



Convivium, fractio panis, or maybe coena coelestis?

INTRODUCTION

In Gospel of St. Luke we read: „(...) Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!” (Lk 14, 15)¹.

The feast (Greek: *deipnon*²; *syssitia*³, *symposion*⁴; Latin: *convivium*⁵, *epulum*⁶; *coena*⁷ and others⁸) was in ancient societies not only a way of celebration of a private or a public character, but also an expression of the religious life and the way to worship the deceased. In the shared banqueting there were all aspects of celebration joined together. This diversity was also present in feasts held by Christians within early Christian period. So no wonder that descriptions and remaining representations of early Christian feasts provide researchers with many interpretative problems. However, the purpose of present considerations will not be to

¹ Passages from the Bible after: *Greek-English New Testament. Greek text Novum Testamentum Graece, In the tradition of Eberhard Nestle and Erwin Nestle*, eds. B. Aland, K. Aland, J. Karavidopoulos [et al.], Stuttgart 2008¹¹; *The Septuagint Version of the Old Testament and Apocrypha with English translation by Sir Launcelot Lee Brenton and various readings, critical notes and appendices*, London 1807-1862.

² δειπνον - meal, sometimes breakfast, afternoon meal or generally meal. Abramowiczówna 1958: I 502.

³ συσσίτια / συσσίτιον – common meal, common hall. LSJ: 1734.

⁴ συμπόσιον - feast, gathering, banquet, guests, revellers, convivial hall. Abramowiczówna 1958: I 170-171.

⁵ convivium - common feast, participants of the feast, convivial hall. Plezia 1998: I 760.

⁶ epulum - banquet, solemn feast. Plezia 1998: I 348.

⁷ coena - main meal of the Romans, consumed in the evening, supper, feast. Plezia 1998: I 472-473.

⁸ About differences (also terminological differences) between many types of ancient feasts – among others Schmitt-Pantel 2003: 490-494; Binder 2003: 488-497.

identify definitively particular kinds of Christian banquets, but to show their complex character and features that assimilate and distinguish them from the manner of celebrating practised in ancient world. Difficulties in defining and distinguishing various types of feasts – Eucharistic feast, agape, feasts to hold the dead in constant reverence - seem to weaken, when we consider them in the context of the Graeco-Roman tradition.

FEAST – ANCIENT TRADITION

In ancient Greece the feast fulfilled an important religious function because it was connected to the sacrifice (fig. 1)



Fig. 1. The Sacrifice from Pitsa, c. 540 BC, National Archaeological Museum of Athens
(<http://www.mlahanas.de/Greeks/Arts/SacrificePainting.htm>).

that consisted, as it seems, not only in the act of killing



Fig. 2. The Sacrifice of a young boar, c. 510 BC–500 BC, Louvre Museum (http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kylix_sacrifice_boar_Louvre_G112.jpg).

(fig. 2)

and burning, but also in the common, for the people and the gods, act of eating of what has been offered up as a sacrifice (fig. 3)⁹.



Fig. 3. Kylix with a Symposium Scene (detail), c. 500 BC Staatliche Museen, Berlin. (<http://www.toledomuseum.org/kiosks/classic-court/ancient-greece/greek-drinking-parties-symposia/>).

⁹ Jean-Pierre Vernant and his successors emphasize the act of eating (among others: Vernant 1979; Murray 2000: 264-265); Walter Burkert emphasizes the act of killing (Burkert 1986: 2-3). About Greek feasts in detail – among others Murray 1990; Schmitt-Pantel 1992; Węcowski 2011.

Paul Veyne writes that: „In a Greek or Latin text the word <<sacrifice>> always implies <<feast>>”¹⁰. In ancient Greece feasts were accompanied by sacrifices at least from times of Homer (Od 12, 363-371). They were almost the only opportunity to consume meat and that is why this moment was so important for the entire family or other community. The sacrifice followed by common feast accompanied also numerous religious holidays, such as Panathenaea or the Great Dionysia (fig. 4).



Fig. 4. The Great Dionysia, Pronomos Vase, c. 500 BC, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Napoli.
(<http://web.eecs.utk.edu/~mclennan/Courses/US210/City-Dionysia.html>;
<http://museoarcheologiconazionale.campaniabenculturali.it/thematic-views/image-gallery/RA84/view>).

Greek meals generally consisted of two phases: *deipnon* (eating, also sacrificial meat) and *symposion* (drinking, mainly wine thinned with water)¹¹. Among them followed different customs such as pouring out several drops of wine (fig. 5),

¹⁰ Veyne 1998: I 194.

¹¹ Węcowski 2011: 13-14; Smith 2003: 20.



Fig. 5. Libatio Scene, c. 480 BC, Louvre Museum.
http://pl.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Plik:Libation_Macron_Louvre_G149.jpg&filetimestamp=20110414150340.

singing the song in honour of deities and other ceremonies. All that took place in a separate room - called *andron* - where one feasted (fig. 6).

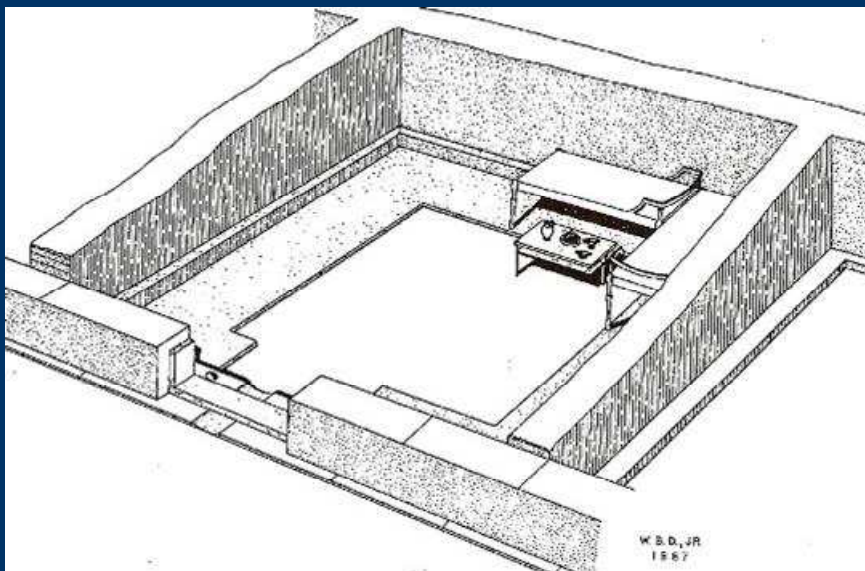


Fig. 6. Andron, Ateny.

Preserved remainings of such dining rooms, both in houses and sanctuaries, furnished and supplied with dishes, come mainly from the 5th-4th century BC.

Many well-known iconographic representations show scenes from *symposia* (fig. 7)¹².

Fig. 7. Symposium Scene, c. 480 BC, Michael C. Carlos Museum.
(<http://carlos.emory.edu/kylix-with-symposion-scene>).



Włodzimierz Lengauer writes that: „The symposium - the uniquely Greek institution of the culture and the morality - is inseparably connected to the life of the aristocracy. It is an organized meeting of a group of men in the private house of the host who give themselves up to the solemn, but at the same time cheerful, wine feast”¹³.

¹² In the 80s there was the growth of interest in Greek feasts (so-called *symptotic studies*). Particularly worthy of note are the studies of Oswyn Murray and his critics – Węcowski 2011: 1-5, 12-24.

¹³ Lengauer 1999: 54 (transl. A. Krauze-Kołodziej).



Fig. 8. Stamnos with Symposion Scene, c. 525-510 BC, Muzeum Narodowe, Kraków. (fot. A. Krauze).

(fig. 8) Greeks usually feasted in a semi-recumbent position - arranged two by two on special sofas (*klinai*) placed around walls. This position indicated the wealth and the privilege of revellers¹⁴. The servants waited on the lying guests¹⁵. Participants of feasts devoted themselves to conversations (fig. 9)¹⁶,

¹⁴ Węcowski 2011: 14nn.

¹⁵ Lissarague 1990.

¹⁶ Etymologically the word „biesiada” (in Polish – feast) comes from Old East Slavic „beseda” which in Greek means „logos, rhema, homilie”.

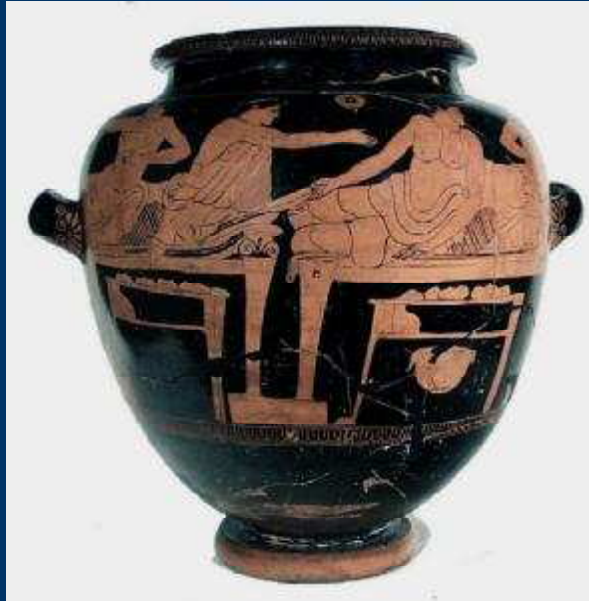


Fig. 9. Stamnos with Symposion Scene, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.
(<http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/dictionary/Dict/ASP/dictionarybody.asp?name=Symposion>).

games (fig. 10),



Fig. 10. Kottabos, c. 470 BC, Antikensammlung, Munich.
(<http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/dictionary/Dict/ASP/dictionarybody.asp?name=Kottabos>).

listening to music (fig. 11),



Fig. 11. Symposium scene: banqueters playing the kottabos game while a girl plays the aulos, c. 420 BC, National Archaeological Museum of Spain. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Symposium_scene_Nicias_Painter_MAN.jpg).

admiring the dancers, singing songs. It seems that on Greek symposia women appeared only as servants, dancers, flutists or hetaerae (fig. 12)¹⁷.

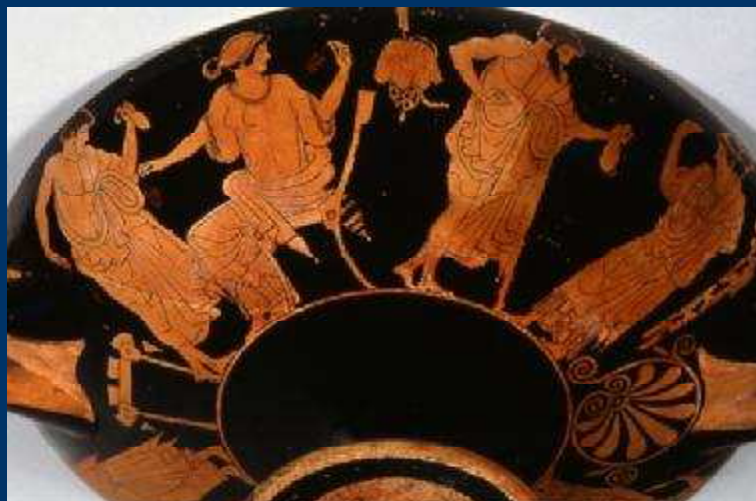


Fig. 12. Kylix with men visiting hetairi. c. 490–480 BC, Toledo Museum of Art. (<http://www.toledomuseum.org/kiosks/classic-court/ancient-greece/greek-drinking-parties-symposia/party-girls/>).

¹⁷ Lengauer 1999: 54.

Shared banqueting had also its wider social aspect.



Fig. 13. Derveni crater, c. 350-320 BC, Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki.
(<http://ancientrome.ru/art/artworken/img.htm?id=3901>)



Fig. 14. Vix crater, c. 530-510 BC, Musée du Pays Châtillonnais.
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Crat%C3%A8re_de_Vix_0023.jpg)

(fig. 13-14) Both family members gathered at the crater for symposium and Greek citizens, taking part in feasts, were building the community of their *polèis* and were equal to each other¹⁸.

Both in ancient Rome and in Greece feasts were held together with sacrifices in honor of the gods (fig. 15)¹⁹.

¹⁸ About religious, social and cultural meaning of symposium – Danielewicz 2001: 56-62.

¹⁹ About Roman feasts in detail - among others Dunbabin 2003; Klinghardt 2003; Gold-Donahue 2005.



Fig. 15. *Suovetaurilia* to the god Mars, relief from the panel of a sarcophagus., first half of the 1st century CE, Louvre Museum.
(http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Suovetaurile_Louvre.jpg).

In Roman art (1st century BC-5th/6th century AD) there are a lot of representations of feasts preserved mainly in houses and tombs²⁰. The scenes of banquets were usually placed on the walls (fig. 16)



Fig. 16. Fragment of the fresco in the Villa of Misteri in Pompei, c. 60 BC.
(http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:08-07-07_227_Italien-Urlaub;_Pompeji,_Villa_dei_Misteri,_Wandmalerei.jpg)

²⁰ Is well known that the Romans considerable attached particular importance to *lectisteria* (feasts in which were present statues of the gods). There were presented only on coins. There are no representations of feasting emperors or banquets of a religious nature. There are only a few scenes remaining that represent banqueting gods, mainly Dionysos and Heracles.

and on the floor (fig. 17).

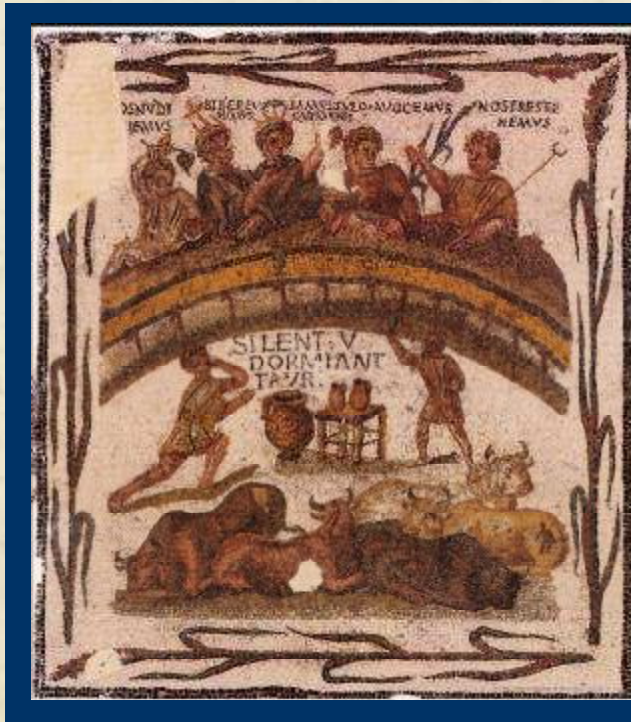


Fig. 17. Banquet scene – mosaic, c. 200-220 CE, El Jem (Thysdrus), Musée du Bardo, Tunis.
(<http://www.lessing-photo.com/dispimg.asp?i=110103+9+&cr=6&cl=1>)

Both in Greece and in Rome the connection between the feast and the cult, the eating with religious ritual, played a crucial role: „It used to be the custom of old to sit on long benches in front of the hearth and to suppose that gods were present at table" (Ow., Fasti VI, 320-322 , transl. J. G. Frazer 1929 : 321). It was already proved by the closeness of the small shrines dedicated to the household gods and the kitchen in the Roman house (fig. 18).



Fig. 18. Casa del Fabbro /
House of the Smith,
Pompeii.
(fot. A. Krauze)



Fig. 17 Plan of peristyle 1187 (Casa del Fabbro)

The Romans feasted in *triclinia* (fig. 19-20)

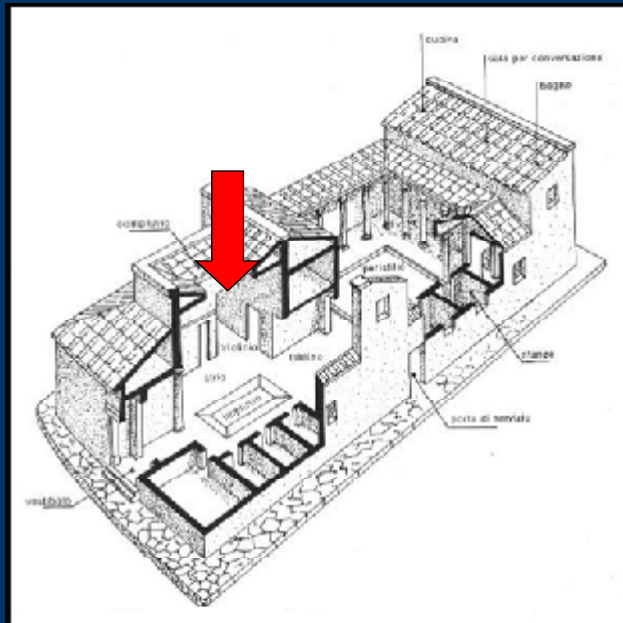


Fig. 19. Triclinium in roman domus
(<http://web.tiscalinet.it/romaimperiale/abitazioni/abitazioni.html>.)

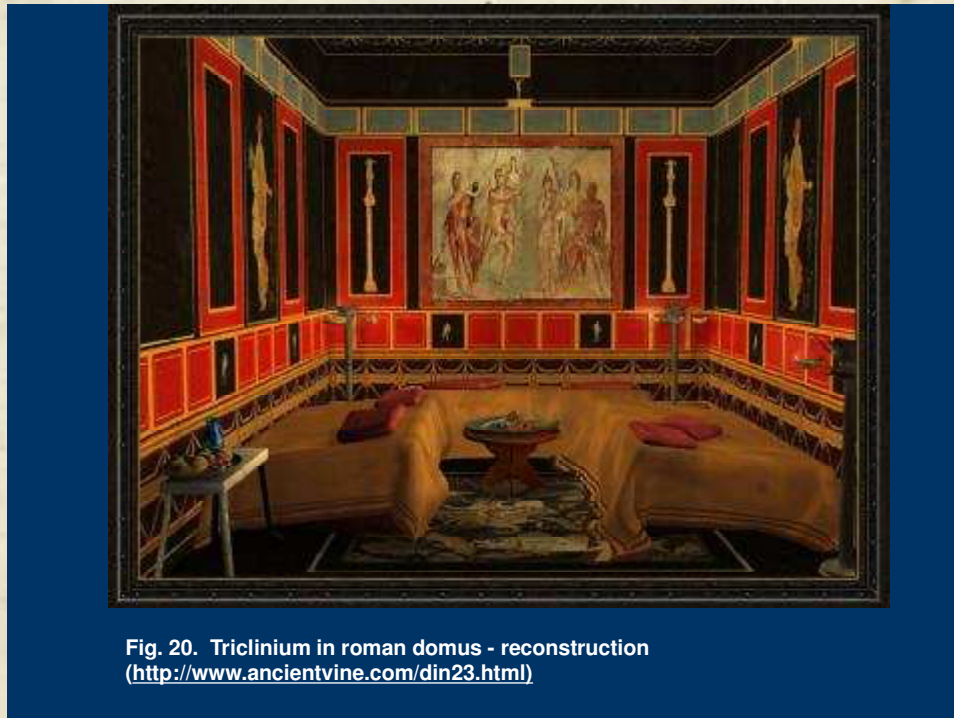


Fig. 20. Triclinium in roman domus - reconstruction
(<http://www.ancientvine.com/din23.html>)

- rooms that, because of their impressive size and sumptuous decoration, quickly became the most important places in the house: „There was a large company of dinner-guests, and since she was one of the first ladies of the town, the very flower of society was there. There were luxuriant tables gleaming with citron-wood and ivory, couches draped with golden cloth, generous cups of varied appeal but alike in costliness (...) Several brilliantly robed waiters elegantly served heaped platters; curly-haired boys in beautiful clothes continually offered vintage wine in gems shaped into cups" (Apuleius, *Metam.* II, 19, transl. J. A. Hanson, Loeb 1989: 96-97).

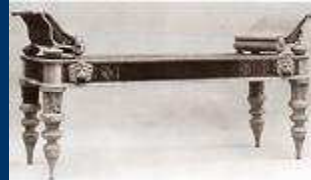


Fig. 21a-b. Triclinium – kline (lectus).
a. Triclinium on Añón street, 1st century, Caesaraugusta
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Zaragoza_-_Museo_-_Triclinio_de_la_calle_A%C3%B1%C3%B3n_02.jpg
b. Pompeian daybed, 1st century
<http://www.designboom.com/history/3.html>

(fig. 21a-b) Triclinia were supplied with beds for the dinner-guests. Usually a total of seven men celebrated on three couches, lying two or three on one bed depending on the social hierarchy. This quantity was though considered to be the ideal number of participants of the banquet, according to the Latin proverb: *Septem - convivium, novem - convivium*. Towards the end of the 3rd century in Roman dining rooms appears *stibadium* (fig. 22-23).

Fig. 22. Stibadium, Faragola
http://www.the-goldenrule.name/Dionysus_AgapeSigmaCouch/Dionysus_AgapeSigmaCouch--MORE.htm



Fig. 23. Stibadium, Faragola.

(http://www.the-goldenrule.name/Dionysus_AgapeSigmaCouch/Dionysus_AgapeSigmaCouch_--_MORE.htm)



Feasting together in Rome, however, was not only a confirmation of the social status of participants of the banquet. It also fulfilled euergetic function and unified the community and the family. During feasts social differences were blurred. Banquets were also organized in public places such as sanctuaries. This was the primary way to meet for the members of numerous collegia. Such feasts were held regularly in the courtyards, porticos and gardens as well (fig. 24)²¹.

²¹ The scenes of picnics in the paintings and mosaics were mentioned by Philostratus the Younger mention in the 3rd century and Libanios in the 4th century. Picnics - solid, brick installations in the gardens such as in Pompeii, in the House of the Ephebe – were imitating luxurious triclinia in the villas of aristocracy and emperors (e.g. villa of Claudius at Baiae).

Fig. 24. House of Triclinia, Ostia.
(fot. A. Krauze)



To describe a common banquet Cicero (Cato mai. XIII 45) suggested the term *convivium*, which was to replace the Greek term *symposion*. It proves that, knowing Greek culture, Romans wanted to create their own distinct traditions. Mixing wine with water in Roman banquets wasn't obligatory, as it was in Greek feasts, and it wasn't done in one common crater. Apart from that, participants in the Roman feasts were women and children (and what's more lying down, just like men).

(fig. 25) In Greece, situation like that was simply unthinkable²².

²² An equal status of men and women in the representations was already visible in Etruscan tombs from the 6th century BC.



Fig. 25. Banquet scene, Casa dei Casti Amanti, Pompei
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Pompeii_-_Casa_dei_Casti_Amanti_-_Banquet.jpg)

In the beginning Romans were sitting during feasts. Then they took over semi-recumbent position (fig. 26)

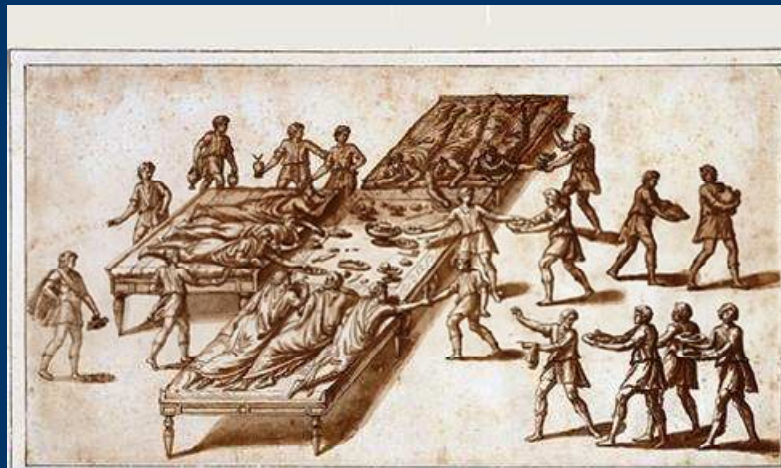


Fig. 26. Banquet position – reconstruction.

probably from Greeks. This position, being characteristic of the social elite, was commonly used to depict distinguished people on sepulchral reliefs (fig. 27)²³



Fig. 27. Gravestone with funerary banquet, 2nd–3rd century, excavated at Palmyra, Syria, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

(<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/02.29.1>)

For ancient societies funerals and celebrations in honor and memory of the deceased, provided an opportunity to consume common meals. It could be proven not only by numerous examples of funerary art, but also triclinia or stibadia for the revellers preserved in the cemeteries²⁴.

²³ Roller 2006.

²⁴ Dunbabin 2003: 124-144.



Fig. 28. Funeral stela, 1st-2nd century, Galeria Sztuki Starożytnej Muzeum Narodowe, Kraków
(fot. A. Krauze).

(fig. 28) Representations showing banquet guests lying in the tombs appeared not only on the reliefs of the sarcophagi, but also on stelae and funerary mosaics (fig. 29)



Fig. 29. Mosaic of a funerary symposium, c. 4th century AD, from the Antioch Necropolis, Worcester Art Museum.

(<http://www.sacred-destinations.com/turkey/antioch-mosaic-photos/funerary-banquet.jpg.html>).

Perhaps the spreading of this theme in Roman funerary art was caused by the memory of the Etruscan funerary traditions (fig. 30)



Fig. 30. Sarcophagus of an Etruscan couple, from the 6th century BC, Villa Giulia Museum, Rome.

(<http://xenohistorian.faithweb.com/europe/eu03a.html>).

Banquet scenes were also depicted, although less frequently, on the vessels (e.g The Sevso Treasure – fig. 31a-c²⁵)



Fig. 31a-b. Sevso Treasure, late 4th - early 5th century AD.

(<http://www.romancoins.info/MilitaryEquipment-Luxury.html>).

²⁵ About The Sevso Treasure – among others Merryman 2008 (online version; http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1105584).



Fig. 31c. Sevso Treasure, late 4th - early 5th century AD.
(<http://www.romancoins.info/MilitaryEquipment-Luxury.html>).

and in the Late Antiquity in book painting (fig. 32)



Fig. 32. Dido's Feast, Aeneid, Vat. Lat. 3867, 6th century AD.
(http://www.mythfolklore.net/3043mythfolklore/reading/aeneid/images/vat_dido.htm)

as an illustration of mythological and biblical scenes.

It is known that Christianity relied not only on Roman, but also, and maybe primarily, on Jewish tradition and culture. In ancient Israel the feast occurs mainly in the sacrificial context. Daily sacrifice, burned on the altar (Ezek 41, 22; 44, 16) was to be the food for the

Lord (Lev 3, 16; 21, 6, Num 28, 2). Its act crowned a shared meal consumed by the Lord, by a person who gave the sacrifice and by present people (Deut 12, 4-7). In the Old Testament we read: „(...) Salomon (...) came to Jerusalem, where he (...) offered up burnt-offerings and offerings of well-being, and provided a feast for all his servants” (1 Kg 3, 15).

Participants of the sacrificial feast, like in the ancient world, were subordinated to the hierarchy. It was emphasized, among other things, by designated places at the table or determined parts of the sacrifice that could be consumed.

In Judaism, maybe even more than in Greece and in Rome, the community of the table had a strong social dimension. It symbolized the real union of participants of the feast, complemented by common consumption of food. Without a doubt, this tradition, like ancient banquets held in honour of the deceased in the graves, found its continuation among Christians²⁶.

FEASTS IN THE BIBLE AND EARLY CHRISTIAN SOURCES

In many biblical and early Christian sources we can find various types of banquets, practised by Christians in first centuries after Christ. Already in the New Testament the theme of the feast appears repeatedly (among others: Lk 7, 36-50; 14, 7-24; 15, 23-24; 22, 7-20, 41-43). The Last Supper, recognized as an announcement of the heavenly feast (Mt 26, 29; Mk 14, 25; Lk 22, 18), is also kind of a shared meal. This image of the feast as a metaphor of the eternal happiness appears in apocalyptic writings of the Old (The Book of Enoch 62, 14) and the New Testament (Apoc 3, 20; 19, 9)²⁷.

Well-known are also early Christian texts discussing the course and the meaning of feasts. Already Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2, 42-46) describe „the breaking of bread” (*fractio panis*) as an important element of the life of Christians of first centuries. Banquets are mentioned also in the letters of apostles – Paul (1 Cor 11, 20), Peter (2 Pet 13) and Jude (Jude 12). They criticize the despicable behaviour during feasts²⁸.

Saint Ignatius of Antioch in his letter to the Smyrnaeans (Ep. Smyrn. 8, 1-12) writes that it is not allowed to baptize nor to feast outside the Church (probably he meant the banquet connected with Eucharist).

²⁶ In particular it is about so-called agape - Gnilka 2003: 202.

²⁷ Wronikowska 1990: 123.

²⁸ Wronikowska 1990: 123n.

Pliny the Younger, writes about agape for the first time, maintaining that Christians detainees claim to „gather for the consumption of food, usual and completely innocent”²⁹.

Clement of Alexandria, like apostles Peter, Jude and Paul, was critical about an inappropriate behavior during the agape, emphasizing the profound spiritual aspect of this type of assemblies (Paed. II, 4-6)³⁰. At the same time, he warns Christians against the lavishness of feasts. The shining example of a proper behaviour at the table should contain: eating and drinking in moderation, keeping decency and abiding by the rules given by the author (Paed. II, 4, 44)³¹.

Agape are, as well, a dissertation topic of many other authors such as Origen (Contra Cels. I, 1), Minucius Felix (Octavius, 31) and Tertullian (Apolog. 39, 14-19; 49, 2), although the course of these banquets and their character stays still unspecified³². Perhaps they were feasts, to which from the 2nd century wealthy people invited other members of Christian community, mainly people in need: „(...) and the nature of this supper you may understand by its name; for it is the Greek word for love [agape] (...) If therefore we feast only with such brave and excellent designs, I leave you from hence to guess at the rest of our discipline in matters of pure religion; nothing earthly, nothing unclean has ever admittance here; our souls ascend in prayer to God before we sit down to meat; we eat only what suffices nature, and drink no more than what is strictly becoming chaste and regular persons. We (...) discourse as those who remember that they are in the hearing of God. (...) And as we began, so we conclude all in prayer, and depart not like a parcel of heated bullies, for scouring the street and killing and ravishing the next we meet, but with the same tenor of temperance and modesty we came, as men who have not so properly been a-drinking as imbibing religion.” (Tertullian, Apolog. 39, 16-19, transl. W. M. Reeve, pp. 112-113).

The text of Justin Martyr seems to comprise some indication, presenting the order of the Sunday liturgy in the first centuries after Christ. It begins with a common reading of Holy Scriptures and caution, followed by thanksgiving prayer and the Eucharist. The meeting ends with distribution of what became the Eucharist and sending it to the absent. Agape is combined here with Eucharist as a true sacrifice. We do not know, however, whether this

²⁹ Quoted by: Hamman 1990: 253. About agape – among others J. F. Keating 1901: *The Agape and the Eucharist in the Early Church*, London; E. Baumgartner 1909: *Eucharistie und Agape*, Solothurn; K. Völker 1927: *Mysterium and Agape*, Gotha; A. Hamman 1968: *Vie liturgique et vie sociale*, Paris. In Polish research – among others J. Pałucki 1995: *Agapy wyrazem braterskiej miłości chrześcijańskiej w Kościele starożytnym*, Lublin.

³⁰ Wronikowska 1990: 124.

³¹ Hamman 1990: 249.

³² Probable course of agape – Hamman 1990: 252-254.

solution was practised from the beginning. This is one of many problems of interpreters of various types of described or represented early Christian feasts (fig. 33)³³.

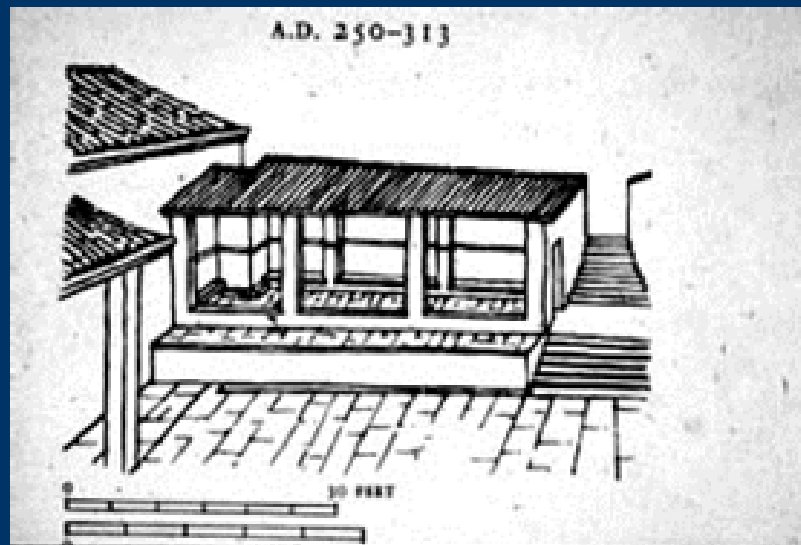


Fig. 33. So-called „Triclia”, beneath San Sebastiano, Rome – reconstruction.

Researchers derive agape as one of the types of feasts from the tradition of the communion of the table that was introduced by Christ Himself, by sitting with sinners, publicans and poor for supper (Mk 2, 13-17, Mt 11, 19). In this way he wished to put them on par with others, pointing the fact that they have the same right to achieve forgiveness and salvation. At the same time, one can see here the eschatological nature of the words of Christ who compares the act of salvation to the ceremonial meal³⁴: „But he said to him, <<A man once gave a great banquet, and invited many, and at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited: „Come, for all is now ready”. But they all alike began to make excuses. (...) And the master said to the servant: „For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet>>” (Lk 14,16-24).

In this sense, participation in community of the table may bring us to participate in the eschatological banquet in the Kingdom of God³⁵. The announcement of the heavenly banquet (*coena coelestis*) were also the Eucharistic feasts. Christ Himself repeatedly in the pages of the New Testament identifies his Body with food, by which the soul may be saved: „I am the

³³ Until the creation of the first rooms specially adapted for gatherings of Christians in prayer, the number of revellers could not be bigger than the number of dinner-guests that would fit in the triclinium. A special room, devoted to Christian feasts, called Triclia preserved in the Catacombs of San Sebastiano in Rome.

³⁴ Gniska 2003: 200-202.

³⁵ Gniska 2003: 202.

living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh” (Jn 6,51). Fathers of the Church in the Eucharist saw not only the sacrifice, but also a very special food eaten after offering it - the Body and Blood of Christ³⁶.

Another type of feasts - celebrations associated with the cult of the dead which probably took place in Africa – is mentioned by Tertullian (De monog. 10; De corona 3; De exhort. cast. II; Adv. Marc. 5, 9; De Test. anim. 4).

Both for ancient people and for Christians of the first centuries, funerals and celebrations in honor and memory of the deceased, provided an opportunity for shared meals.

ICONOGRAPHY

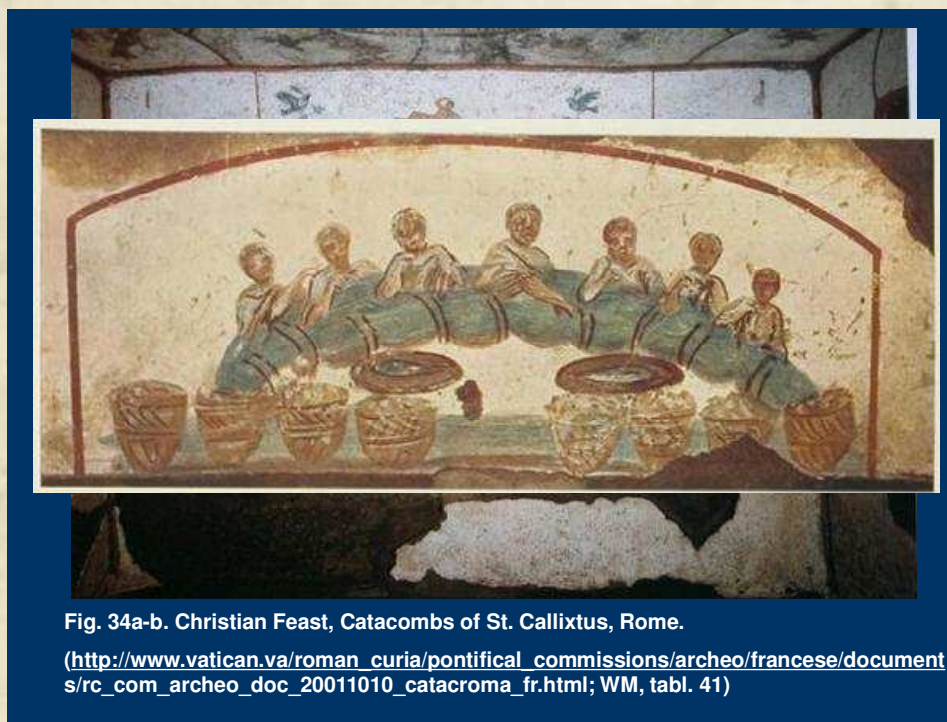


Fig. 34a-b. Christian Feast, Catacombs of St. Callixtus, Rome.

(http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_commissions/archeo/francese/document/s/rc_com_archeo_doc_20011010_catacroma_fr.html; WM, tabl. 41)

(fig. 34a-b) Probably the oldest representations of Christian feasts come from the 3rd (Kal 21, 22)³⁷ and the early 4th century³⁸. They appeared in the sepulchral context - on the walls of the catacombs and on the sarcophagus reliefs³⁹. The paintings decorate the central parts of walls of cubicula in the Roman catacombs including Catacombs of San Callisto, Catacombs of Priscilla, Catacombs of Marcellinus and Peter. Most representations refer to the

³⁶ Słomka 2000: 16-105. Feast after sacrifice in antiquity – Iwaszkiewicz-Wronikowska 2008: 146 n. 4.

³⁷ The earliest known example of a banquet scene comes probably from the first half of the 3rd century from the the Hypogeum of the Aurelli – Mazzei 2000: 134.

³⁸ Dunbabin 2003: 175.

³⁹ Iwaszkiewicz-Wronikowska 2008: 147.

ancient iconographical type of feast showing people dressed in tunicae, both men (Catacombs of San Callisto) and women (Catacombs of Priscilla (fig. 35))



Fig. 35. Christian Feast in so-called Capella Greca, Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome.

(http://www.saluzzo.chiesacattolica.it/gris/articoli/arte_fede/eucaristia1.html)

sitting around the table („usually small, often three-legged table”⁴⁰), filled with serving plates with food.



Fig. 36. Christian Feast, Catacombs of St. Callixtus, Rome.

(WM, tabl. 41)

⁴⁰ Iwaszkiewicz-Wronikowska 2008: 146.

(fig. 36) It may happen that on both sides of the table there are baskets filled with bread (e.g. Kal 22, 24, 25, Pri 39) - from seven (Kal 24) / or five⁴¹ / up to ten baskets (Kal 25). In most scenes one can find similar motives - bread, fish, baskets and tripod⁴², but sometimes there are also some additional items such as a cup standing on the ground in front of stibadium in the scene of the feast from the Catacombs of Priscilla⁴³.

Representations from the Catacombs of San Callisto and the Catacombs of Priscilla are mostly similar to those present in the pagan funerary art. The only difference in the Christian scenes is the presence of baskets of bread and the lack of the servants (motive of fish or settling the revellers on stibadium were also present in earlier ancient representations)⁴⁴.



(fig. 37a-b) Apart from the banquet scenes on the walls of the catacombs, one can also find other representations connected with feasts, or complementing them⁴⁵. An example of this solution is a representation of a tripod with a platter (filled with bread and fish) and

⁴¹ Dunbabin 2003: 175.

⁴² Wronikowska 1990: 122-123.

⁴³ Dunbabin 2003: 175.

⁴⁴ Dunbabin 2003: 176.

⁴⁵ Mazzei 2000: 134.

baskets with bread standing on its both sides (ceiling Kal 21)⁴⁶. In the Catacombs of San Callisto there are also many other representations of fish and baskets⁴⁷.



Fig. 38. Scene, Catacombs of St. Callixtus, Rome.
(WM, tab. 41)

(fig. 38) In the cubiculum Kal 22 on both sides of the tripod, on which there is a loaf of bread, there are standing figures - a man holding out a hand towards the food and a woman with her hands spread out in a gesture of prayer (*expansis manibus*)⁴⁸⁴⁹.

⁴⁶ An example of the reduction of the banquet scene – Gerke 1940a: 37; Wronikowska 1990: 122.

⁴⁷ Symbolic meaning – Gerke 1940a: 37; Wronikowska 1990: 123.

⁴⁸ Gesture and its function in the early Christian art – De Maria 2000: 187-188.

⁴⁹ According to Professor Bożena Iwaszkiewicz-Wronikowska this scene, viewed in the context of the Eucharist, may show the first iconographical representation of the Christian altar. Presented man would make a gesture of blessing over bread (*impositio manum*). The author refers to many previous researchers who have tried to interpret this representation as related to the Eucharist (GB De Rossi, J. Bilczewski) or they did not exclude this possibility (e.g. Fabrizio Bisconti, Barbara Mazzei). Banquet scene depicted in the same cubiculum, could perhaps be a continuation of the Eucharist scene or at least it would "not interfere" with that scene - Iwaszkiewicz-Wronikowska 2008: 147-149.



Fig. 39. Scene, Catacomb of Saints Peter and Marcellinus, Rome.

(http://www.the-goldenrule.name/Orgy_Council_of_Laodicea.htm)

(fig. 39) In the Catacombs of Marcellinus and Peter there is a greater diversity of depicted banquet scenes or representations referring to them. One showed here both individual dinner-guests and the whole groups of them (from six to seven people). Often the revellers are accompanied by servants who bring jugs with wine and plates. Some of the participants of feasts keep their cups, or even raise their glasses in a toast, which was not present in the scenes from the Catacombs of San Callisto⁵⁰.

Eight well-preserved scenes in the lunettes of arcosolia, coming probably from the 3rd / 4th century, have inscriptions addressed to Sabina, Agape and Irene (to these two both together and separately; their names mean "love" and "peace" and that is why many researchers do not interpret these characters as real women, but as personifications of Christian virtues⁵¹) such as „*Sabina misce*“, „*Agape, misce nobis*“, „*Irene, porge calda(m)*“. These are requests for mixing wine or heating water probably directed by guests towards women⁵² (fig. 40).

⁵⁰ Dunbabin 2003: 178.

⁵¹ Dunbabin 2003: 179.

⁵² Dunbabin 2003: 179.



Fig. 40. Scene, Catacomb of Saints Peter and Marcellinus, Rome.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Agape_feast_03.jpg

The scenes present from two to five revellers, not only men but also women and children⁵³. In two representations there is a woman who is sitting on a separate chair. In some scenes there are also standing women and boys, usually carrying a jug or a cup.



Fig. 41. Scene, Catacomb of Saints Peter and Marcellinus, Rome.
<http://www.passionistnuns.org/Saints/SsMarcellinusPeter/index.htm>

⁵³ St. Augustine in his Confessions (Conf., IX, 8) speaks of children who eat at the table with their parents.

(fig. 41) On a tripod, which in two scenes is covered with a cloth, in one representation there is a fish⁵⁴.

The scenes of early Christian feasts decorate not only the walls of the catacombs, but they also appear among the sarcophagus reliefs (fig. 42-43).



Fig. 42. Banquet scene, sarcophagus, Musei Vaticani, Rome.
(www.rome101.com)



Fig. 43. Banquet scene, sarcophagus, Musei Vaticani, Rome.
(www.rome101.com)

⁵⁴ Dunbabin 2003: 178.

EARLY CHRISTIAN FEASTS - INTERPRETATION OF THE MEANING

The interpretation of the feasts, both mentioned by early Christian writers and represented in the catacomb paintings and sarcophagus reliefs, gives rise to many difficulties in research. They arise due to the complex character of many types of early Christian "banquets". We can deal with agape, mortuary feast in honor of the dead, the Eucharist or its equivalent in the form of so-called *coena coelestis*.

In the oldest literature on the subject these scenes are considered as an illustration of the heavenly banquet⁵⁵. In the early 19th century researchers opposed to this transcendent interpretation, considering the depicted images to be real feasts that, even before in the ancient pagan world, were held in honor of the dead on their graves⁵⁶. Giovanni Battista De Rossi regarded these representations as symbolic. He interpreted the paintings from the Catacombs of San Callisto, referring, in his view, to the texts of the New Testament, as connected with the feeding of the multitude and the Eucharist, and the images from the Catacombs of Marcellinus and Peter as representation of *coena coelestis*⁵⁷. His concept was developed by Joseph Wilpert who recognized these scenes as representations of Eucharistic feasts⁵⁸.

Joseph Liell, polemicizing with Wilpert, attributed two meanings to the represented feasts. He considered them the actual meals with family or the symbolic idea of the heavenly banquet⁵⁹. Henri Leclercq saw these scenes as mortuary feasts in honor of the dead, which in their complex meaning had also some features of other types of banquets⁶⁰.

The newer literature on the subject usually refers to one of the earlier interpretations by providing further arguments in favour of the previous thesis. Most researchers see the representations of early Christian feasts as actual banquets in honor of the dead, which were held near their graves⁶¹. In favour of this interpretation appeals, according to Professor Elzbieta Jastrzebowska, the presence of baskets with bread interpreted as gifts to the poor, distribution of which was often accompanied by feasts in honor of the deceased organized near their graves. This custom was a continuation of similar pagan traditions⁶². Professor Jastrzebowska claims as well: „My former interpretation of these scenes as representations of funerary banquets with traditional menu: fish, bread and wine, today I would modify to the

⁵⁵ Wronikowska 1990: 125.

⁵⁶ Raoul-Rochette 1836: 132-158.

⁵⁷ De Rossi, *RS II*: 244nn, 341, tabl. 11-16.

⁵⁸ Wilpert 1895.

⁵⁹ Liell 1903.

⁶⁰ Leclercq, *Agape* [in:] *DACL*, vol. I, col.775-848.

⁶¹ E.g. Dölger 1943: 503-540; Stüiber 1957: 130-136; Jastrzebowska 1979: 3-90.

⁶² Dunbabin 2003: 177.

extent that I am not inclined so radically in the direction of a realistic interpretation. Undoubtedly, these scenes were also means of symbolic meaning⁶³”.

Other researchers, agreeing with the possibility of a symbolic interpretation of early Christian scenes of feasts, see them as the representation of the Eucharistic liturgy, directly connected for Christians with the heavenly feast, which is a reward for a worthy life on earth⁶⁴.

There are also scholars combining the two interpretations - the real and the transcendent feast - in one representation⁶⁵.

CONCLUSION

The feasts were an important element of ancient tradition and a frequent subject of representations in ancient art. It seems that also for Christians in the first centuries after Christ the feast played a crucial role. Moreover, the representation of early Christian feasts in many ways relates to similar scenes in ancient art, especially funerary art. It is clearly visible not only in the use of a similar representational pattern, but also in the complexity of meaning of the banquet and variety of its types (the banquet relating to religion, feasts in honor of the dead, banquets organized for urban communities). They were a symbol of unity and religiousness of a community.

Later scenes that appear in Christian art, showing events both from the Old and from the New Testament (fig. 44-46)

⁶³ Jastrzębowska 2003: 120n (transl. A. Krauze-Kołodziej).

⁶⁴ E.g. Gerke 1940b: 148; Sauser 1966: 139. The second version is supported by the regulation in the Catechism of the Catholic Church: „The Mass is at the same time, and inseparably, the sacrificial memorial in which the sacrifice of the cross is perpetuated and the sacred banquet of communion with the Lord's body and blood. But the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice is wholly directed toward the intimate union of the faithful with Christ through communion. To receive communion is to receive Christ himself who has offered himself for us.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1382 – online version: http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P42.HTM)

⁶⁵ E.g. Testini 1966: 272; Pani Ermini 1969: 159.



Fig. 44. Herod's feast - fragment, Codex Sinopensis, 6th century.

(http://www.artbible.net/3JC/-Mat-14,01_Death_JBaptist_Mort%20Jbaptiste/slides/06%20CODEX%20SINOPENSIS%20LE%20FESTIN%20D%20HERODE.html),



Fig. 45. Mosaic from Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, c. 500 AD, Ravenna.

(http://christchurchwindsor.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/StApollinareNuovo_LastSupper.jpg)



Fig. 46. Last Supper, Codex Rossano, 6th century AD., Diocesan Museum, Rossano.
(<http://www.premiumorange.com/tapisseries-licornes/CHASSE/01f-%20the%20last%20supper%20and%20the%20apostles.htm>)

seem to confirm the ancient origins of iconographic pattern of banquet scenes.

However, apart from features that make early Christian feasts similar to those pagan ones, there are also some differences that prove a new understanding of a banquet. Christian feast seems to emphasize the unity of community and equality of all its members even more than pagan banquet. Christian is also a tradition of agape - a feast for the people in need – often combined with the Eucharistic feasts, which, together with banquets in honor of the deceased, was an expression of deep religiousness. They were an announcement of the heavenly banquet that symbolized an eternal reward for those redeemed through Jesus Christ's final sacrifice.

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CONVIVIAM, FRACTIO PANIS, A MOŻE COENA COELESTIS?

(Summary)

The aim of the article is to show the complex character of banquets held by Christians in the first centuries after Christ and features which characterize them when compared to the feasts celebrated in the late ancient world.

In the introduction the author presents fragments of biblical and patristic sources chosen to illustrate the subject. The main part of the presentation is dedicated to different iconographical types of banquets shown in catacombs and on Christian sarcophags. The images are considered in the context of the ancient representational tradition.

In the last part there is an attempt to critically elaborate various interpretations of banquet scenes which appear in older and newer literature on the subject.

Iconographical continuity between ancient and early Christian representations are shown as an example of the connection between pagan spirituality and a new era influenced by Christian religion.

KLUCZOWE SŁOWA: bankiet, uczta, antyczny, klasyczny, wczesnochrześcijański, ikonografia, literatura, teologia

KEY WORDS: banquet, feast, ancient, classical, early Christian, iconography, literature, theology