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The Banquet of Crassus: Politics, Myth, and Ritual

During his first consulship in 70 B.C., Marcus Licinius Crassus hosted a large public banquet on behalf of Hercules at the Ara Maxima, during which "10,000 tables were set out and each man additionally presented with an allowance of grain enough to last for three months" (Plutarch, *Crass.* 12). The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to consider the political circumstances of which this extravaganza was a part, and secondly, to show how this political situation helps to throw unexpected light on the connections between the Ara Maxima's unique ritual and its foundation legend. In this banquet, we find a sophisticated treatment of the Altar's peculiar ceremonial practices which, while undertaken to score political points with the Roman crowd, nonetheless highlights the religious harmony of the Altar's myth and rite. It must be noted that in 70 Crassus shared the consulship with Pompey, against whom he was desperately competitive (cf. ! A. Ward, *Marcus Crassus* [1977] 99ff.). Although both generals were fresh from military successes—Pompey in Spain, Crassus over Spartacus,—Crassus would enjoy only an *ovatio*, an honor of decidedly lesser distinction than the triumph awarded to Pompey for his Spanish victories. Beryl Rawson (*Antichthon* 4 [1970] 30ff.) has noted that much of Pompey's propaganda in this year focused on Hercules of the Ara Maxima: to capitalize upon Hercules' Spanish association, Pompey dedicated a new temple of Hercules in this forum to sit alongside this altar. It is in light of this bold initiative by Pompey that we must see Crassus' elaborate banquet: such a large offering in the heart of the cattle market would, as Rawson aptly remarks, "give Crassus an excellent opportunity to steal Pompey's thunder." But, in addition, this distribution must be seen in light of the Ara Maxima's cult restrictions: Varro records that at whatever was offered to Hercules at the Altar was required to be eaten in its entirety before the sanctuary (*LL* 6.54). Such a provision, while rare in Rome, can be paralleled in various other parts of the ancient world (cf. Burkert, *GRBS* 7 [1966] 104 n. 36). To understand how Crassus could give away a three-months' amount of grain at his feast, we must turn to the relationship between the Altar's myth and its rite. The ritual provision that no meat be taken away from the sanctuary thus can be seen to grow out of the action of the foundation legend, in which Hercules commemorated the recovery of his stolen cattle by giving an elaborate banquet. No cow must be taken away from Hercules—neither from the hero's herd nor from the feast given in his memory. With this in mind, we see that Crassus' offering kept scrupulously within the ritual stipulations of the cult: whatever meat was offered at any of the 10,000 tables doubtlessly was discarded; the cereal offering, however, was not covered by this regulation and so was free to be taken away for private use. In this cultic loophole, Crassus found a way to make a lavish gift to the people while simultaneously countering, and to a certain extent disarming, Pompey's self-promotional usage of Hercules. Crassus' handling of these ritual matters, moreover, allows us to see more clearly how the foundation myth of the Altar, which involves Hercules recovering his stolen cow in the Cattle Market, is connected to the odd provision of the rite disallowing the removal of any of the sacrifice.