



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Communal dining in the Roman West : private munificence towards cities and associations in the first three centuries AD

Wen, S.

Citation

Wen, S. (2018, September 6). *Communal dining in the Roman West : private munificence towards cities and associations in the first three centuries AD*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/64935>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/64935>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/64935> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Wen, S.

Title: Communal dining in the Roman West : private munificence towards cities and associations in the first three centuries AD

Issue Date: 2018-09-06

Conclusion

Roman dining activities which took place in a public or a collegial context have been paid increasing attention over the past decades. Few efforts, however, have been made to present particularities of public feasts or collegial meals sponsored by private munificence in various parts of the Empire. Despite the importance of previous studies such as those by Donahue, Mrozek and Melchor Gil, they have still not explained why privately sponsored communal dining appears to have been a popular form of *euergetism* in certain parts of the empire. They have also paid little attention to the differences in the chronological distribution in these areas. One of the aims of this book has been to explain why the practice of privately sponsored communal dining gained popularity in Italy, Spain and North Africa, particularly in the second and early third century AD, but not in other parts of the western half of the Roman Empire.

One of the factors which has hindered a comprehensive understanding of the motivations behind providing food-related benefactions has been that the relationship between benefactors and beneficiaries has not been investigated in sufficient depth. Although the variety in the identities of the benefactors has been remarked on by most historians, if we want to identify how benefactors were connected with the targeted communities, a distinction between local benefactors and those originating from outside the community is a prerequisite. In Chapter 2, I have calculated the share of local benefactors and used this to identify the major group of them who footed the bill for food-related benefactions bestowed on communities or specific groups within these communities. Even though the information in our sources does not allow a complete reconstruction of the identities of all benefactors, it has been made clear that the members of local elite families accounted for the vast majority of benefactors who shouldered the costs of public dinners.

Although the occasions on which public feasts were provided by private benefactors have been mentioned in previous literature, so far no in-depth analysis of the circumstances in which such donations were made has been attempted. A detailed examination of the epigraphic evidence reveals subtle differences between office-related, responsive, voluntary and testamentary food gifts. The concerns which prompted benefactors to bestow their generosity in the form of public meals varied from occasion to occasion. Pertinently, it is impossible to pinpoint the underlying reasons behind the persistence of privately sponsored public dining across three

centuries without looking at developments and changes in the social and political life in the cities of early-imperial Italy and the western provinces.

The vast majority of office-related food benefactions were lavished on people who had local citizenship rights. Viewed from the political angle, this can be seen as an outcome of the development of oligarchical political life in the cities. Even though the role of local assemblies in popular elections was gradually eroded and local elite families monopolized the highest offices, the ideal persisted that the local citizen body was still the source of political legitimacy and provided the context in which political and social prominence could be achieved. Along with the devaluation of local elections (and their eventual disappearance), public feasts or food distributions provided by the local elite when they were elected to magistracies, entering or holding such offices became a highly effective way of affirming the continuing importance of membership of the citizen body and of legitimizing their political and social dominance in the eyes of non-elite citizens.

The presence of responsive benefactions demonstrates the existence of a reciprocal relationship between a prominent citizen and the community. When the circumstances required it, honorees were expected to reciprocate the bestowal of a public honour and, in practice, any further food-related benefactions which primarily targeted the decurions, or the entire citizen body or both helped to continue to maintain the benefactor's elevated position in the communities.

Previous studies have related the motives behind munificence on food gifts to elite peer competition, the perpetuation of civic memories or attempts to strengthen the existing social order. Importantly, when these voluntary food benefactions were bestowed, they could be in the form of celebrations of the benefactor's birthday or important family anniversaries and a marking of the dedication of statues for family members. This finding indicates that, in an increasingly oligarchical society, the boundary between the public and private life of prominent citizens was becoming blurred.

If we take the recipients of such munificence into account, it is evident that the vast majority of voluntary food benefactions still targeted people with local citizenship rights or decurions or both. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that voluntary benefactions were as much 'political' as 'office-related' food gifts. By transforming personal birthdays and important family events into public occasions, the local elite expressed the idea that the community was being governed, and ought to be governed, by a small group of elite families whose biological continuity and prosperity were a matter of public concern. However, although the political aspects of voluntary food gifts are undeniable, a significant minority of other civic groups such as *Augustales*, women and children also received voluntary food benefactions, indicating that voluntary benefactions ought to be distinguished from office-related gifts.

An examination of testamentary benefactions also reveals that the entire citizen body and decurions remained the favoured target groups of beneficiaries. While the posthumous arrangement of food-related benefactions could help to affirm the deceased's elevated position in the community after death, additional food gifts provided by heirs and other people when they fulfilled the provisions laid down in a will can be seen as a way of claiming or broadcasting political and social prominence in the community by making a display of generosity.

Like male benefactors, a big proportion of female benefactors also belonged to local elite families. Their acts of munificence, either on their own or as co-donors, demonstrate that in an increasingly oligarchical society local politics was becoming a family affair. Female members were allowed, or even expected, to advertise the superiority of elite families and contribute to perpetuating and legitimizing collective elite rule. It is also noteworthy that a significant minority of women were targeted as recipients of community-wide meals. This can be seen as a recognition of the importance of women in perpetuating the elite families and the local citizen community.

As we have seen in Chapter 3, not all of different groups of community residents would invariably participate in public feasts at the same time. The binary distinction between decurions and the citizen body is a prominent feature between the recipients of all kinds of food benefactions. While affirming the continuing importance of citizen communities, particularly town-dwelling citizens, wealthy citizens also did not hesitate to put great efforts into highlighting their rightful place among the local elite by targeting the decurions exclusively. Meanwhile, other status groups, including *Augustales*, *collegia*, women, children and resident non-citizens, also began to be included as recipients of civic munificence. This change can be seen as catering to the demands of the local elite for a large audience to achieve public recognition and advertise their superior status. These observations indicate that a hierarchical yet inclusive community came into being.

While social distinctions between decurions and ordinary citizens, or between decurions, *Augustales* and *populus*, can be detected in the reception of food benefactions, the bulk of epigraphic references to privately sponsored food benefactions do not strongly demonstrate hierarchical arrangements between various groups. This observation also applies to the arrangements between men and women. As I have argued, bestowing food-related benefactions was an excellent way of underscoring the importance of membership of the civic community. However, although food gifts were rarely used to underline social distinctions, there is ample evidence of cash distributions (*sportulae*) being used to signal hierarchical relationships within communities.

Most scholars have observed that the epigraphic record referring to privately sponsored public dinners is concentrated in Italy, Spain and North Africa. However,

the concentration of epigraphic references to this practice in Italy, Baetica and Africa Proconsularis raises the question of why this form of *euergetism* was fairly highly developed in these regions but failed to take a real hold in other parts of the Western Empire? As we have seen in Chapter 5, private munificence took many different forms. Region-specific preferences for particular euergetic practices would seem to have reflected the existence of a variety of regional political cultures. Although private expenditure on sacred or public buildings is attested in the north-western provinces, it appears that many of these edifices were not erected for the purpose of benefiting the civic communities as whole. In these parts of the Empire, the firmly entrenched position of a small oligarchy seems to have obviated much of the need to provide benefactions for legitimizing elite rule and affirming core civic values.

In contrast, a distinct political culture held sway in the communities of Italy and within its context local elites competed for prestige and honour, striving in the hope that they should live up to the ideal of civic community. A similar dynamic political culture also appears to have characterized many communities in various parts of Spain and North Africa, probably as a result of an earlier presence and a higher concentration of Caesarian and Augustan colonies founded in these areas. A close inspection of the epigraphic evidence reveals further distinctions within these large regions. For instance, benefactors from North Italy showed a preference for *panis et vinum* rather than *crustulum et mulsum*, and the local elite of the Iberian Peninsula were in the habit of providing *epula* rather than food hand-outs. It is also possible to detect a specific 'Baetican' social-political context in which members of the town elite were expected to provide public meals for their fellow citizens, whereas the local elite of the neighbouring province of Tarraconensis preferred to spend money on public or religious buildings.

On an urban level, privately sponsored public dinners often took place in medium-sized or small towns. One plausible explanation is that in smaller towns there were probably fewer benefactors with the financial wherewithal to fund expensive building projects. Going a step farther, it might be suggested that a specific political culture was to be found in medium-sized and small towns in which food benefactions played an important part in local political and social life.

Any study which attempts to reconstruct the chronological development of euergetic practices in the Empire will have to face possible inherent distortions created by empire-wide and regional 'epigraphic habits'. Bearing this in mind, I have tried to demonstrate that the chronological distribution pattern of evidence of privately sponsored public dining should not be seen just as a reflection of the epigraphic habit but as a real social custom (Chapter 6).

In an attempt to account for the increase in the number of inscriptions giving evidence of privately funded public meals from the first to the second century, the accumulation of wealth among the elite during the high Empire can be seen as one of

the prerequisites before local elites could engage in *euergetism*. The motivation for them to have actually adopted a particular form of euergetic practice, as I have argued, should be understood as a response to the socio-political developments in the first two centuries AD. As has been highlighted in various chapters, the gradual erosion of the voting rights of local assemblies might have increased the social and political significance of euergetic practices. In this context, food benefactions targeting civic communities can be seen as a particularly effective way of expressing elite allegiance to civic values and of legitimizing elite rule in the eyes of non-elite citizens. Meanwhile, increasing differentiation among local town-councillors could have prompted local elites to provide public banquets for decurions, which can be seen as an effective means of simultaneously displaying the benefactor's social superiority and his or her allegiance to the principle of elite solidarity.

The decline in inscriptions referring to privately sponsored public dining in the late third and the subsequent fourth century reflects a fall in the number of food benefactions being bestowed on the communities. While it has been plausibly argued that the disappearance of *euergetism* must have been related to the changes in the structure of the Empire and in the mentality of the elites, this book goes a step farther and relates the changes in elite mentality towards *euergetism* to concomitant changes in the political context. The changes in the political and social structures in the later Empire resulted in the destruction of earlier local political cultures. The old mechanism by which local elites had channelled their ambitions into their communities was broken down by the expanding imperial bureaucracy. New career opportunities in the imperial bureaucracy contributed to loosening the ties between the wealthiest elites and their communities and resulted in the loss of importance of civic communities as the only legitimate source of power and honour on the municipal level. These changes taken together undermined the base of *euergetism*, ultimately destroying the practice.

Another observation concerns regional differences. Various regions of the western half of the Empire displayed distinct chronological trajectories of this euergetic practice. Although the earliest evidence comes from mainland Italy, the practice of privately sponsored public dining appears to have persisted longer in North Africa than in Italy. Part of the explanation must be that, during a building boom of the late second and early third century, more public dinners were probably offered to mark the dedications of buildings. Nevertheless, the more enduring prosperity of the African local elite should be seen as a factor which ensured the longevity of *euergetism* in this specific region.

Among various sub-groups within the local communities which received food gifts from private benefactors, members of different associations were exclusively targeted by some benefactors (Chapter 4). Even though *collegiati* were often targeted as undifferentiated entities from an outsider's point of view, some collegial by-laws

regarding food arrangements confirm that the status distinctions which existed in the wider community was also replicated on a lower social level. In view of the fact that most public feasts and collegial dinners were provided by internal benefactors, it seems fair to argue that food benefactions were effectively employed by prominent 'insiders' to achieve prominence and advertise the vertical relationships within either a wider community or lower-ranking groups.

In comparison to the occasions on which donations were made as identified in the case of community-wide meals, there seems to be no solid evidence of office-related food benefactions for associations. On the one hand, the duties of organizing collegial dinners assigned to *magistri collegii* made it improper for office-holders to advertise such obligatory generosity; on the other hand, the meals which were the responsibility of the *magistri* were probably paid for out of the collegial treasury, leaving little room for food benefactions *ob honorem*. The concerns and aims revealed on the other three occasions (responsive, voluntary and testamentary) are very similar to those identified in instances of privately sponsored public dining.

It is noteworthy that epigraphic references to privately sponsored dinners for *collegia* are attested only in certain regions (Chapter 5) and are concentrated in a limited period of time (Chapter 6). As I have argued, it should not be seen as a coincidence that such collegial meals are found in the same regions in which *collegia* are known to have taken part in community-wide feasts and in a period in which privately sponsored public dinners were at the peak of their development. Notably the epigraphic record referring to both privately sponsored dinners targeting *collegia* exclusively and *collegia* participating in community-wide meals is concentrated in mainland Italy. This observation permits the inference to be made that *collegia* probably played a more prominent role in the political and social life of the civic communities of Italy than in those of the western provinces. The chronological pattern corroborates this inference. It seems that precisely because of the increasing prominence of *collegia* in the second century, external benefactors were prompted to target them as a status group in the community-wide meals which were sponsored and hence to take the trouble to provide exclusive benefactions for them. Meanwhile, (prominent) members of associations could have also felt compelled to affirm the importance of their membership by emulating such practices on a more modest scale.

Inscriptions referring to privately sponsored food benefactions targeting *Augustales* only are very sparse. However, the epigraphic record available indicates a practice similar to privately sponsored dining for *collegia*. One difference is that all benefactors who decided to shower food gifts on the *Augustales* only were members of these associations or were close relatives of members. As far as can be determined, *Augustales* appear to have adopted egalitarian food arrangements. In this regard they could have been following the example set by the decurions who provided undifferentiated food benefactions for other town-councillors. Likewise, the epigraphic

record referring to food benefactions exclusively targeting *Augustales* is attested only in Italy, with a notable concentration in the second century. This finding also indicates the signs of the development of a regional political culture in which both *collegia* and *Augustales* were recognized as important building blocks of local society.

It seems fair to conclude that the popularity of privately sponsored communal dining was rooted in specific social and political cultures in the cities of Italy, Baetica and Africa Proconsularis. Therefore region-specific differences in political cultures and long-term changes in these region-specific cultures are key to understanding not only the long persistence of privately sponsored communal meals but also their ultimate disappearance.

