The banquets of Alexander

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Abstract

Banquet scenes are often described in Plutarch’s Lives. In the Life of Alexander, Plutarch defines the exemplary profile of the Macedonian king in his relations with others – his companions and friends and his defeated enemies. The social institution of symposium, so deeply rooted in the Greek tradition, is used as an instrument to highlight certain aspects of Alexander’s “Greekness”, either to contrast them with the customs of the barbarians, or, alternatively, to confirm that the conqueror fully adopted barbarian ways.

In spite of the fact that Alexander behaves immoderately at banquets, Plutarch neither criticizes him openly nor censures him; the behaviour should not be taken as belonging to Alexander’s ἥθος, but to the changes that he introduces in the Greek tradition itself.

The ritualized act of sharing food and drink played an important role in the social, political and religious cohesion of Archaic and Classical Greece, since the banquet, either public or private, offered an occasion to strengthen ideological links and friendships. Due to the economic outlay that it represented and the time it required, the private symposium was associated above all with an aristocratic lifestyle; it was a reunion inter pares in an exclusively masculine environment.

Equally, the size of the group that participated in the symposiac gathering – and the venue – had a direct effect on the nature of the loyalties inside the group and on the formation of the corresponding ἑταιρεία, bearing in mind that the symposium – “un spettacolo a se stesso” – became a space that was outside the polis, with specific rules and norms of its own. Examples are its distinct treatment of sexuality, both in terms of the homoerotic relations established among the young in the closed setting of the banquet – in parallel with the gymnasium and the palaestra –, the creation of a kind of free love associated with the hetairae and artists who customarily attended symposia, and the development of forms of ritual exhibitionism and violence inherent in the event’s final κῶμος.

From the fourth century onwards, the decline of the cities and the changes in the forms of power were often attributed to the extreme luxury in which the richest sectors of society lived. This impression was greatly reinforced by the tales of the fabulous banquets of the Hellenistic monarchies, which were obvious examples of the transformation that the institution of the symposium had undergone. This explains why Plutarch speaks so highly of the private

2 The Etruscans and Romans admitted their wives and daughters to their banquets; the Greeks regarded this as a clear example of their lack of education and morality; cf. Theopomp. Hist. FGH 115 F 204; Cic., Ver. 2.1.64-66.