

Epicurious about the *memento mori*?: The Skeleton in Roman Feasting Contexts

Towards the end of the Roman Republic and into the early Empire, the Roman banquet functioned to strengthen relationships, form political bonds, and to entertain the Roman elite (Donahue 2003), but it also functioned to remind banqueters of their own mortality and as a visible expression of aristocratic social anxieties. At this time, skeletal imagery appears frequently in dining contexts, serving as a *memento mori* during a jovial occasion. This is during the same time in which Epicureanism grew in popularity throughout the Roman Empire, which has led some scholars to draw a direct correlation between Epicureanism and increased depictions of the skeleton (Frel 1980). Although previous scholars established this connection between the macabre imagery and Epicureanism, and by extension feasting, there does not appear to be any connection between this imagery and the time period in which they belong. In this paper I will show that images of the *memento mori* in the 1st century B.C. through the 1st century A.D. were an expression of aristocratic anxieties over their own security in the Roman political system.

I hope to demonstrate how death fits into a larger framework of the *carpe diem* mentality as its expressed by the authors Petronius (Petr. 5.34), Seneca (*Brev. Vit.* 10.1.4) and Horace (*Od.* 1.11). However, the poetic imagery of the *memento mori* transcends the written record as there are notable examples of skeletons in Roman art from this time period, many of them connected to a feasting context. The banquet skeleton figurine, known as the *larva convivialis*, was presented in the Roman banquet as a reminder of mortality (Frel 1980). There are also literary descriptions of the *larva convivialis*. In the bizarre Latin novel, the *Satyricon*, by Petronius there is an episode when Trimalchio, a former slave who had his own change of fortune and earned

more money than he knew what to do with, entertains his guests with an elaborate banquet complete with a *larva convivialis* and a sobering reflection on mortality and fortune (Petr. 5.34).

To understand the larger context of the *larva convivialis*, I will analyze other examples of skeletons associated with the Roman banquet at this time period. This includes a silver cup depicting the shade of Epicurus (Weber 1909) and two mosaics from Pompeii, one of a skeleton holding two *askoi* and one of a skull with balancing scales. The latter mosaic was found in a triclinium and, while demonstrating everyone's imminent mortality by the skull, it also demonstrates the capacity for one's fortune to quickly change (De Caro 2001). My research shows that these works would have served as a reminder for unpredictable and potentially traumatic experiences amidst an otherwise cheerful social gathering. This idea is supported by later examples of skeletal imagery that was perpetuated in medieval art through the *rota fortunae* and the *danse macabre*, which flourished in the late medieval period during the plague epidemic, and, consequently, radical societal changes (Oosterwijk 2004). Even though the imagery in the late Middle Ages is not typically set in a feasting context, these similar ideas come through.

Thus, I will demonstrate that skeletal imagery in the context of Roman feasting from the 1st century B.C. to the 1st century A.D. was a manifestation of social and political anxieties, a grim reminder of changing fortune and everyone's eventual fate. The skeleton functioned as a *memento mori* in relation to Epicureanism in these feasting contexts, but it also demonstrates the aristocratic disquiet and uncertainties at this time.

Bibliography

- De Caro, Stefano. 2001. "The National Archaeological Museum of Naples." *Soprintendenza Archeologica di Napoli e Caserta*.
- Donahue, J.F. 2003. "Toward a Typology of Roman Public Feasting," *The American Journal of Philology*. 124.3: 423-441.
- Frel, F.C. 1980. "A Larva Convivalis in the Getty Museum," *The J. Paul Getty Museum Journal* 8: 171-172.
- Oosterwijk, Sophie. 2004. "Of Corpses, Constables and Kings: The *Danse Macabre* in Late Medieval Renaissance Culture." *Journal of The British Archaeological Association*. 157, 61-90.
- Weber, F.P. 1909. "Aspects of death, and their effects on the living, as illustrated by minor works of art, especially medals, engraved jewels, &c." *The Numismatic Chronicle and the Journal of the Royal Numismatic Society*. 9.4: 365-417.