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Horizontal women: sex and the ideology of convivial posture at Rome

Historians assert that Roman republican women normally dined seated as their menfolk reclined, while imperial women reclined like men (e.g. Marquardt, *Privatleben* 1886: I.300-301; Ihm, *RE* 3.1895.63-67; Balsdon, *Roman Women* 1962: 272; Weeber, *Alltag im alten Rom* 125, Bradley in *Meals in a Social Context* 1998: 46-48). Reconsideration is necessary. Based mainly on two oft-cited texts (Val. Max. 2.1.2; Isid. 20.11.9), this assertion ignores much countervailing textual and visual evidence. Moreover, it neglects the interpenetration of dining posture with other social practices and tensions, which made posture meaningful and suggest particular rationales for its representation.

I survey the evidence for women's convivial posture from the beginnings through the Antonine period, as it is represented in (mostly elite) literary texts, on freedmen's funerary monuments from Rome (see esp. Wrede in *AA* 1977, Boschung, *Grabalt* 1987, Sinn, *Marmorurnen* 1987) and in Romano-Campanian wall paintings (see e.g. Varone in *Ercolano 1738-1988* 1993: 622ff.), whose intended viewers varied in status. The texts overwhelmingly indicate that, in all periods, women of diverse statuses dined reclining alongside men to whom they were sexually connected (e.g., Plaut. *Bacch.* 1188-93, *Amph.* 804, Dio 48.44, Cic. *Ver.* 2.5.80ff., Livy 39.42, Ov. *Am.* 1.4, *Her.* 16.217ff., Mart. 10.84, 11.23; Tac. *Ann.* 11.27, Suet. *Cal.* 24.1, Plut. *Mor.* 759F, Juv. 2.120); all three forms of evidence-but texts and paintings especially-show that this posture was erotically charged and might indicate that such women were also more widely sexually available. Conversely, some texts and funerary monuments portray women dining seated alongside reclining men; this posture likely connotes chastity (Val. Max. and Isid. supra; Apul. *Met.* 1.22; Dio Chr. 7.65; Boschung nos. 327, 775, 784, 833). But the texts locate this practice in the remote past or among foreigners, and the funerary monuments aim to stress a legitimate, exclusive marriage connection-freedmen's special concern (Zanker in *JDAI* 1975). Thus seated women, though their image is ideologically potent, are special cases.

My survey suggests that women of every status commonly dined reclining, even during the republic. More interestingly, it reveals an ideological link between posture and sexuality, which probably has more to do with how women's dining posture is represented in text and art than actual social practice does.