywhere in the city. Palmyra's city core was one which centered upon the greenery of the oasis and monumental Sanctuary of Bel and stretched from there towards the desert.²³ The Sanctuary of Bel, which was the main sanctuary of the city, stood at the end of the colonnaded main street, hovering majestically over the rest of the cityscape. However, the city also had a string of other sanctuaries, such as the Sanctuary of Nabu, that of Baalshamin and the one of Allat.²⁴ Furthermore, in the main Sanctuary of Bel, other gods of Palmyra were also worshipped, namely Yarhibol and Aglibol. The city had a complex religious life, which lay in the hands of the Palmyrene male elite, as far as we can tell from the textual evidence.²⁵

21 For recent contributions on the age of Zenobia and her role in the fate of Palmyra, see Sartre and Sartre-Fauriat 2014; Andrade 2018.

22 See Intagliata 2018, also for further literature.

23 Gawlikowski 2015.

24 Gawlikowski 1973; 1976; 1983a; 1983b; 1990a; 1990b; 1991; 2014; Kaizer 2002 for the cults and sanctuaries known in Palmyra as well as further literature.

25 Kaizer 2002. Also see Raja 2016b; 2017c for recent contributions on Palmyrene priesthoods and their relations to the elite of Palmyra and implications for structure of the religious life. On the elites of Palmyra, see the standard works by Yon 1999; 2002. Also see the edited volume by Raja 2019 for contributions dealing with a variety of aspects of the religious life of the city in the Roman period.

3 The banqueting tesserae as tools for social inscenation – the SoMe of the Palmyrene male elite

It is within this framework of an elite-driven society that the so-called banqueting tesserae must be understood and contextualized. The tesserae were small objects, often measuring no more than a few centimeters in diameter and usually made of clay, although examples of bronze, iron, glass and lead are also known.²⁶ They were made in unique series of numerous pieces. One lot, which is considered complete and consisting of 125 tesserae, was found buried in a pot in a sanctuary (al-As'ad, Briquel-Chatonnet and Yon 2005). This find indicates that the tesserae had not been distributed, since tesserae normally are found scattered across the site or in large amounts in other parts of the sanctuaries. In particular in the banqueting hall of the Sanctuary of Bel, large amounts have been found, not least in the drainage connected to the hall. More than 1100 different series or types of the tesserae are known.²⁷ While this sounds like many, in reality when divided over a potential time span of three hundred years, this amounts to one series made roughly every 110 days, so three times a year. Of course such an equation is highly theoretical, but it is important to clarify that the tesserae seem to have been quite restricted in use and most likely were only used at very special occasions and not at all banquets held in the sanctuaries in the city. It might also have been that the tesserae were a phenomenon only used for a short time in Palmyra. This is, however, difficult to say, since the tesserae cannot be dated on the basis of style or typology, because they are so small and developments over time cannot be detected.

While it has been claimed that the tesserae were produced in connection with heroization banquets, this seems very unlikely.²⁸ There is nothing in the iconography of the tesserae which testifies to a heroization or divinization of

²⁶ I have dealt with the tesserae in earlier publications and will not give all references to other publications here, since they are all listed in my earlier publications. See Raja 2015a, 183–186 for the nature of the tesserae and the way in which they were produced and used. Furthermore see Raja 2015b and 2016a for other publications on the tesserae. Ingholt, Seyrig and Starcky 1955 remains the standard work on these objects, but is in the meanwhile due for an update. This publication also records the other materials that tesserae could be made of. See also Raja 2015a, 184 for a listing of those.

²⁷ Ingholt, Seyrig and Starcky 1955.

²⁸ Hvidberg-Hansen and Ploug 1993, 18–20 and in the tesserae part of the catalogue. They conclude this on the basis of stars, which sometimes are located on both sides of the heads of the Palmyrene priests shown on the tesserae, and they also imply that the reclining priests

deceased Palmyrenes taking place.²⁹ The iconography of the tesserae is highly varied for such small objects and includes a wide range of religious symbols, representations of deities, and inscriptions, as well as signet ring seal imprints, which make for a highly individualized imagery for each series of tesserae. We must assume that a signet ring would have identified a specific priest. This conclusion is supported by the fact that many of the male funerary busts display such rings on one of their fingers, underlining that the tradition of using such rings to put one's individual mark on important documents was flourishing in Palmyra. But one element which is repeated on the majority of the tesserae is the depiction of Palmyrene priests wearing their distinct Palmyrene priestly hats.³⁰ Most often, these priests are shown as small full figures laying on a *kline* at a banquet, but sometimes they are also represented in bust form or standing (Figs. 1–6). Sometimes, the figures are accompanied by inscriptions giving us the names of the priests or of the group of priests they belonged to and who hosted and paid for the banquet. Priests in Palmyra were plentiful. In the corpus collected within the framework of the Palmyra Portrait Project, representations of Palmyrene priests make up more than 10 percent of the entire corpus and more than 20 percent of all male representations.³¹ These numbers are significant, because they give insight into the fact that Palmyrene priesthoods were commonly held within the elite male groups of Palmyra and that they were often primarily status symbols rather than professions.³² Palmyrene priesthoods were, so to say, not only religious offices but also positions which expressed societal power and high standing (Raja 2016b; 2017b). Thus, the tesserae, which were closely connected to Palmyrene priests and the groups to which they belonged, must be seen in a different light than they have been until now. They can be viewed as tokens of power – power to give access to

might have been dead and shown in a position of being honored by their group of priests. However, there is nothing to indicate that such an interpretation holds up.

29 Contra Hvidberg-Hansen and Ploug; Gnoli 2016; Kaizer 2002 as well as Raja 2015a; 2015b; 2016a.

30 See Raja 2016b; 2017d; 2017c; 2017b for a collection of articles on Palmyrene priesthood and further references. See in particular Raja 2018b for a recent contribution on the terminology earlier used for the Palmyrene priestly hat. Also, see Stucky 1973 for an earlier important contribution on Palmyrene priests, as well as Kaizer 2002, 234–241.

31 See Raja 2018a; 2019 for very recent contributions, which include a report on the status of the Palmyra Portrait Project and the corpus which now comprises more than 3,700 funerary portraits of deceased Palmyrenes. Also, see Krag 2018 for a monograph on the female representations.

32 See Raja 2017c; 2017a for further considerations on this aspect of Palmyrene societal structure and patterns.

(a)

(b)

Fig. 1: Tessera from the collection at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek (IN 3213) depicting reclining priest in full figure on the obverse and a signet seal imprint of a portrait in profile on the reverse (photo by Anders Sune Berg; copyright Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, reproduced courtesy of Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek).

Fig. 2: Tessera from the collection at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek (IN 3198) depicting reclining priest in full figure on the obverse and busts of deities on the reverse (photo by Anders Sune Berg; copyright Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, reproduced courtesy of Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek).

Fig. 3: Tessera from the collection at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek (IN 1143) depicting two reclining priests in full figure on either side of the tessera (photo by Anders Sune Berg; copyright Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, reproduced courtesy of Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek).

high status and attractive events, such as the religious banquets which we know, from the archaeological contexts, took place in the sanctuaries of Palmyra, not least in the banqueting hall located in the *temenos* of its main sanctuary, that of Bel (Fig. 7).

Fig. 4: Tessera from the collection at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek (IN 3215) depicting a Palmyrene priest in bust shape on the obverse and a signet seal imprint showing the head of Athena in profile set in a wreath on the reverse (photo by Anders Sune Berg; copyright Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, reproduced courtesy of Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek).

How could such power – power to use the main banqueting hall of Palmyra and other sanctuaries – be achieved by a certain group of Palmyrene men, who likely even belonged to a string of different religious groupings? On the one hand, their high societal status must have played a role. But on the other hand, the number of Palmyrene priests in relation to the representations of “ordinary” Palmyrene men in fact also shows that priests were not such an exclusive group within the group of elite men. As mentioned above, they make up more than 20 percent of the entire corpus of male representations. So within the elite male group, it can be assumed that it was normal to hold a priesthood. Therefore, such power must also have been legitimized by the rest of the male elite group. Most likely most of these, if not all, were related to some priests as well. At least the banqueting scenes from Palmyra warrant such conclusions, since they usually show one or more priests in combination with non-priestly family members (Fig. 8). Certainly, the number of priests overall would have given some power to the groups as such. However, this was most likely also a power that came with responsibility and obligations, which might have included having to host and therefore pay for banquets. One way of being acknowledged and making people aware of the financing which had gone into a banquet, as well as the religious event which it was, was through the iconography imprinted on the tesserae.

Fig. 5: Tessera from the collection at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek (IN 3200) depicting a standing Palmyrene priest in full figure flanked by two (sacrificial?) animals on the obverse and two animals on the reverse surrounded by symbols (photo by Anders Sune Berg; copyright Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, reproduced courtesy of Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek).

So the tesserae became objects that served a very practical function: namely to admit guests to religious banquets held in the sanctuaries of Palmyra, most likely on rare occasions – judging by the number of series distributed over the history of Roman Palmyra – which in turn may have made these events even more exclusive. The images which the tesserae carried would have informed the invited visitor of the fact that he, or less likely she, was a selected guest;

Fig. 6: Tessera from the collection at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek (IN 3206) depicting a standing Palmyrene priest in full figure on the obverse and a wreath with a signet seal imprint in the middle depicting a standing (naked?) deity on the reverse (photo by Anders Sune Berg; copyright Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, reproduced courtesy of Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek).

revealed who was the sponsor of the event as well as the religious context within which the banquet was to be held. However, the tesserae came to hold another function as well: they served as expressions of both individual identity as well as being signs of belonging to exclusive groups – even if only for a certain event. Priests would have their tesserae iconography very individually configured. Perhaps they were themselves even involved in the process of selecting the images – obverse and reverse – which is likely. The tesserae iconography, which almost always includes an image of a priest, or even two, therefore can be considered a kind of SoMe (social media) of antiquity, which at one and the same time expressed individuality – the image of a specific priest and the individual configuration of both sides of the tessera – while also being a strong expression of belonging to a wider group of powerful Palmyrene men, the priests.

Fig. 7: View of the remains of the banqueting hall located in front of the Temple of Bel within the temenos of the Sanctuary of Bel in Palmyra (copyright Rubina Raja).

4 Conclusion

The Palmyrene banqueting tesserae remain an unexhausted source for exploring societal structure and patterns as well as the structure of the religious life of Palmyra on so many levels. While being – as far as we can tell – a quite unique phenomenon in classical antiquity, the tesserae testify to processes of expressing individual identities, while at the same time strongly underlining the individual's belonging to a wider group within one's societal level/hierarchy. In this way, Palmyrene priests, although powerful, also conformed to traditions which seem to have been deeply embedded in the structure of Palmyrene religious life. While Palmyra developed extensively during the three hundred years it flourished in the Roman period, the structure of the religious life seems to have been quite conservative and did not allow for much divergence as far as we can tell from the visual representations of priests in Palmyra or from the plentiful corpus of the banqueting tesserae. So individuality was kept within the framework of already existing societal and religious norms. But groups and individuals seem to have found ways of expressing their distinct identities anyhow – not least through the fascinating iconographic language of the banquet-ing tesserae.

(a)

(b)

Fig. 8: Complete sarcophagus with banqueting scene with standing priest and two reclining priests and portrait busts on the box, two being of priests. National Museum of Damascus, Damascus, 240–273 CE (copyright Palmyra Portrait Project, Ingholt Archive, courtesy of Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek).

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