

ANCIENT ROMAN HOUSEHOLD FURNITURE AND ITS USE: FROM HERCULANEUM TO THE RHINE

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SUMMARY

In this contribution I will first enter upon Roman household furniture and especially the preservation of wooden furniture and its specific use in everyday life. In the second part, as a case study, I will treat the sources we have at our disposal about Roman banquets (*convivia*) and the rooms in which they took place. The interior decoration and the furniture used will be discussed, as well as the etiquette that had to be observed during dining and drinking¹.

Key words: household furniture, wooden furniture, banquets (*convivia*)

RESUMEN

En este trabajo se estudiará primero el mobiliario doméstico romano y especialmente la conservación del mobiliario lúgneo y su uso específico en la vida diaria. En la segunda parte, como un estudio de caso, se estudiarán las fuentes que tenemos a nuestra disposición sobre los banquetes romanos (*convivia*) y las habitaciones en los que éstos tenían lugar. La decoración interior y el mobiliario usado será discutido como símbolo de etiqueta para ser observado durante la comida y la bebida.

Palabras clave: mobiliario doméstico, mobiliario de madera, banquete (*convivia*)

¹ This contribution reflects the three lectures I gave in Murcia in May 2009, the first on the forms and functions of the *Herculaneum* furniture, the second on techniques used by Roman cabinet makers and the last on the changing forms and uses of dining room furniture. The first part, including the part on the Herculaneum Furniture is a summary of Mols, 1999. The second part, entitled 'The Rhine', is a summarized version of my contributions to the publication of the ship wreck 'De Meern 1': Mols, 2007. References can be found in these publications. The third part is an altered and updated version in English of an article in the Dutch journal *Lampas* (Mols, 2006).

INTRODUCTION

Handbooks on Roman furniture, and works discussing the interior of Roman houses, often state that Roman residences were sparsely furnished. A Roman house contained only the most necessary items of furniture. This idea arose in the 19th century, when interest in Roman antiquities took flight. In this contribution, however, the validity of the notion is questioned, on the basis of two examples of groups of wooden furniture which I have had the opportunity to analyse. The first group stems from Herculaneum - a town which, as is well known, was covered in lava, alongside Pompeii, when Mt Vesuvius erupted in AD 79. The second group contains furniture that was found in the Netherlands in a ship which sank in the Rhine towards the end of the second century AD.

Looking at Roman Furniture one can differentiate categories along lines of function and the use of material. Function will be discussed later, but for now I want to focus on delineation in types of material. The material that was used, after all, strongly influences the level of preservation. Roman furniture can be roughly divided into three main categories: metal, especially bronze; stone, especially marble; and wood. Other materials are much more rare, and often restricted to a particular area. Thus, for instance, there are some items of furniture in Kimmeridge shale, a rock containing bitumen, from the vicinity of Dorchester in Southern England. The shapes of the items, especially tables, but also other items of furniture, are comparable to those found in wood elsewhere. Here, I will limit myself to the three main groups.

As will become clear, furniture in metal and stone can still be in a very good state of preservation. Samples are often beautiful and worked to a high level. Wood, on the other hand, is found much more seldom, and in a much more fragmentary state. Often, it concerns only small parts. As, however, the many images of wooden furniture illustrate, the original situation must have been very different. Most furniture was made of wood, and only a small part was constructed from other materials. What remains in the present, in other words, bears little relation to the reality of the Roman past. How then to create a representative image of the residential decoration of ancient Rome?

To this purpose, we need to find wooden furniture. An important source for this are the excavations in and around Pompeii. The devastating eruption of the Vesu-

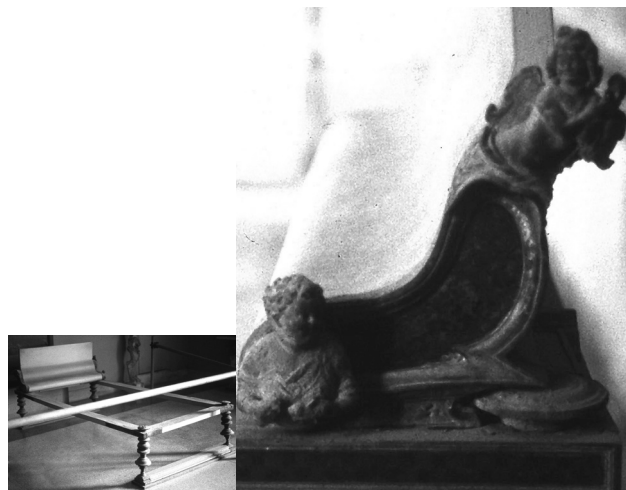


Figure 1. Wooden couch (*lectus tricliniaris*), from Pompeii, Naples, Museo Nazionale Archeologico (photo S. Mols).

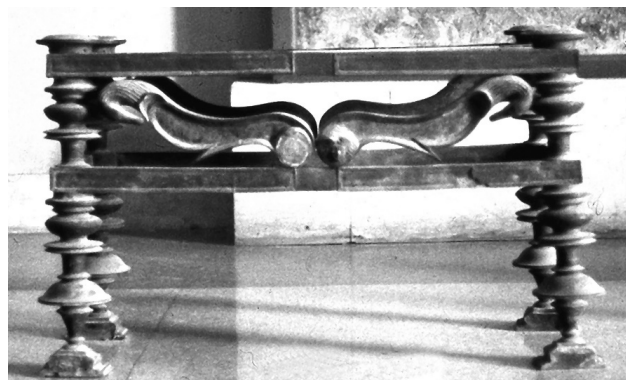


Figure 2. Modern bench consisting of parts of one or more *lecti tricliniaries*. Naples, Museo Nazionale Archeologico (photo S. Mols).

vius, after all, supplies us with a ‘freeze-frame’ filled with information on Roman daily life in the first century AD. Little wood, however, was preserved in Pompeii. In some cases casts were made of holes left by dissolved wood in the volcanic material. Alternatively, there remain parts of wooden furniture which were made in different materials, such as metal which served to support a construction, or bronze that was used to embellish it. Figure 1 shows bronze decorations of a wooden bed for a dining room. The find was well documented, which allowed wood to be added in the right shape. The striking adornments of beds are, by the way, not found solely in Pompeii. Many museums show comparable examples from older excavations at Pompeii, however, especially those of the 18th and 19th century, are often badly documented, and attachments were reconstructed erroneously. As a result forms of furniture were created which never existed in antiquity (fig. 2). In the case illustrated the remains of

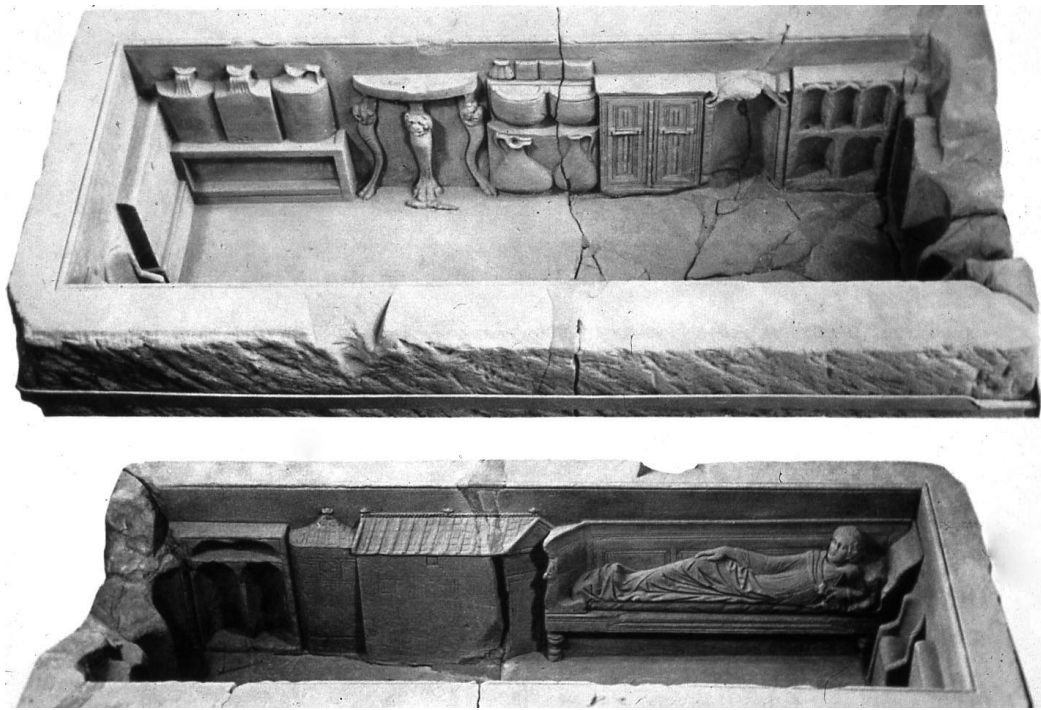


Figure 3. Sarcophagus with interior reliefs, from Simpelveld (the Netherlands), Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden. Photo: museum.

two or three dining-room beds are recreated into a small bench. Taking the dissolved wood into consideration, the image ought to have looked like the one illustrated in fig. 1. A large group of wooden furniture was found in Herculaneum, the city that was destroyed alongside Pompeii by the eruption of Mt Vesuvius in 79 AD. I will return to this group later.

A second source of information for our knowledge of wooden furniture are depictions of the furniture on different media. We find, for instance, depictions of dining room furniture on reliefs and mosaics from all over the Empire, and especially on wall paintings from Pompeii and Herculaneum. These depictions go some way in filling the void caused by the absence of wood, but much remains open, especially regarding details. The depictions of furniture found elsewhere show shapes of furniture which we also know from the Pompeian images. Depictions from very different parts of the Empire in fact illustrate a remarkable consistency in the shapes of furniture, and only a very slow change in fashion in this respect, which is a remarkable feature of Roman furniture.

A monument special for its images of wooden furniture is a sarcophagus which was found in the village of Simpelveld in the south of the Netherlands (fig. 3). It

shows the interior of a villa, and also various pieces of wooden furniture, including a woman lying on a couch or reclining bed.

When wooden furniture is preserved, it is almost always by accident. Wood, for instance, remains from extremely dry environments, such as Roman Egypt, or the Crimea, which is less known but very important for our knowledge of Hellenistic and Roman wood-working.

Wood can also be preserved in an extremely wet environment. Examples coming from the Rhine will be described later. Finally, wood can be carbonized, making it chemically more stable and preserving it if it is treated correctly. The latter happened during the eruption of the Vesuvius. Not, however, in Pompeii, but in nearby Herculaneum, which was likewise destroyed. The scalding hot eruption discharge burned the wood in the town, but instantly sealed it, separating it from oxygen, and thereby stopping the actual burning of the material.

I. THE HERCULANEUM MATERIAL

Since the beginning of regular excavations in 1738, all sorts of objects made of organic material have been dug up, with only a very small proportion surviving to

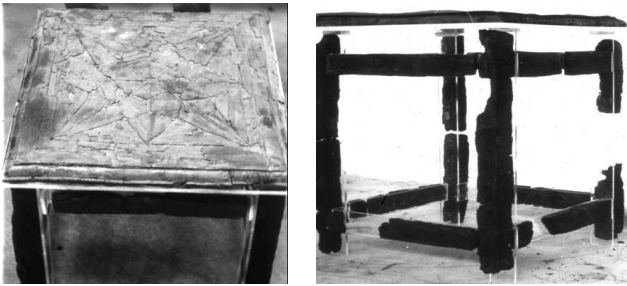


Figure 4. Wooden stool from Herculaneum, Herculaneum (photo S. Mols).

the present. For a long time excavations were organised by means of mine shafts, as can still be seen from the case of the ancient theatre, about 25 meters beneath modern ground level. A proven method to preserve wood, however, was not at hand until 1927, when large scale excavations started, and part of the ancient town was uncovered. Nowadays, an area of about 200 by 300 meters can be visited.

Organic material has been preserved throughout the town. Better than in any other Roman town, we gain an impression of wood used in architecture, or of other finds in materials which were lost elsewhere.

Furthermore, as this is the main topic of our contribution, about 40 pieces of wooden furniture have been preserved. Some of these are discussed briefly here. The shapes are simple, mostly functional, but not without elaborate details, and occasionally decorations which must have been made with much attention. I will present here some examples giving an impression of the material:

Seating is scarce: there are only three benches and one stool (fig. 4). The latter has a very basic form. It is a square seat upon four straight legs which are tied together by two sets of four rungs. All the joints are mortise and tenon joints. What makes the stool particularly interesting, however, is the seat, which is decorated with an eight-pointed star in wood mosaic, edged by a triple receding moulding.

Fifteen pieces of storage furniture have survived in Herculaneum. These can be divided into cupboards, racks, chests and a very special category, that of household shrines (fig. 5-6). Most of these have simple, utilitarian shapes. In the majority of cupboard-doors a construction of framing and panels was used, as in the small cupboard shown in figure 5. In this piece hinges were made of a number of small cylinders, assembled in a band, alternately fixed and moving, like a modern piano hinge. In this case, wooden cylinders were used,



Figure 5. Wooden *cupboard* from Herculaneum, Herculaneum (photo S. Mols).



Figure 6. Wooden *aedicula* from Herculaneum, Herculaneum (photo S. Mols).

but often use was made of bone instead. Bone cylinders are frequently found in excavations from Roman times, indicating that items of storage furniture were a much used category of household equipment all over the Em-



Figure 7. Wooden table from Herculaneum, Herculaneum (photo S. Mols).

pire. In Herculaneum combinations of bone and dark wood have also been found, as the excavation reports indicate. The household shrine or *aedicula* shown in figure 6 is an expertly made piece of furniture, as the marble capitals and mouldings in the columns and the pediment show.

Six wooden tables have been preserved in Herculaneum, all but for one exception of the same type: a round tabletop resting on three legs, which are modeled into more or less stylized animal legs; the claw of a lion or dog forms the base and the leg is crowned by an architectural motif (fig. 7). At two-thirds of the height, a figurative decoration is sometimes mounted on the front and sides. The table shown in figure 7 has heads of griffins, with their typically sharp ears and protruding tongue. Other examples are decorated with heads of the young Dionysus/Bacchus with garlands of ivy or with a hunting dog emerging from an acanthus calyx and running upwards, its rib cage pressed against the table leg. All decorations seem to refer to the function of the tables: they were used as dining tables. The griffins, through their association with Dionysus/Bacchus, refer to the wine consumed with the meal, the dogs refer to the food itself, the bag of the hunt. The curved table



Figure 8. Wooden couch from Herculaneum, Herculaneum (photo S. Mols).

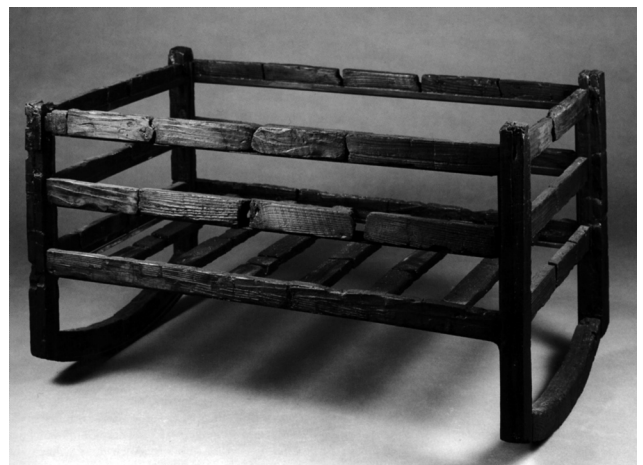


Figure 9. Wooden cradle from Herculaneum, Herculaneum (photo S. Mols).

legs go back to Hellenistic models, but the decorative addition of a whole animal, or of animal or human heads, is a Roman invention.

The last category I will present here are beds and couches (fig. 8-9). The bed shown in figure 8 originally had high boards mounted on three sides of the bedframe, of which only two are partly preserved. It had four legs formed on the lathe, here with a bronze casing. The bases of the legs are linked by stretchers at each end. To support the mattress, a system of intersecting slats are fitted into the rails of the bedframe, with half-lap joints at the intersections, and mortise-and-tenon joints at the end of the slaps, very much resembling the modern slatted base. Other forms of beds are children's beds, like the cradle with two curved rockers at the bottom (figure 9), and so-called *biclinia*, instances of couches joined together at right angles. It is a variety of the better known *triclinium*,

three couches or beds furnishing a dining room.

There is little known about the tools for furniture making or carpentry used by the Herculaneum cabinet makers. Regarding the techniques and wood species used, the furniture must speak for itself. Analysis of the traces made by woodworking, in combination with finds of actual tools from elsewhere and depictions of these, provides insight in the tools that were used.

Apart from the different types of furniture found in Herculaneum and the techniques used for their manufacture, the very detailed excavation reports allow us to gain a detailed image of the context in which the material was found. From it, the following conclusions can be drawn: firstly: most pieces of wooden furniture were of practical use in the daily life of the local inhabitants. Secondly: wooden furniture was rarely placed in a room to show the social status of the owner, in marked contrast to marble and bronze show pieces, which were generally placed in formal spaces. At first glance, there seems to be one exception: in dining rooms, clearly also rooms frequented by important visitors and guests, wooden furniture was used. As for the couches: the visible parts were made of bronze, the wood covered by richly decorated sheets and blankets, and the wooden tables were made of species of precious wood. The tables had to be light to make it possible to remove them quickly during dinner courses. It is not remarkable in this respect that in Latin the same word, *mensa*, is used to indicate both table and dinner course. Perhaps the most important observation is that the general idea that Roman houses were scarcely furnished is not attested in Herculaneum.

The information available from Herculaneum, combined with written sources, furthermore allows us to reconstruct ancient contexts like, for example, the interior of a *triclinium*, the standard Roman dining room, even if, as said before, the actual combination of three couches has not been preserved. I will enter upon this below.

II. THE RHINE

From Herculaneum we now briefly go to the Rhine. In 2003, in a town called Vleuten-De Meern, in the middle of the Netherlands, near Utrecht, a Roman ship which could be dated to the second half of the second century A.D. was found in a now silted up branch of the river. This in itself was no remarkable find. Roman ships are found regularly, also in the Netherlands. But in this case, uniquely, the ship's cabin could be salvaged intact, including its contents which included, as must



Figure 10. Wooden front of a cupboard from the shipwreck "De Meern 1", Lelystad (the Netherlands) (photo RCE Amersfoort).

be clear by now, also furniture. Some of the pieces that were found I want to discuss briefly here: a cupboard, a chest, and part of a bed or couch.

The best preserved piece is a cupboard of 73 cms in height with two doors and four internal compartments (fig. 10). Here, only the front of the original piece is shown, but the finds allowed for a reconstruction of the whole cupboard. During excavation the left door was found closed and the right door open, as can be seen here. Unlike the Herculaneum cupboard shown earlier, it is obvious that the framing of these doors is only suggested by mouldings in the front side. In this case the hinges were metal, attached with nails, bended at the back. The same phenomenon is visible in the chest (fig. 11). This piece measures 132 cms in length and was probably also used as a bench in the cabin. The bed poles were made on the lathe and attached to the bedframe with nails, also bended towards the end. All three pieces were furthermore made of reused wood, but not without elegance, at least for the parts that were visible—that is, when the cupboard and chest were closed—. There are, furthermore, similarities to the Herculaneum furniture in outward appearance, as can for instance be seen in the case of the cupboards. As for the beds, the Herculaneum samples are more elaborate in legs and bed frame. A better parallel for the bed legs from the ship we have in the couch depicted on the *Simpelveld Sarcophagus* (figure 3), which, like the ship, is datable to the late second century AD. This may give us an idea of the development of forms through time. There is, however, a striking difference between the maker of



Figure 11. Wooden chest from the shipwreck “De Meern 1”, Lelystad (the Netherlands) (photo RCE Amersfoort): above, during excavation; below: reconstruction.

the ship inventory and the Herculaneum cabinet makers. The first left, as it were, his signature in banded nails, a phenomenon which occurs more often on ships -also in non-movable parts- and seems to be an integral part of the practice of ship-carpentry. It appears that the person who made the furniture was the actual sailor. On the outside, he adapted his furniture to what appears to have been the Roman norm.

Completely unique in this respect is that his toolkit was salvaged too, giving us an idea of the materials with which he worked his wood. Striking, also, is the complete absence of a plane for making mouldings.

Apart from the two groups of finds which I’ve just presented, there are some other surviving pieces of Roman furniture, but these are on the whole isolated cases, without the context which, as must be clear, is of the utmost importance. It is these two groups, therefore, which give a unique insight in the daily use and position of furniture in Roman times.

The two other important categories of material, bronze and marble, were much less common, and furniture from these materials more often than not had representative functions. Regularly, they were showpieces, used to impress guests. Returning to the Simpelveld sarcophagus, it becomes clear that it lacks images of marble and bronze furniture, affording a prominent place to wooden furniture. Keeping in mind an analysis of the material from Herculaneum and the Rhine, one can conclude that the sarcophagus intentionally depicts the daily, personal, surroundings of the deceased lady. A better freeze-frame of a Roman private interior has yet got to be found.

III. DINING IN A ROMAN CONTEXT: ROMAN DINING ROOMS, TABLE ARRANGEMENT AND ETIQUETTE

In the Nineteenth-century opera *Herculaneum* composed by the French composer M. Félicien David a certain Olympia is going to live in a fictive palace in Herculaneum. The palace and also the city of Herculaneum are depicted as extremely luxurious:

“L’atrium du palais d’Olympia, orné de toutes les richesses de la fantaisie étrusque. C’est le vestibule des opulentes maisons des Romains à Herculaneum»².

This and similar images of decadence are to be found since the Nineteenth century in many handbooks on Roman daily life. Fortunately the emphasis on the reconstruction of Roman private culture is gradually changing this narrowminded picture. This also applies to food culture in that period. When there is no emphasis laid on gorging and carousing, as was done frequently in the past, a much better picture of an ordinary aspect of daily life arises. This does not preclude excesses during a banquet (*convivium*), but those will rather have been the exception.

Although Roman dining rooms as such did not get much attention during the last years, much has been written on what happened inside them³. These studies mention the decoration and interior design of these

² The opera has a libretto written by J. Méry and T. Hadot and had its première in 1859.

³ See in this respect the congress reports of Murray, 1990 and Slater, 1991; recently Dunbabin, 2003 and Gold and Donahue, 2005 have been published.

rooms only in passing⁴. In this contribution I will take into account reclining during banquets. Firstly I will enter into archaeological sources. Then I will focus on the prehistory of the Roman habit of reclining. To present a picture of the form and interior decoration of dining rooms and their use I will combine literary and archaeological sources.

III.1. The archaeological sources

Of course many material remains of dining rooms have been excavated, but although these finds are widespread over the whole former Roman Empire, most of them can be found in the cities destroyed by the eruption of Mt Vesuvius in 79 AD., especially Pompeii and Herculaneum. From Rome far fewer samples of dining rooms are known, but the remains we have complement the knowledge we have from the Campanian material. Despite the large amount of city area that has been excavated, Ostia, Rome's harbour city, provides relatively little information. The main cause is that it is much more difficult to identify dining rooms in this city. The smallness of apartments in Ostia seem to have prompted a multifunctional use of rooms. To a slightly lesser degree this was also the case with the smaller dwellings in the Campanian cities. Furthermore there are indications that home-owners left it to their tenants to furnish their houses as they preferred, which is why specific references or hints to the function of rooms lack in architecture and decoration.⁵ A big difference between Rome and Ostia on the one hand and Pompeii and Herculaneum on the other is of course that in the capital and its harbour city only the architectural remains can provide us with information; loose finds are mostly lacking. In the Campanian cities in many cases rooms have been found containing their complete inventory. In Herculaneum even wood has been preserved, as I have already mentioned above, while in Pompeii plaster and concrete casts have been made of furniture of which the wood itself has perished, in a manner similar to that of the famous plaster casts of victims of the eruption. Moreover brickwork dining arrangements have been found in Pompeii, in rooms facing gardens, like in the



Figure 12. Pompeii, House of the Cryptoporticus, brickwork *triclinium* (photo: S. Mols).

House of the Cryptoporticus (fig. 12) and in gardens, where people could organize outdoor banquets in the open air or underneath a pergola. A problem we come across studying interiors in Pompeii and Herculaneum is that the picture they provide is one of the last few days before the fatal eruption. From recent archaeological studies has become clear that the inhabitants already had an idea of the coming disaster, reason why one has to be careful with judging the situation one comes across excavating in these cities. Inhabitants must have taken several emergency measures to cope with the impending catastrophe. The much-suggested idea of a snapshot in time in which life just prior to the eruption has been frozen, necessarily has to be nuanced (Allison, 2004, p. 25-26; Dickmann, 2005, p. 8-9). Furthermore the question arises whether, and to what extent, there were differences with the city of Rome, to which many of our written sources on material culture refer. Nevertheless, Pompeii and Herculaneum remain our most important source for knowledge about Roman dining rooms and their furnishings. For the period after 79 AD we have to consult other sources, the amount of which is unfortunately much smaller.

Since the eighties of the previous century members of the department of Classical Archaeology of the Radboud University Nijmegen (NL), amongst whom the author of this contribution, do research in Pompeii, Herculaneum, Rome and Ostia. It is precisely the combination of data from the archaeological remains with the information provided by ancient literature, which yields a fairly good idea of dining rooms and their use. In this research it is tried to sketch a picture of the building history and residential history of a.o. dwellings by meticulously registering all visible remains and by small scale excavations. On this basis the relative chronology of conse-

⁴ During the last years there has been much discussion on the translation of Latin names of rooms in Roman houses and the implicit fixing, or better, restricting/limiting of their function, but I will not pay attention to this in this contribution. See Allison, 2004.

⁵ See Mols, 1999a, p. 362-363.

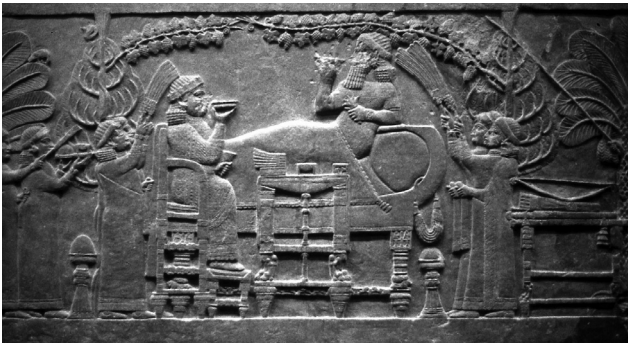


Figure 13. Assyrian relief from Niniveh, London, British Museum (photo: S. Mols).

cutive stages is determined. This leads to an idea of the changes occurring during the time a particular building was in use. A point of particular interest in this respect is the ‘functional analysis’, which combines analysis of architectural remains with the furnishing and interior decoration of rooms. This resulting image gives insight into the use of rooms and buildings and the changes in it through time. This method provides understanding of the history of a complex.

III.2. Sitting or reclining?

In the Homeric epics people did not recline during meals. The Homeric heroes sat down. The habit to recline during dinners in Greece was introduced relatively late, during the Orientalizing period (Seventh century BC), and has Oriental origins⁶. As an example we can mention a famous Assyrian relief from uit Niniveh, now in the British Museum in London. The relief shows king Asurbanipal reclining while his wife Ashursharrat is sitting on a chair at the foot of the couch (fig. 13)⁷. It is likely that the Greek aristocracy adopted the habit from Persian nomad warriors, about whom we have information through Herodotus (9.82). Reclining during banquets was initially an elite fashion: it took place in the *andron*, the male room of a Greek dwelling⁸. It was furthermore a male affair that was probably reserved to male citizens of equal standing.⁹ In a Greek dining

6 Mols, 1999, p. 127, Dentzer, 1969, p. 195-224, both with references to earlier literature.

7 See for Eastern *symposia* Boardman, 1990, p. 125, 129-130 and Burkert, 1991.

8 See for Greek dining rooms: Bergquist, 1990.

9 See regarding couches in Greek *symposia* and their Eastern provenance Dentzer 1982, p. 444-452; Boardman, 1990, p. 122-131. Herodotus 5.18 discusses at length the amazement of the Macedonian



Figure 14. Tomb of the Diver, Poseidonia/Paestum. Archaeological Museum Paestum (photo: S. Mols).

room an unequal number of couches stood along the walls, with a minimum of three. Some *andrones* have been found with room for 23 couches, but these are an exception restricted to reception halls in (semi-)public buildings¹⁰. On each couch one or two persons could recline in a semi-supine position, as has been depicted on many Greek vases and in the symposiastic scenes in the Tomb of the Diver in Poseidonia/Paestum, dating from circa 480 BC (fig. 14).

Judging from depictions the couches were relatively high and had an elevation at one or two short sides, which could hold a cushion to support the arms of the banqueters. Before each couch stood a table with three legs for food and drinks. Initially these tables were rectangular, as can be seen on the painting in Poseidonia. From the second half of the Fourth century BC round tables appeared also with three legs, which finally displaced their rectangular predecessors (Richter, 1966, p. 70-71; Dentzer, 1982, p. 331-334).

On the Italian peninsula the reclining banqueting position probably arrived relatively early, possibly through its introduction in Magna Graecia with Campania as ‘intermediary’ to the north, as had happened with bathing practices. From that moment onwards the Etruscan and Roman elite reclined during banquets.

The change from reclining to sitting during banquets probably started in the fourth century AD. A Cathaginian mosaic dating from the late Fourth century shows an aristocratic banquet with benches, each carrying three banqueters¹¹. While eating in a sitting position must have become fashionable very quickly in the Western part of the Empire, the reclining position remained until the Sixth century in the Eastern part¹².

king Amyntas about the Persian habit that allows the men to recline with their wives.

10 See in this respect Bergquist, 1990, scheme on p. 50.

11 Blanck, 1981; Dunbabin, 1991, p. 136 and 147 (with correction on the dating); Dunbabin, 2003, p. 89-91 and figs. 46-47.

12 See Rossiter, 1991, p. 207-209; Dunbabin, 2003, p. 141-174.

III.3. Roman dining rooms

The name for the typically Roman dining room furniture, *triclinium*, derives from the Greek and literally means ‘three couches’. Apart from indicating dining room furniture the expression was used during a long time for the dining room itself. Following the Greek habit Roman dining room furniture at least until the First century AD consisted of three couches. Each of these couches gave place to a maximum of three persons, and not to only one, as often is thought. In a fragment from the *satyrae menippeae* Varro (116-27 v.Chr.) states that in a *convivium* or banquet the number of guests had to lay between the number of the Graces and that of the Muses. Less than three and more than nine was -if we may believe Varro- not intended¹³.

The expression *triclinium* to indicate dining room furniture is used at least until the end of the first century AD. Later on the expression remains in us to indicate a dining room, but no longer as an indication of the furniture. This can be deduced from a passage of the grammarian Servius, who has to explain his readers what the expression *triclinium* in Vergil means.¹⁴ The *stibadium*, mentioned by Servius in the same passage, apparently was the sort of dining room furniture in use in his age, the fourth century AD, and knowledge of the older form did no longer exist. Synonym for *stibadium* was *sigma*, the name of which refers to piece of furniture’s shape: a semi-circle, or rather a crescent, (derived from the Greek character ζ = *sigma lunare*), which afforded room to five to eight persons. The optimal number of

13 Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 13.11.1-2: *Lepidissimus liber est M. Varronis ex satiris Menippeis, qui inscribitur: nescis, quid vesper serus vehat, in quo disserit de apto conviviarum numero de que ipsius convivii habitu cultuque. Dicit autem conviviarum numerum incipere oportere a Gratiarum numero et progredi ad Musarum, id est proficisci a tribus et consistere in novem, ut, cum paucissimi convivae sunt, non pauciores sint quam tres, cum plurimi, non plures quam novem.* (A very charming book is one of the Menippean satires of M. Varro, entitled: “You never know what the late evening brings you”, in which he delates on the appropriate number of participants at a dinner and the proper appearance of the banquet itself. And then he says that the number of participants must start with the number of the Graces and can increase to that of the Muses, i.e. start with three and end with nine, so that, when there are only a few participants, their number is not lower than three, and, on the other side, when there are many participants, their number does not exceed nine.)

14 Servius, *Commentarius in Vergilii Aeneidos libros* 1, 698: *SPONDA antiqui stibadia non habebant, sed stratis tribus lectis epulabantur, unde et triclinium sterni dicitur.* (Sofa: in the old days people did not have ‘stibadia’, ate reclining on three made up couches; therefore one says: ‘to make up the *triclinium*’.)



Figure 15. Tivoli, Hadrian’s villa, *stibadium* in the Serapeum (photo: S. Mols).

banqueters seems to have been seven, as passages in Martialis and the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* indicate¹⁵. The appearance of this form in a few Pompeian paintings, and in reality, in masonry in the garden of House VIII 3.15 in the same city, proves the existence of this type of furniture in the first century AD, but also shows that its popularity yet had to increase. All examples indicate furthermore that *stibadia* were initially located only outdoors¹⁶. In Hadrian’s Villa at Tivoli we find both types: two dining rooms with room for the three couches of a *triclinium* face the Fountain Garden. The rooms have mostly been erroneously identified as the Greek and Latin library of the villa, but served in fact as dining rooms, as their layout with three niches for dining couches clearly shows. They face the north, which is an indication that they primarily functioned during summer time, when one hoped to keep away the burning sun and warmth. The most famous *stibadium* in the Villa has been built in the complex mostly referred to as *Serapeum*, the crescent-shaped head of the *Canopus* (fig. 15). Like in Pompeian *triclinia* this garden lounge faced the north.

If we pace up with the texts, it seems that only in the Third century the *triclinium* was totally ousted by the crescent-shaped form of the *sigma*, also indoors. Since then crescent-shaped dining rooms were built for furniture having the same form. Well known examples are the banqueting halls in the Villa at Piazza Armerina in Sicily (late third or early fourth century AD), where

15 Martialis 10.48.6: *septem sigma capit* (the ‘sigma’ provides place to seven persons); *SHA* (Lucius Verus) 5.1: *septem convivium, novem vero convivium* (seven makes a banquet, nine a cacophony). See also Rossiter, 1991, p. 202.

16 See Dunbabin 1991, p. 130-135.



Figure 16. Reconstruction drawing of a Roman *triclinium*. Drawing: T.M. (from Mols 1999, fig. 30).

in some cases as many as three *sigmata* were located around a single central space¹⁷.

III.4. The interior and location of *triclinia*

Pompeian dining rooms show remarkable similarities in form and interior decoration. Figure 16 offers a proposal for a reconstruction of the furnishing of dining rooms, based on a combination of written sources, actual finds from Pompeii and Herculaneum and depictions of *convivia*¹⁸. The couches in the Pompeian dining rooms



Figure 17. Recess for the placement of a *lectus tricliniaris*. Pompeii, Casa del Cinghiale (photo: S. Mols).

were generally approximately 2,40 m. long and 1,20 m. broad. Many of the rooms in which these couches stood were about 3,60 m. broad, offering space along the rear wall to one couch in its length and one in its breadth. Very often the placement was such that along the right wall of the room a couch was placed in its length, with its short back side against the rear wall. The remaining space along the rear wall (2,40 m.), to the left of the first couch, was taken up by the second couch, placed with its long side along the rear wall. The third couch was placed with its short side against the second along the left wall of the room. The arrangement thus in most cases was asymmetric, in the form of the Greek capital *pi*, of which the right ‘leg’ is also shorter than the left one.¹⁹ I will return to this asymmetry later.

If rooms were less than 3,60 m. broad, then recesses were made in one or more walls to provide space for the placing of the couches (fig. 17). This argues for the use of fixed measurements for Pompeian, and maybe also Roman, couches.

Many reconstructions of Roman dining rooms erroneously provide all couches with an elevation at one of the short sides, known as *fulcrum* from ancient literature (fig. 1)²⁰. The couch in the middle, however, in reality did not have a *fulcrum*, as can be deduced from, among other things, the already mentioned *triclinium* built in brick in the House of the Cryptoporticus in Pompeii (fig. 12).

19 See Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, Cambridge 2002, p. 8-9.

20 A reconstruction drawing often reproduced is that of Henri Thédénat (*Pompéi*, Paris, 1910, fig. 44). Here all three couches -also, erroneously, the one in the middle- are provided with a *fulcrum*. See for the reproduction among others: Clarke, 2003, p. 224 and Dunbabin, 2003, p. 43.

17 On dining rooms and social aspects of banquets in late Antiquity, and among other things the protocol that had to be adhered to, see Rossiter, 1991.

18 Drawing T.M. Reproduced from Mols, 1999, fig. 30.

Although this was made in one piece, it reflects wooden prototypes. Only the couches along the right and left wall of the room had a *fulcrum*, at the short sides directed towards the open space of the room. Probably these elevations -often richly decorated- in the first place had a practical function: they prevented the mattresses lying on all three beds from moving. They were stuck between the room walls and and the two *fulcra*. The decoration of the *fulcrum* appliques, mostly made of bronze and sometimes inlaid with other materials, contains references to the god Dionysus/Bacchus, like mules' heads with bunches of grapes, Satyrs and Maenads.

From the dining couches found in Pompeii and Herculaneum in most cases only the decorative metal parts have been preserved, like parts of the *fulcra* and the bronze attachments of the wooden legs. The small fragments of the wooden parts of the *triclinia* we have, do not allow for a reconstruction. In Herculaneum, however, a construction of two dining room couches jointed at right angles has been found²¹. These are designated with the expression *biclinium*, known from Plautus²². From these finds and descriptions and depictions we can deduce that the couches in *biclinia* and *triclinia* were supported by legs, and that on frames provided with lattices mattresses were laid. In all probability the construction of the later wooden *stibadia sigmata* was comparable to this, but the samples found until this very moment are all made of brick.

In the middle of a *triclinium* stood in most cases probably only one small round table. In general this table will have been made of wood or thin metal (bronze) (fig. 7). Tables, found in Herculaneum, are elegant wooden specimens, with legs shaped like animal legs and often with a decoration on two thirds of their height. Here we encounter animal heads, often associated with the god Dionysus/Bacchus. Sometimes we encounter hounds that as it were with their rump sprout from the table legs – the upper part of their body rising up from a calyx of acanthus leaves. This equals them to the dionysiac grotesques in Roman wall paintings and in the decoration of Roman drinking cups, made of bronze and silver. With their forelegs they seem to run up the table leg. The hounds themselves are connected with Artemis-Diana, goddess of hunting, and implicitly to

²¹ Herculaneum, Casa dell'Alcova, *biclinium*: see Mols 1999, p. 154-156.

²² Plautus, *Bacchides* 720 and 754. See for the etymology: Quintilianus, *Institutio Oratoria* 1.5.68.



Figure 18. Pompeii, Casa del Labirinto: mosaic of a *triclinium* with *emblema* (Photo: H. van de Sluis, Radboud University Nijmegen).

the game eaten during banquets. The table in the centre could easily be moved and it is possible that for every course during banquets different tables were carried in, as is suggested by the Latin word *mensa*, which has the meaning of table as well as course during a *convivium*.

Although the furniture is lacking in most dining rooms in Pompeii and Herculaneum, one can nevertheless easily recognize rooms as *triclinia*. The wall paintings, for example, show different colours and motifs in the part of the room where beds stood, than in the open space in front of the dining furniture. Sometimes this division is accentuated by a division in the ceiling: the part above the open space can be higher or lower than the part above the couches, or the part above the couches has a barrel vault while the part in front of them is flat. The most remarkable distinction could be made in the decoration of dining room floors: the parts on which the couches stood differ from the rest of the room's floor decoration. The part covered by the couches was out of sight and therefore often had a much simpler decoration than the remaining part of the room. In the position where during banquets the round table stood, a square in the floor had often been more elaborately decorated. Many *triclinia* here often had an *emblema* in mosaic, sometimes even with a figurative representation, for instance a mythological story, a seascape or a representation of philosophers (fig. 18). Although there is much discussion about the function of these *emblemata*, in my opinion apart from being nice looking decorations, these were intended as 'conversation pieces', to encourage conversation among the guests²³. An often used counter-argument is that the representations on these *emblemata* were only visible

²³ See more extensively Mols, 2001.

for those who stood in the open space near the entrance of the room and did not take part in the banquet, but were only attending it as spectators. On these practices of people watching other persons banqueting we are informed by writers from the highest levels of society, like the description the poet Statius (*Silvae* 1.6) gave of a banquet organised by the Emperor Domitian, which he attended not as a participant, but as a spectator. In the provincial town of Pompeii such a thing was not to be expected. The orientation of many *emblemata* has rather a different background: the *emblema* could only be seen before the banquet, when the guests entered the room and took their places on the couches. During dinner the *emblema* was almost entirely invisible for them, hidden by the table placed over it. Neither would spectators have had the opportunity to see it.

In larger banquet halls and reception rooms there was often space left between the dining room furniture and the walls, to give the participants the opportunity to approach the couches from behind. For larger groups of banqueters dinner was served in additional rooms or there were several sets, each consisting of three dining couches, in one room. A very likely candidate for arrangements with several sets is the banqueting hall that faces the court with the octagonal fountain in Domitian's palace on the Palatine in Rome. Dinner could also be served in a number of different rooms, each with a *triclinium*, all facing a single central room, as in the case of the rooms in the pavilion of Nero's Domus Aurea preserved at the foot of the Oppian hill in Rome.

Some Pompeian dwellings, especially the larger ones, have more than one dining room. Sometimes the difference lies in their dimensions -in the larger ones one could walk around the couches-, but mostly orientation was the most important factor for making a division. During the summer one chose the coolest dining room, facing north, and in winter time rooms facing south were used. Because dining room furniture has not been found in all rooms that on the basis of dimensions, form or decoration of floors, walls or ceilings can be identified as dining rooms, we can suppose that dinner couches and other pieces of furniture were transferred according to the seasons. The measurements of *lecti tricliniariae*, discussed above, guaranteed that couches would fit in all dining rooms.

III.5. Table arrangement and *etiquette*

Now that we know about the dining room furniture, the question arises how people reclined on a *triclinium*. Fortunately we have many images at our disposal showing people in this position. However, the written sources are not very communicative about this topic, which is not very surprising when one takes into consideration that little was written about daily activities. There are, however, exceptions, in many cases with a curious or comical undertone, making it worthwhile to enter into reclining and etiquette during banquets. Apart from many occasional remarks in Latin literature, there are two authors, both writing in the second century AD who provide more information in this respect: Apuleius and Plutarch²⁴.

Plutarch's *Quaestiones Convivales* (table talk) is in its content sometimes somewhat trivial. Many of the subjects are touching upon *convivia* and can teach us something about table arrangement and etiquette. Let us start with some serious subjects. According to Plutarch (*Quaestiones Convivales* 1.2 [615]) it was necessary to determine the table arrangement for a banquet with guests beforehand, to avoid trouble between guests and host or hostess. From a large number of passages in Plutarch and other authors we can gather what table arrangement in a *triclinium* implied. Apparently one knew exactly what the rules were: all nine places within a *triclinium* had a different name and status²⁵.

From left to right -seen from the open space of the dining room, standing in front of the dining couches- the beds were called successively *imus*, *medius* and *summus lectus* and the three positions on each of the couches were indicated with the same expressions (fig. 19). The position for the most important guest was *imus* (*sc. locus*) *in medio* (*sc. lecto*), a position denoted also as *locus consularis* or *locus primus*. Next to him, on the left couch, lay, *summus in imo*, the host, and the position next to those (*medius in imo*) was reserved for his wife, when she attended the banquet. All other places in a *triclinium* subsequently had a fixed hierarchical position. If the status of two persons was equal, age was the deciding factor. A well-considered table arrangement prevented jealousy and formed the basis for a fruitful conversation.

²⁴ Wilkins, 2005 treats the literary sources.

²⁵ On this topic many studies have been published. See Dunbabin, 2003, p. 39-43; Clarke, 2003, p. 224-227.

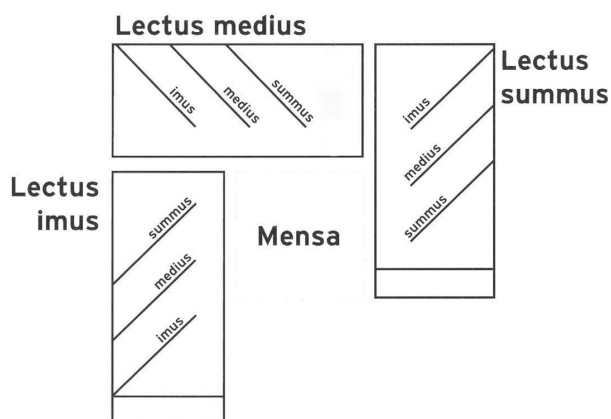


Figure 19. Outline of positions in a *triclinium* (drawing: S. Mols).

One could carry things too far however, as can be concluded from Pliny the Younger, who rails against a host who in front of his guests of different status put food of diverse quality²⁶.

As for the reclining position our most important sources are found in ancient literature; there are of course images of people reclining, but these do not clearly show their exact pose. In his *Quaestiones Convivales* 5.6 (679-680) Plutarch describes a discussion about a rather trivial riddle. In passing he enters upon the reclining pose. The riddle asks why there is a lack of space for the banqueters at the beginning of a dinner, and why later on this is no longer the case. The contrary ought to be expected, the author observes, because while they are eating people's stomachs become thicker. The solution to the riddle is that the banqueters at the beginning lay flat on their stomachs in order to have two hands free to grasp food and drinks, and later, after the edge had been taken off their appetite, they turned over on their sides, which was why there was more space on the couches. In his *Metamorphoses* (10.16-17) Apuleius writes about his main character, Lucius, turned into an ass, who was invited to a banquet and had to recline, resting on his left elbow. The passage tells us what was considered a decent reclining position. Together with depictions on wall paintings and reliefs the reclining pose can be reconstructed. One ate neatly if one lay on one's left side with a cushion under one's left arm. The right hand served to grasp food and drinks from the table in the centre of the *triclinium*. It is striking that the prescribed

²⁶ Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae* 2.6. Also on *sigmata* there seems to have been a fixed table arrangement: see Dunbabin, 1991, p. 135.

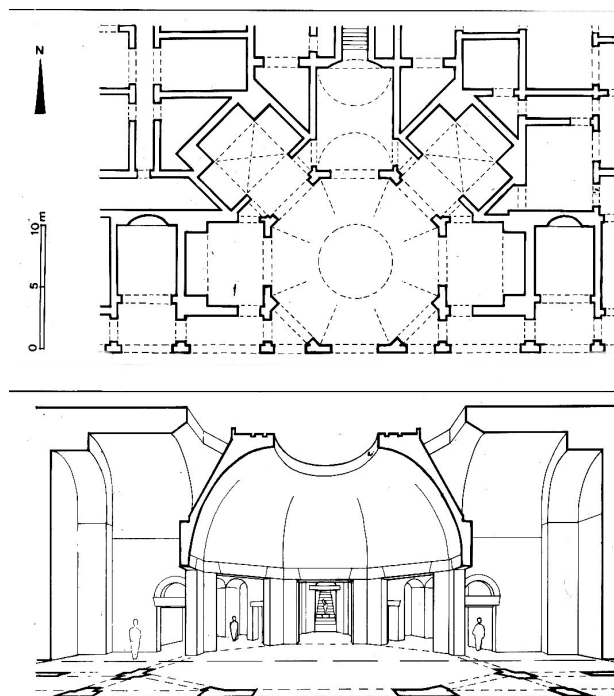


Figure 20. Rome, Domus Aurea: plan of the octagonal court with four adjacent *triclinia*. From: J.B. Ward-Perkins, *Rom*, Stuttgart 1988, p. 69, Abb. 96-97.

position -as in later times-, forced left-handed people to eat with their right hands²⁷.

On the relatively small table food and drinks must have been placed continuously. The banqueters all lay somewhat obliquely along the breadth of the couches, as is shown in figure 16. The asymmetrical placement of the couches sketched above, in my opinion has a practical purpose: in a small room this seems the only way to prevent the heads of some banqueters from disappearing behind others' backs. In larger dining rooms such an asymmetrical placement was not necessary, because there was enough space to place the dining couches independently, as was the case in the already mentioned dining rooms adjacent to the octagonal court of the *Domus Aurea* pavilion on the Oppian hill in Rome (fig. 20). The other furniture of the room then must have been adapted to the more spacious arrangement, because now it was no longer possible for all the banqueters to reach with their right hands a single table placed in the centre; this, after all, would have been too far away. Such a placement could have required for more tables, but about this we

²⁷ For more about etiquette at formal banquets see d'Arms, 1990.

do not have any sources at our disposal. As an alternative we could also think of a continuous stream of servants passing by the couches with trays loaded with food and drinks. In Latin literature we can read more than once about large numbers of servants at *convivia*, and images document this for late antiquity²⁸. Owing to the greater distance between the banqueters, the conversation will have been less intimate, so that a banquet in such a large hall will certainly have been more formal²⁹.

Most of the banquets described in ancient texts are elitist affairs and one can ask oneself to what extent those below the top were stuck to table arrangement and etiquette, for instance in Pompeii, where the middle classes were in charge during the last years before the fatal eruption. As for table arrangement there are enough indications that there too the *locus consularis*, the (*locus*) *imus in medio*, was the place of honour: it cannot have been a coincidence that in many Pompeian dwellings the view from *triclinia* towards for example the garden was optimal from that position, since a few years denoted as ‘framed view’³⁰. So the - at first sight often interpreted as non-Roman- asymmetrical placement of garden sculptures in a peristyle can be explained from the wish to create an optimum view for the one who occupied the place of honour in a *triclinium*. The one in this position must therefore have been the most important guest and not, as in Petronius (*Satyricon* 31) the host, i.e. Trimalchio himself. The “new fashion” sketched in this passage, must have been felt as an affront against etiquette.

III.6. A persistent misunderstanding

In many handbooks one can read that in the Roman world the right to recline during banquets was a male privilege. Despite the explicit postulation in some ancient texts that women were not allowed to recline, the passages that indicate that this, on the contrary, was very normal, are by far in the majority³¹. In fact, a passage at-

tributed to the Greek historian Theopompus, who lived and wrote in the fourth century BC, indicates that it may also have been a very old Roman practice, probably of Etruscan origin³². The fact that Roman women reclined during banquets therefore indicates that the habit was introduced not directly from Greece, but indirectly, via the Etruscans³³. It is therefore tempting to interpret Greek vases with depictions of mixed *symposia* as products especially made for the Etruscan market.

It seems that texts that mention women sitting during banquets and not reclining refer to a short-lived “Greek” fashion of a limited group of Roman elite persons³⁴. The misconception that women were not allowed to recline is furthermore fed by a large number of reliefs from Gallia and the Northwestern provinces of the Roman Empire, depicting a similar scene: a man is shown reclining on a couch and his wife sits on a chair at his feet. In front of the couch a table can be seen, with food and drinks. The depictions on these reliefs, however, only have a relationship with reality in terms of the realia depicted (the couch, the chair, the table). They do not allow for the assumption that women sat and men reclined during banquets, because they are copies of a similar fixed formula or cliché that we encounter in Greek reliefs. The latter are known as “Banquet couché” or “Totenmahl”, a group of monuments studied extensively by Jean-Marie Dentzer³⁵.

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28 Large groups of slaves serving at banquets are mentioned by Seneca, *Epistulae* 17.3 (*turba servorum*) and Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 33.26 (*mancipiorum legiones*). See for depictions of servants on late antique mosaics: Dunbabin, 2003, p. 150-156.

29 A description of such a large, formal dinner gives Statius, *Silvae* 4.2. See Klodt, 2001, p. 37-62.

30 Clarke, 2003, p. 226-227 and 240.

31 So Suetonius, *Caligula* 24 enters upon the position given to Caligula’s wife during meals, namely to the left of the Emperor, instead of the usual position for women at the right hand of their spouses. See for the reclining of women also Hemelrijk, 1999, pp. 42-44 and Dunbabin, 2003, p. 67-68.

32 The passage is cited by Athenaeus (*Deipnosophistai* 12.517 d). Theopompus considers the reclining of Etruscan women an example of the Etruscan lack of culture and immoral behaviour.

33 Nepos, *De Viris Illustribus praefatio* 6-8 explicitly mentions the difference between Greek and Roman banquets.

34 See also Roller, 2005.

35 Dentzer, 1982. See also Mols, 1999, p. 52.

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