

Banquets, Reputation and Social Obligation in Roman Egypt: Some Notes on the Dinner Invitations in Papyri*

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Banquetes, reputación y obligación social en el Egipto romano: notas sobre las invitaciones a fiestas en los papiros

This work aims at analyzing the invitations to feasts in papyri within the context of the social dynamics of commensality in Roman Egypt. Drawing upon Dietler's concept of «commensal hospitality», this work examines the roles played by commensals at these banquets, as well as the implications of inviting and being invited to a feast. Its objective is to assess the extent to which the celebration of feasts, the issuing of invitations, and the attendance to these feasts may relate to an attempt made by hosts and guests to acquire and increase their prestige and reputation within the group.

Key words: papyri; invitations; feasts; commensality; Roman Egypt.

El objetivo de este trabajo es analizar el corpus de invitaciones a fiestas en papiro dentro del contexto de las dinámicas sociales de la comensalía en el Egipto romano. A partir del concepto de «hospitalidad comensal» acuñado por Dietler, este trabajo explora el papel desempeñado por los diferentes miembros de las comunidades de comensales en los banquetes, así como las implicaciones de invitar y ser invitado a una fiesta. El objetivo último del trabajo es tratar de determinar en qué medida la celebración de fiestas, la circulación de las correspondientes invitaciones y la participación en dichas fiestas pueden ponerse en relación con un intento por parte de anfitriones e invitados de obtener y acumular prestigio y reputación dentro del grupo.

Palabras clave: papiros; invitaciones; fiestas; comensalía; Egipto romano.

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1. Introduction

«S'il y a des gens que refusent de venir, je crois que me mourrai de honte». *Le Bal*, a short novel by Irène Némirovsky (1929), narrates a peculiar episode in the life of the Kampfs, members of a Jewish family from humble beginnings, who suddenly become rich after a fortunate windfall in the stock market. The Kampfs had everything that money could buy, except for that which they most yearned for: the acceptance of the French high society. To obtain public recognition of their newly acquired status, the Kampfs were determined to host a «social ball», on which they spent a great deal of money on food, musicians, decorations, and beverage.

The Kampfs' «first great ball» depicts a common feature of feasts across time and space: in Michael Dietler's words (2001, pp. 71-72) the potential of feasts to represent, define and manipulate the social relations among participants. Along with many other functions, feasts could serve as means for an individual to acquire and accumulate social prestige and honor. This is nothing new. In fact, so-called «feast studies» have a longstanding interest in revealing the existing close connections between commensality, social relations, and politics, and thus, with power¹. Indeed, by applying different sociological and anthropological theories to the analysis of literary and archaeological sources, recent scholarship has gained a better understanding of the social, economic, and political dimensions of feasts and banquets in the Ancient World².

Judging by the documentary sources, feasts must have been important events in the lives of the inhabitants of Roman Egypt. A great deal of public records, such as commemorative inscriptions as well as private sources in papyri, in the form of letters, accounts, or invitations to banquets, reveal the existence of several festive events. While scholars have mainly focused on the religious and

¹ The ethnoarchaeological approach to feasts was first delineated in the seminal work edited by Dietler & Hayden (2001). For an overview of the different theoretical developments on the study of feasts see further Hayden & Villeneuve 2011.

² The bibliography on the topic is extensive. Some fundamental works on banquets in the Ancient World are, inter alia, Ascough 2008, Donahue 2004, Murray 1990; Schmitt Pantel 1992; Smith & Taussig 2012; Wecowski 2014; van Eijnde, Blok & Strootman 2018.

cultural elements of feasts, the relationship between these texts and the complexity of social dynamics between commensals remains largely unexplored³.

Invitations on papyri, on the other hand, have been studied from the point of view of their use, and several hypotheses regarding their practical function have been proposed⁴. When considering the *raison d'être* of these artifacts, scholars normally regard them either as a material proof of the observance of the rules of etiquette by the Oxyrhynchite elite or as a technical arrangement necessary for the proper preparation of a banquet. First Wilcken and then Welles considered the invitations to be something «fein»; a gesture of elegance by the host toward those who might have not been satisfied by an oral invitation⁵. Others have found a connection between the invitations in papyri and visiting-cards in the halls of the Victorian residences; with the display of invitations to dinner thus acting as a kind of «status-symbol» which «enable the guests to advertise in a discreet manner his social standing and popularity in the community⁶». As the feasts were usually held on the same day or the day after the invitations were issued, invitations in papyri have been also considered as a technical necessity prior to the celebration of a banquet. Written invitations were thus a mass production which functioned as reminders of invitations already made⁷. In line with this functional approach, it has been suggested recently that invitations in papyri acted as a kind of «permission to enter to the venue of the party⁸».

Another relevant aspect of banquets, however, is the social obligation of commensals toward one another. In fact, inviting someone to share a meal creates what Dietler defines as «commensal hospitality», i. e., a debt from guests to host which generates a sense of social obligation until an equivalent gift can be returned⁹.

While invitations in papyri are extremely formulaic, private letters and other documentary sources often contain glimpses of intricacies of the social relationships between diners. However, a perennial problem with papyrological

³ See, e. g., the still fundamental works by Vandoni 1964 and Perpillon-Thomas 1993.

⁴ On the material aspects of the invitations on papyri see Stroppa (forthcoming).

⁵ Wilcken 1912, p. 419; Welles 1967, pp. 260-261.

⁶ Skeat 1975, p. 254. See further Gardner, Marshall & Nelson 2018, p. 210; Martín Rodríguez 2000, p. 489. With some reservations, Berkes 2018, p. 278.

⁷ Gilliam 1976, p. 318; Montserrat 1992, p. 303, n. 8; Montserrat, Fantoni & Robinson 1994, p. 45.

⁸ El-Mofatch 2016, p. 2004; Artz-Grabner 2016, p. 529.

⁹ Dietler 2001, pp. 73-75. See below in this article.

sources is their typicality. After all, a great deal of the textual sources on feasts and banquets in Roman Egypt have largely survived due to mere accident of preservation. To put this in other words, it may be questioned to what extent an isolated account, a written ruleset concerning feasts and banquets of an association, or even the fears and thoughts of a sole individual in a private letter can be taken to represent the much larger question of social norms and practices. To be sure, the papyrological corpus related to the celebration of feasts provides us only with sporadic evidence. That being said, I still believe that it is well worth trying to piece these sources together. By analyzing the invitation papyri in combination with private letters and accounts, this paper aims at understanding the social implications of both inviting and being invited to a feast in Roman Egypt. Based on Dietler's concept of «commensal hospitality», this paper explores the roles played by the different members of communities of commensals at these banquets, the expected behavioral norms of reciprocity, and the alignment of individuals with these norms. Its goal is to evaluate to what extent the celebration of feasts, the issuing of invitations and the attendance to these feasts could reveal an attempt made by hosts and guests to obtain and accumulate prestige, honor, and reputation within the community.

2. *Feasts and the quest for the status quo*

Papyrologists have so far published fifty-two papyri and one ostrakon containing formal invitations¹⁰. Dating from the 2nd cent. to the 5th CE, these documents mainly originate from Oxyrhynchus, although some of them come from Soknopaiou Nesos (*SB* XIV 11652), Euhemeria (*W.Chr.* 485), and Narmouthis (*O.Medin.Madi* 31). They usually follow a standard formula with few minor variations¹¹: the invitation verb (ἐρωτᾷ, καλεῖ), the identity of the host¹², the invited guest (generally addressed by the accusative pronoun

¹⁰ PSI inv. 4361, a further invitation to a wedding feast is going to be published in a forthcoming *PSI* volume. I wish to thank Marco Stroppa (Florence) for this reference. Lists of invitations in papyri can be found in Gardner, Marshall & Nelson 2018, pp. 211-212; Pruneti 2016, pp. 120-128; El-Mofatch 2006, p. 2010; Artz-Grabner 2016, pp. 517-520.

¹¹ On the structure of the invitations, see Kim 1994.

¹² See, however, *P.Köln* I 57, an invitation by the god (ὁ θεός) and *P.Oxy.* LII 3694, and invitation addressed to the στρατηγός which was issued by the god Amon, the inhabitants, and the notables of the village of Seryphis.

σε), the purpose of the invitation (δειπνήσαι), and finally, basic information regarding the date, time and venue of the feast as well as the event.

ἔρωτᾷ σε Ἀντώνιο(ς) Πτολεμ(αῖος) διπνῶσ(αι) (I. δειπνήσ(αι))
παρ' αὐτῶι εἰς κλείνην (I. κλίνην) τοῦ κυρίου
Σαράπιδος ἐν τοῖς Κλαυδ(ίου) Σαραπίω(νος)
τῆι ις ἀπὸ ὥρας θ. (P.Oxy. III 523 [Oxyrhynchos, 2nd cent. CE]).

Antonios Ptolemaios invites you to dinner
with him at the table of the lord Sarapis
in the house of Claudios Sarapion
on the 16th at 9th o'clock

Table 1 summarizes the festive events so far attested in the invitations in papyri:

Table 1: Feasts attested in the invitation papyri.

<i>Event</i>	<i>Designation</i>	<i>Sources</i>
Birthdays (sons and daughters)	πρωτογενέσιον, πανήγυρις τῆς γενεθλίου, γενέσια	SB XVI 12511 P.Oxy XXXVI 2791 P.Oxy. IX 1214
<i>Therapeuteria</i>	θεραπευτήρια	P.Oxy. LXVI 4543 P.Oxy. LXVI 4542 SB XIV 11944
<i>Mallokouria</i>	μαλλοκούρια	P.Oxy. XII 1484
Verification	ἐπίκρισις	P.Oxy. LXVI 4541 P.Oxy. VI 926 P.Oxy. XXXVI 2792 P.Oxy. XLIX 3501
Wedding	γάμος	SB V 7745 P.Oxy. III 524 P.Fuad. I univ. 7 P.Oxy. LXXV 5057 SB XIV 11652 P.Köln VI 280 P.Oxy. I 111 P.Oxy. XXXIII 2678 P.Oxy. XII 1580 P.Oxy. XII 1579 P.Oxy. VI 927 SB XXII 15358 P.Fay. 132 P.Oxy. XII 1486 P.Oxy. XII 1487
Coronation	στέψις	P.Oxy. XVII 2147 P.Oxy XLIV 3202
Banquet of Anubis	κλίνη	SB XX 14503

Offering of Isis	ἱέρωμα	<i>P. Fouad</i> 76 <i>P.Oxy.</i> LXXV 5056 <i>P.Oxy.</i> LXVI 4539
Banquet of Sarapis	κλίνη	<i>P.Oxy.</i> XXXI 2592 <i>P.Yale</i> I 85 <i>P.Oxy.</i> III 523 <i>P.Oxy.</i> I 110 <i>P.Brit. Col.inv.</i> 1 <i>P.Oslo</i> III 157 <i>P.Oxy.</i> LII 3693 <i>SB XVIII</i> 13875 <i>P.Coll.Youtie</i> 51 <i>P.Coll.Youtie</i> 52 <i>P.Oxy.</i> XIV 1755 <i>P.Oxy.</i> LXII 4339 <i>PSI XV</i> 1543 <i>P.Oxy.</i> LXVI 4540 <i>P.Köln.</i> I 57
Festival and a wearing (?) of roses ceremony	πανήγυρις καὶ ῥοδοφορία	<i>P.Oxy.</i> LII 3694
Dinner	δειπνήσαι	<i>SB XVI</i> 12596 <i>P.Oxy.</i> XII 1485 <i>O. Medin. Madi</i> 31
Banquet	ξενία	<i>P.Oxy.</i> IV 747
The good day	ἀγαθὴ ἡμέρα	<i>P.Heid. inv.</i> G 1639

Some of the feasts which one could get invited to in Roman Egypt occurred in connection with specific rituals, in which the status and prestige of the host, his family, and social networks played a key role. Specifically, the μαλλοκούρια, the ἐπίκρισις, and the θεραπευτήρια feasts were connected to rites de passage and rites of initiation that marked the transition between child and adulthood, as was explained by Montserrat (1991, pp. 43-49; 1996, pp. 36-48). The μαλλοκούρια feast, appearing in one invitation, consisted of an offering in which boys offer a lock of their hair. This ritual has an Athenian precedent—in Athens, candidates to the ephebeia offered their lock of youth to Artemis—but in Egypt it took the shape of the offering of the «Horus lock¹³». To reach the status of citizen of a Greek polis or to that of the gymnasial class member in the metropolis, boys had to participate in the ephebeia. The μαλλοκούρια took place in the Great Sarapeum in Alexandria and was attended by high officials¹⁴. Before the admission to the ephebeia, the

¹³ See Legras 1993; Montserrat 1993; Montserrat 1991, pp. 41-45; Montserrat 1996, pp. 39-41.

¹⁴ *P.Oxy.* XLIX 3463.6-9 (Oxyrhynchos, 58 CE).

male family members of the candidate had to present him (εισάγει) while acting as guarantees of the boy (γνωστεύουσι), who was also interrogated about his other family members¹⁵.

The ἐπίκρισις, attested in four invitations, was the ceremony accompanying the examination of the civic status of a boy at the age of fourteen —the time in which boys become liable for the poll tax— to join any of the elite groups that enjoyed tax privileges. Those boys aspiring to enter the metropolite class had to demonstrate that both parents were members of this class. Members of the ἀπὸ γυμνασίου, on the other hand, had to demonstrate that the ancestors of the boy on both sides of the family were included in the original list of the members of the gymnasium or in the lists of 56/7 and 72/3 CE¹⁶. According to Montserrat, the ἐπίκρισις was also a rite of admission into the father's kin group¹⁷.

Two (or possibly three) invitations¹⁸ attest a θεραπευτήρια feast of the host's daughter. The reason and nature of the θεραπευτήρια feast remain unclear, and, consequently, several hypotheses have been put forward. For Huebner (2009) the θεραπευτήρια was the family celebration that followed a girl's circumcision, while Montserrat (1991, pp. 47-48; 1996, pp. 41-48) took it as a temple ritual connected with the menarche or as a preliminary to marriage¹⁹. Direct sources do not tell us very much, so both explanations seem plausible. Whatever the ritual, the θεραπευτήρια could have celebrated a newly acquired girl in marriageable and fertile condition.

¹⁵ See, e. g., *P.Gen.* II 111 (Alexandria, 137 or 158 CE?). On the εἴσκρισις reports see below.

¹⁶ On the ἐπίκρισις and εἴσκρισις reports see Nelson 1979; Bussi 2003. On the metropolites and gymnasial classes see, e. g., van Minnen 2002; Broux 2013.

¹⁷ Montserrat 1996, pp. 37-39; Montserrat 1991, p. 44. The ritualization of the entering of the boy into the paternal group was not, however, an exclusive trait of the Roman-Egyptian elite. The rules of a private association active by the middle of the 1st cent. CE [*P.Mich.* V 243.5 (Tebtunis, 14-37 CE)] stated that [ἐ]άν δέ τις γαμήσῃ, δότωι (l. δότω) (δραχμᾶς) β, παιδογονίου ἄρρενο(ς) (δραχμᾶς) β, θηλείας (δραχμῆν) α «If anyone [i. e. any of the members] marries, let him pay two drachmas, for the birth of a male child two drachmas, for a female one drachma». Trans. by Boak. These rites of passage and social inclusion of the children entailed a change in the father's social networks, and, as such, the transformation had to be exhibited and sanctioned in front of the group. Compare to the role played by feasts of baptism in Medieval Europe, on which see Alfani & Gourdon 2009.

¹⁸ On *SB* XIV 11944 see Montserrat 1990.

¹⁹ On the female nubile age see Rowlandson & Lippert 2019, pp. 341-342.

If there ever was a feast in which the exhibition of the status and the new established family bonds played a fundamental role, this was the wedding-feast. So far fifteen papyri contain invitations to γάμοι, which were generally hosted by the bride's father²⁰. The wedding venue, which was normally a private house²¹, had to be festooned with flower arrangements, which could be gifted by family friends²².

²⁰ The father of the bride is the host in *SB* V 7745; *P.Fouad I univ.* 7; *SB* XXII 15358 (fragmentary); *P.Fay.* 132. The father of both the bride and the groom (i. e. consanguineous marriages) is also the host in *P.Oxy.* III 524 and *P.Köln* VI 280. Marriage feasts could be also hosted by the mother of the groom (*P.Oxy.* LXXV 5057), the mother of the bride (*P.Oxy.* XII 1579) the mother of both the bride and the groom (*P.Oxy.* I 111), the father of the groom (*P.Oxy.* XXXIII 2678), the bother of the bride (*P.Oxy.* XII 1580; *P.Oxy.* XII 1487) as well as the by groom himself (*SB* XIV 11652; *P.Oxy.* VI 927; *P.Oxy.* XII 1486).

²¹ The host's house: *SB* V 7745; *P.Oxy.* I 111; *P.Oxy.* XII 1579; someone else's house: *P.Oxy.* III 524; *P.Fouad I Univ.* 7; *P.Köln* VI 280; *P.Fay.* 132; not specified: *P.Oxy.* XII 1580; *P.Oxy.* VI 927; *P.Oxy.* XII 1486; *P.Oxy.* XII 1487. Interestingly, weddings could be also celebrated in temples. See *P.Oxy.* LXXV 5057 (Thoereum); *SB* XIV 11652 (Aphroditeum); *P.Oxy.* XXXIII 2678 (Sabazeum); *SB* XXII 15358 (λόγιον, i. e., the birth-house). On the «birth-house» see El-Mofatch 2006, pp. 1999-2000.

²² *P.Oxy.* XLVI 3313 (Oxyrhynchos, 2nd cent. CE). See below in this article For other wedding presents see *O.Ashm. Shelton* 196 (Oxyrhynchites, 5th-6th cent. CE); *P.Oxy.* XVII 2144.20-21: lamps (Oxyrhynchites, 275-299 CE); *SB* VI 9107: ten ducklings (Unknown provenance, 500-699 CE). Voluntary associations may require extraordinary contributions from a member if he marries. See e. g., *P.Mich.* V 243.5 (2 drachmas). On wedding feasts see in general Perpillou-Thomas 1993, pp. 15-19. Papyri from both Byzantine and Arabic periods are often very informative on the mobilization of additional food and drink for the feast through the host's networks of social obligation. See e. g., *SB* XVI 12854 (Thebes, 5th cent. CE) for the testimony of an individual who sent 17 λίτραι perhaps of fish «for what is due» (l. 11: κατὰ μέρος) to a certain Silbanos Pekerb for his son's wedding. On the sense of κατὰ μέρος in this context see Gallazi & Wagner 1983, p. 180. On occasion of a family wedding, a host may distribute gifts among his subordinates, as we may infer from a note accompanying the gift of a jar of wine (ὀμφοκηρὰ μία) at his son's wedding. See *SB* XIV 12077 (Unknown provenance, 4th-5th cent. CE). By that time, the success of a feasts, however, was not only dependent on someone's capacity mobilize the necessary resources for the celebration, but also on the range of guests that he or she was able to gather. Indeed, a letter by a certain Athena dated to the second half of the 7th cent. CE (*P.Apoll.* 72 [Apollonopolis Magna]), which contains an invitation to the wedding of his daughter addressed to the pagarches, may reveal an effort by the host to bestow the wedding with the ritual sanction coming from the attendance of a local authority.

The devotion for Isis, and especially for Sarapis, seems to have prompted the celebration of other feasts appearing in the invitations. Seventeen papyri contain invitations to the so-called κλίνη of Sarapis. While in most cases the κλίνη was a celebration in itself, some of them were connected to other celebrations as a μαλλοκούρια, as well as a birthday party²³. These κλῖναι of Sarapis could be celebrated either at private houses as well as at the temple of the god²⁴. Scholars have often discussed the religious nature of these banquets along with their relationship to festivals of Isis²⁵. Apparently the κλῖναι of Sarapis were banquets with the form of θεοξένια in which the god could participate either as a guest or even as a host²⁶. We typically fail to address the nature of the relationships between the participants of the κλῖναι who happen to appear in the invitation papyri. Therefore, it might be asked whether they were indeed members of a religious voluntary association, with its internal life and activities—including feasts and banquets—regulated by a set of written rules. Alternatively, the invitees to a κλίνη could just have been part of a loose-knit group of devotees of Sarapis, who freely met to perform cultic banquets and other relevant rites, perhaps at the occasion of festivals connected to the Sarapis cult²⁷. As a matter of fact, it has been suggested that the κλῖναι appearing in the invitations may have been part of the banqueting activities of associations²⁸, for which, based on what we know of the festive and dining practices of associations in Roman Egypt, we might presuppose the existence of a set of rules setting out the compulsory attendance for their members, the funding of these banquets, as well as the fines for non-attendance²⁹. To be sure, some sources point out that κλῖναι could be celebrated

²³ Μαλλοκούρια: *P.Oxy.* XII 1484 birthday party: *SB XVI* 12511.

²⁴ Private houses: *P.Yale* I 85 (father's house); *P.Oxy.* III 523 (house of Claudios Sarapion); *P.Oslo* III 156 (host's house). Sarapeum: *P.Oxy.* XXXI 2592; *P.Oxy.* I 110; *P.Brit. Col.inv.* 1; *P.Oxy.* LII 3693; *SB XVIII* 13875; *PSI XV* 1543. Dining hall of the Sarapeum: *P.Coll.Youtie* 52; *P.Oxy.* XIV 1755; *P.Oxy.* LXII 4339; *P.Oxy.* LXVI 4540. Other venues in *P.Coll.Youtie* 51 (birth house), *P.Köln* I 57 (Thoreum).

²⁵ See Milne 1925; Koenen 1948; Montserrat 1992; Bricault 2013; Gardner, Marshall & Nelson 2018.

²⁶ Aristid. 45. 27. See further *P.Köln* I 57, an invitation by the god himself.

²⁷ On the dates of celebration of the Sarapis see Koenen 1967.

²⁸ See, notably, Milne 1925.

²⁹ See, e. g., Boak 1937, p. 216; Gibbs 2011, pp. 300-302; Venticinque 2016, pp. 49-52.

within the framework of associations³⁰. The letter that Ptolemaios, a follower of Serapis sent to his father (*P.Mich.* VIII 511, first half of the 3rd cent. AD) is a remarkably telling source that will be discussed later in more detail. Let us now say that Ptolemaios mentions two fees in exchange for a place at the banquet of Serapis that is probably going to take place at a festival connected to his cult: the novices' fee and a fee for a place (ll. 2-4)³¹. The existence of fees to defray banquet expenses indeed recalls the practices of some associations attested in Egypt and elsewhere. Thus, the κλίνη in which Ptolemaios was going to participate was, in all likelihood, the cultic banquet of a religious society. However, it is important to remark that not all κλῖναι attested in the papyrological record were necessarily banquets organized within the framework of private associations. The most plausible interpretation of the nature of these meals is that of Youtie³²: the term κλίνη of Sarapis was a religious banquet which took the form of a θεοξένιον and, as such, it may refer to any banquet where an image of the god was displayed. It seems therefore reasonable to think that a devotee of Serapis, regardless of his eventual membership within a cultic association, could organize banquets where the god was present—at home, at the temple or at someone else house—and invite others to join him. Be that as it may be, the linkage with the god, the representation of the religious feelings, and the exhibition of the adherence to these values may have defined to a greater extent the ethos of the communities of commensals that participated in these κλῖναι.

³⁰ Some sources point out that κλῖναι could be used indeed as a term to refer to Egyptian associations. Philo (*In Flaccum* 136) uses first the term θίασος – a term that designates a religious association – as a generic name to refer to all the associations in Egypt, to later clarify their specific names: σύνοδοι and κλῖναι. *P.Oxy.* XLIV 3164. 4 (Oxyrhynchos, 73 CE) also links the terms θίασος and κλίνη, but the general context is unfortunately far from clear. The papyrus preserves the final part of a petition (ll. 13-14: ἀναφόρτον), which contains a statement on the part of a certain Sois that sacrifices in honor of the imperial house have been performed, together with a plea for his requests to be accessed. The reading in l. 3 of ἱερά κλεινή (l. κλίνη) raises the possibility of a relationship with Sarapis and, therefore, that of Sois being a priest in the services of his cult. The reading in l.2 of θίασος also implies the possibility of a private association being somewhat involved here. Given the fragmentary nature of the document, it is difficult to infer anything clear about its organizational model, let alone its dining practices.

³¹ On this papyrus see Youtie 1948.

³² Youtie 1948, pp. 13-14.

One may wonder what the role played by commensality was and, above all, what significance was held by the act of inviting someone to a banquet in connection with these rites and ceremonies which appear in the invitations. It is thusly appropriate to consider Bourdieu's work on the potential of rites to institute and consecrate the social boundaries between groups³³. According to Bourdieu, one of the main social function of rites was not to mark a transition between two social statuses, but to separate those who have already undergone these rites from those who, by no means, will undergo. Being a strong social and cultural power, rites both consecrate the social differences between groups and effect a «statutory assignation» that makes those who have been instituted by virtue of the rite to feel obliged to conform with their social status.

In this sense feasts accompanying rites of coming-of-age, feasts of coronation (στέψις) of a civic officer, and life crisis events like weddings exert on those being feted some sort of «statutory assignation», as they would encourage them to meet the social expectations related to their new social condition (be it a member of the *ephebeia* or the metropolitan elite, or even a woman who is now ready for a proper marriage). However, one of the distinctive traits of the rites of institution is that they cannot be self-administered, but they ultimately need to be imposed by an entity with the power and authority to legitimize the newly established social order. The bureaucratic process instituted by the Roman administration, together with the attendance of the appropriate civic authorities, was, in fact, the instituting authority for the *ἐπίκρισις* and *μαλλοκούρια* rites of passage. For other rites, such as the *θεραπευτήρια*, weddings, birthday feasts, *κλίνει* of Sarapis, *ιερώματα* of Isis and so on, which were not necessarily administered by the administration, it was precisely the community's being gathered together at the banquet which played the role of the legitimizing body in consecrating the social order. If feasts publicly express their host's status and social identity, it is important to bear in mind that these claims need to be validated by the members of the group. In this sense, when a host celebrates a feast and invites other diners to join him, he is implicitly inquiring about his position regarding the group. Indeed, a fragmentary letter containing what appears to be the response addressed to a woman named Antonia Tekosis to an invitation to the feast of the first birthday of her son Dionysos (ll.1-2: τὰς πανηγύρεις τῶν γενεθλίων

³³ Bourdieu 1982.

τοῦ Διονυσίου) implies that guests would be willing to do everything in their power to attend the banquet, thus showing one's respect to the host family³⁴. Therefore, by accepting the invitation and attending the feast, invited guests confirmed and sanctioned someone's status within the community.

By the same token, invitations can ultimately be rejected. Surely, there may be many causes preventing a guest from attending a celebration³⁵. Yet, non-attendance can be interpreted as signifying that the host does not hold the position that he or she is claiming and thus does not deserve these honors. The fear of offending a host over a missed invitation is probably behind the apologies that we find in some of the so-called letters of condolence, in which the sender apologizes for not being able to be present at a funeral³⁶. Other than being a «consolatory substitute for the physical presence of the writer³⁷», these regrets may also reveal a concern not to be demeaning to the deceased and his or her family with their failure to attend the funerary feast.

If sponsoring a party was a means of increasing someone's base of esteem and prestige within the group, one may wonder how costly it was to provide such a feast. While accounts may offer some glimpses about the foodstuffs consumed and their price, it remains difficult to get a complete picture without accounting for other —often undocumented— variables, such as the lavishness of the celebration or even the number of guests. Nonetheless, wills can be very informative about the worries of being able to mobilize the resources necessary for the celebration of a feast through the someone's networks of social obligation, even after one has already passed away. In 165 CE, Acusilaos, stipulated in his will that his wife —and after her death, his

³⁴ See *PSI* XII 1242. 6-7 (1st cent. BCE-1st cent. CE): τὸ γὰρ ἐφ' αὐτοῖς πάντως ἡδέως ἀπαλλάξομεν. «For as far as we ourselves are concerned, we will put away with complete pleasure». On the interpretation of this letter see Artz-Grabner 2016, pp. 510-511.

³⁵ See below the discussion on *P.Oxy.* III 3313.

³⁶ See, e. g., *SB* XVIII 13946.3-9 (3rd-4th cent. CE): νῆ τὴν σὴν σωτηρίαν, εἰ μὴ τὰ ἐπικίμ[ενά] μοι νῦν φροντίσματα τοιαῦτα ἦ[ν καὶ] τηλικαῦτα ὡς ἀπαραίτητα εἶναι, π[άντα] ἂν καταλιπὼν αὐτὸς πρὸς ὑμᾶ[ς ἀφικό]μην ὅπως τε ὑμᾶς προσκυνήσω [καὶ] περὶ τοῦ συμβάντος ἀνθρωπίν[ου τῆ] | \θ\γατρὶ | ὑμ[ῶ]ν διαλεχθῶ μάλιστα τῆ ἀδε[λ]φῆ. «By your life, if the responsibilities that now fall upon me were not of such importance as to be inexorable, I should have abandoned everything and come to you myself both to salute you and to talk —especially to (our?) sister— about the mortal blow that has befallen your daughter». Trans. by Rea 1986. See further Chapa 1998, pp. 30-32.

³⁷ See Chapa 1998, p. 30.

son Dios— were to give to Acusilaos' slaves and freedmen «for a feast that they shall celebrate at my tomb 100 drachmas of silver to be spent³⁸» every year on his birthday. Another —fragmentary— will from the 3rd cent. CE Oxyrhynchos states that the relatives of the deceased were to be crowned and that they were to offer a sacrifice in honor of the deceased on the designated days (I.1: ἐν τε ἐπισήμοις ἡμέραις³⁹). The will later details the amount of wine and grapes to be provided as food offerings and states that attendants will be «sumptuously entertained» (I. 8: εὐδ'ω/χεῖσθα, I. εὐοχεῖσθαι) at the banquetting halls (I. 8: διπνητηρίου, I. δειπνητηρίου).

The social process triggered by an invitation has therefore a dual rationale. From the guest's point of view, receiving one of these invitations means to be formally recognized as a group member. The celebration of a feast is a powerful means to define the group boundaries, as has often been pointed out⁴⁰. With the process of inviting some and excluding others, one is, in fact, establishing who belongs to the group and who does not. From the host's point of view, however, the issuing of an invitation may entail a challenge to his status within the group. By inviting those who are considered to belong to the group, one is implicitly asking for his status vis á vis them. Consequently, with the acceptance of an invitation, the members of the community agree and confirm the status that the host claims to possess.

3. Feasts, commensal hospitality, and social obligation

A feast may be defined as a form of ritual activity centered around the communal consumption of food and drink, which is different from everyday commensality in terms of quantity, quality, and setting⁴¹. Borrowing Grignon's definition, a banquet represents a form of «exceptional commensality⁴²». Feasts also crystallize the intense relevance of members of the community to each other. Ὅρα, [μὴ

³⁸ *P.Oxy.* III 494.22-25 (Oxyrhynchos, 165 CE): δώσει δὲ ἡ | γυνή μου καὶ μετὰ τελευτήν αὐτῆς ὁ υἱός | μου Δεῖος τοῖς δούλοις μου καὶ ἀπελευθέρ[οις] εἰς | εὐωχίαν αὐτῶν ἢ ποιήσονται πλησίον τοῦ τάφου μου κατ' ἔτος τῆ γενεθλίας μου ἑφ' ᾧ διέπειν ἀργυρίου δραχμὰς ἑκατόν.

³⁹ *W.Chr.* 500 (3rd cent. CE, Oxyrhynchos).

⁴⁰ Grignon 2001, pp. 28-29.

⁴¹ Dietler 2001, pp. 66-75.

⁴² Grignon 2001, pp. 27-28.

οὐκ ἄλλως ποιήσης καὶ λυπήσης ἡμᾶς⁴³ («Take care not to do otherwise and give us sorrow»), a certain Isidoros urged his mother, Chenamoubis, to attend the wedding of a female close relative. Above all, feasts are multifaceted events, so we should not ignore the sincere fondness of diners toward one another nor the importance of the religious dimension of these events.

Feasts are also to be seen as a specialized form of gift exchange, which establishes a social debt and reciprocal obligations between host and guests. This mechanism, which has been abundantly studied in anthropology⁴⁴, forms the basis of what Dietler defined as «commensal hospitality». This relationship between giver and receiver is, according to Dietler, a relationship of social superiority until an equivalent gift can be returned⁴⁵. As will be discussed below, some private letters on papyri provide a glimpse of the awareness of this reciprocal obligation on the part of commensals. Specifically, these sources seem to imply that those who participated in a banquet were expected to contribute to its expenses. If our interpretation is correct, in Roman Egypt it was incumbent upon a «good guest» to help to defray the cost of banquets. As will be discussed below, this moral obligation to reciprocate might have been operative in different commensality contexts. In such competitive contexts, the alignment that the individuals may adopt with regards to the morality of the community can generate either a negative or a positive reputation. The adherence to this ethical norm would consequently lead to an increase of someone's reputation within the community.

Indeed, *P.Flor.* III 332, a letter from the archive of Apollonios, the strategos of the Apollonopolites Heptakomias⁴⁶, provides evidence regarding the

⁴³ *P.Yale* I 78.10-11 (Arsinoites, 1st half 1st cent. CE). This text has been reedited in Maravela & Stolk 2018.

⁴⁴ Mauss 1990.

⁴⁵ Dietler 2001, pp. 73-75. For Dietler it is crucial to understand commensality as a specialized form of ritual activity, with the potential to define and articulate social relationships and, thus, as an arena for the political action. Dietler also proposes three different modes of «commensal politics» or patterns in the different ways that feasts operate symbolically as sites and instruments of politics. The analysis model proposed by Dietler has proven to be very valuable to understand, through the archaeological record, the relationship between changes in these patterns of commensality (preparation, consumption, and contexts of consumption) and major social and political transformations. See, e. g., Bray 2003; van Eijnde, Blok & Strootman 2018.

⁴⁶ TM Arch id: 19.

articulation of the ethical norm to reciprocate within the context of wedding feasts. Between 113 and 120 CE, while Apollonios the strategos was away from home, he received a letter from his mother Eudamonis. The subject of the letter revolves around the lawsuit brought by her «undisciplined» (ἄτακτον) brother, Diskas, against his son, Apollonios. Eudamonis became somewhat fearful, since, in Apollonios’ absence, his brother, Diskas, was planning to attack her with the help of some friends from the gymnasium (ll. 6-10). After the proper and formulaic salutations and desires for good health, Eudamonis added a very interesting postscript to the letter (ll. 22-26).

τοις γάμοις σου ἡ γυνὴ Δισκᾶτος τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ μου ἤνεγκέ μοι (δραχμᾶς) ρ· ἐπεὶ δὲ νῦν Νῖλος ὁ υἱὸς αὐτῆς γαμεῖν μέλλει, δίκαιόν ἐστι καὶ ἡμᾶς ἀνταποδοῦναι, καὶ εἰ ζητημάτιά ἐστι πρὸς αὐτοὺς ἐν μέσῳι.

At your wedding the wife of my brother Diskas brought me 100 drachmas. Since now her son Nilos is going to marry it is right that we make a return gift, even if there are in the middle some claims against them.

Eudamonis’s words reveal the extent to which the celebration of a wedding feast led to both a social debt and an expectation of reciprocity. When Eudamonis’s son, Apollonios, married, her brother’s wife gave her 100 drachmas. Now that the giver’s son is going to marry, Eudamonis reminds her son of the obligation to reciprocate with a suitable gift. Admittedly, this gift can be interpreted in different ways: as a wedding gift⁴⁷ or, based on the specific sense of the verb ἀνταποδίδωμι, as a contribution made in exchange for something, aimed at corresponding to that something that has been previously received: i. e., a contribution made to reciprocate⁴⁸. In this regard, it is interesting to note the extent to which, despite these family issues and her very poor opinion about her «undisciplined» brother, Diskas, for Eudamonis the pressure of doing the right thing, i. e., helping her family to defray the

⁴⁷ Unfortunately, wedding gifts are scarcely attested in papyri dated to the period from 2nd cent. to 4th cent. CE. See above, n. 22.

⁴⁸ Cf. *DGE*, s. u. I.1: «(de una cosa igual) devolver, pagar». See also the construction ἀνταποδίδωμι τὴν χάριν + dative, with the meaning of repaying (someone) for his/her benevolent behavior Cf. *SB* VI 9530.16-17: οἱ θεοὶ τῆ[ν] χάριν σοὶ ἀνταποδώσουσι; *SB* V 7600.8: ἀλλὰ δύναμε (l. δύναμαι) ἃ ἔσθ[υ] σι (l. l. σοὶ) ἀνταπι[οδο]ῦναι τὰς χάριτας.

costs of the wedding and keeping up with what was expected from her, was still of utmost concern.

A 2nd cent. CE letter from Oxyrhynchos (*P.Oxy.* XLVI 3313) attests to the extent to which the fear of not being able to reciprocate could be pressing, even for those who cannot attend the banquets. In a letter addressed to a certain Dionysias, Apollonios and Sarapias express their happiness about the news of the upcoming wedding of Dionysias's son. Interestingly, they also apologize for not being able to attend the celebration. Apparently, Dionysias had previously asked them for a certain quantity of roses and two thousand narcissi. Roses were not yet fully available by that part of the year, so they were able to get together only one thousand. To compensate, 4000 narcissi were sent instead of 2000. In the next section, the apology regarding the arrangements they had been able to make goes deeper (ll. 15-20):

οὐ βουλόμε\θα/ δέ σε οὕτως κ[ατ]αγεινώσκειν (l. κ[ατ]αγιγνώσκειν) ἡμῶν ὡς
μικρολόγων (l. μικρολόγων) ὥστε καταγελῶσαν γράψαι πεπομφέναι τὴν
τιμὴν, ὅποτε καὶ ἡμεῖς ἔχομεν τὰ παιδία ὡς ἴδια τέκνα καὶ πλέον τῶν ἡμῶν
τιμῶμεν (20) καὶ ἀγαπῶμεν αὐτὰ . . .

We wish you did not despise us as misers so as to laugh at us by writing that you had sent the cost (i.e. of the flowers), when we too regard the young ones as our own children and esteem and love them more than our own . . .

The concern of being judged unfavorably (*καταγιγνώσκειν*) is very informative about whatever the mechanisms of social control and reputation may have functioned here. As this apology implies, Apollonios and Sarapias feared being seen as *μικρολόγοι* ('misers') for not having been able to reciprocate. Their fear of being criticized as «misers» therefore seems to suggest that the celebration of a feast could entail a social debt as well as an understanding of the obligation to reciprocate. Yet other testimonies also imply the existence of such a moral obligation, at least in the case of funeral meals. The expenditures for funereal comestibles recorded on some private accounts indeed reveal that participants also contributed food items to funerary feasts⁴⁹. Apparently, this obligation to contribute was also extended to those who could not attend, as we may infer from some references to the

⁴⁹ See, e. g. *P.Oxy.* IV 736.36 (asparagus). See further Montserrat 1997, p. 40.

dispatch of food in the so-called letters of condolence. Comestibles, such as walnuts, which were sent off with the letter carrier, were likely offered to the dead and consumed at these funeral banquets⁵⁰.

The pressure to meet group expectations regarding commensality was strong in other circumstances. By the middle of the 3rd cent. CE, Ptolemaios, a Sarapis follower, wrote a letter to his father two months ahead of the celebration of a κλίνη (*P.Mich.* VIII 511.1-8).

Πτολεμαῖος τῷ πατρὶ χαίρειν. γεινώσκιν (l. γινώσκειν) σε θέλω καὶ τὴν μητέρα μου ὅτι σιωπητικοῦ τῆς κλείνης (l. κλίνης) (δραχμαὶ) κδ καὶ τόπου ἄλλαι (δραχμαὶ) κβ. (5) λογισάμενος οὖν ἦρκα ἀγορανομίαν ἵνα μήτε σιωπητικοῦ μήτε τόπου δῶ, ἀλλὰ καὶ διπλᾶ μέρη λαμβάνω καὶ χορηγῶ αὐτοῖς ξύλα.

Ptolemaios to his father, greeting. I want you and my mother to know that the novices' fee (siopetikon) for the banquet is 24 drachmas and for a place another 22 drachmas. After consideration, therefore, I have taken up the post of agoranomos so that I need not pay the novices' fee nor for a place; but also I receive double portions, and I provide them with wood. (Trans. by Youtie).

Apparently Ptolemaios had to pay two fees to join one κλίνη to be held in two months' time. These fees included 22 drachmas for a «sitting place» (τόπος) at the banquet and 24 drachmas as a fee for neophytes (σιωπητικός). According to Youtie's interpretation, Ptolemaios was about to finish his probationary period and be initiated afterwards into the Sarapis mysteries⁵¹. Instead of paying these two fees, Ptolemaios decided to take up the post of ἀγορανόμος and serve as market supervisor for the festival⁵². Moreover, if he provides his fellow diners with wood, he will be given double portions of

⁵⁰ See *SB* XIV 11646.13-15 (Bakchias?, 1st-2nd cent. CE): κομμεῖς παρὰ τοῦ διδόντες (l. διδόντος) σοὶ τὸ ἐπιστολιν (l. ἐπ[ι]στόλιον) ἑκατὸν κάρηα (l. κάρυα) «You will receive one hundred walnuts from the person who is giving you the letter». Trans. by Chapa. See also *BGU* III 801.12-19 (Arsinoites, 2nd cent. CE). See further Chapa 1998, pp. 32-33.

⁵¹ Youtie 1948, pp. 17-21, finds a parallel between those who had to pay the σιωπητικός fee and the σιγηταί of the association of Iobacchoi from Torre Nova (*IGUR* I 160, 160-165 CE). Both groups were probably composed by those who were being initiated and, consequently, had a passive and silent role in the association ceremonies.

⁵² For the sense of ἀγορανομία in this text see Youtie 1948, pp. 23-26. Alternatively, the term ἀγορανομία here may not refer to the civic office but to an office within the association.

food as well. In the next part of the letter, Ptolemaios asked his father for wood for the banquet. If, for whatever reason, his father was not able to provide it, Ptolemaios and some friends of him would come down themselves to Karanis (*P.Mich.* VII 511.9-22).

ἀπ' ἐντεῦθεν οὖν φρόντισον καὶ (10) ἐὰν ἀναβῆς λήμψη τὸ ναῦλον τῶν ὄνων. χρεια γὰρ ἐστὶν ἐγὼμων. ἐὰν δὲ χρεια μου ἦν (l. ἦ) πέμψεν (l. πέμψον) μοι φάσιν καὶ καταβήσομαι μετὰ ἄλλων δύο φίλων ἵνα μὴ σὺ (15) κοπιᾷς. καὶ γὰρ ἀντιπῖν (l. ἀντιπεῖν) ἄνθρωπος οὐ δύναται τῷ κυρίῳ Σαράπιδι. ἄλλη γὰρ δίμηνός ἐστιν ὡς (l. ἕως) τῆς κλείνης (l. κλίνης). ἐὰν δύνῃ τῷ σῶ ὄνω ἀνελέγκαι αὐτὰ ἀνελέγκον καὶ (20) εὐρήσης (l. εὐρήσεις) εἰς τὴν δαπάνην σου τὰς δραχμάς.
(hand 2) ἔρρωσσο (l. ἔρρωσο)

For this reason, then, give the matter thought, and if you come up you will receive the freightage for the donkeys. For there is a need of 5 loads. If you need me, send me word and I will come down with two friends as well in order that you may not tire yourself. For a man cannot refuse our lord Sarapis. It is another two months until the banquet. If you are able to bring up the wood with your donkey, bring it up, and you will get the money to cover your expense. (2nd hand) Farewell. (Trans. by Youtie)

Ptolemaios letter to his father casts light on some key aspects of the relation between commensality and the recognition of social obligations of reciprocity in Roman Egypt. In fact, the letter reveals that hosts would need to mobilize additional contributions of resources through their networks of personal obligation which can extend beyond the commensals' social and family networks, as seems to be the case between Ptolemaios's father and friends⁵³. The sponsoring of a feast therefore triggers a process which activates the host's networks of support. One may presume, therefore, that the social prestige providing sponsorship for a κλίνη of Sarapis would reflect not only on the host but to his networks as well.

The existence of status-based participation fees as well as the granting of double rations suggest that the banquet in which Ptolemy was to participate was not a κλίνη such as these that we find in the invitations in papyri, but the κλίνη of a religious association: that is to say, a religious banquet organized within the framework of the activities of an association. As a matter of fact,

⁵³ See Dietler 2001, p. 81.

inscriptions and papyri alike reveal that the banqueting and festive activities of the associations were normally regulated by written rules. These bylaws typically contain sections dealing with the establishment of the festive calendar, the financing of the feasts, as well as rules aimed at controlling the behavior of the participants at these banquets. By analogy with these norms, one could argue that, for Ptolemaios, the social pressure to contribute to and defray the costs of the banquet was not so much a matter of an informal ethical obligation, but rather an integral part of the obligations incurred through his membership into the association. At this point it would be useful to understand the dining practices of associations by looking at both the ethical and social dimensions of the rules of these associations.

Recent scholarship has pointed out that associations' rules represent consensual standards of ethical behavior and embody shared values among its members. By writing down a set of rules, and demanding high fines for eventual offenses and misbehaviors, voluntary associations in Egypt dissuaded potential rule-breakers from joining to the group, discouraged their members from behaving in a manner contrary to the interests and purposes of the association, and promoted the creation of bonds of mutual trust between members. As part of this approach, rules regulating the ethical conduct of their members, such as the prohibition of corrupting a member's home or the exchange of insults and violence among members (in fact, these are the rules that usually carry the highest fines) have been interpreted as intended to create and promote trust among association members as well as to neutralize the negative impact that such offenses and misbehaviors may have had on the group's public image⁵⁴.

In my opinion, the rules governing the financial aspects of banquets can also be understood as intended to foster cooperation among members by means of transforming the ethical norm of reciprocation into a formalized institution. Furthermore, these rules were probably aimed at having an impact on the social relations between members. As far as we know from the charts and accounts of Egyptian associations, the costs of feasts and banquets could be funded in two different ways. Some associations established that all members were to contribute equally⁵⁵, thus promoting the creation and mainte-

⁵⁴ See notably Monson 2006; Venticinque 2010; Venticinque 2016.

⁵⁵ See e. g., *P.Mich.* V 243.2 (Gild ordinance. Tebtunis, 14-37 CE): σὺν ᾧ ἐπάναγκον εὐωχέισθωσαν κατὰ μῆνα τῆ β, ἐκάστου εἰς ἐπιμήν[ι]ον τελοῦντος τὰς ἐξ ἴσου κατ' ὄνομα κεκριμένας ἀργυρίου δραχμὰς δέκα δύο. «in whose company [i. e. in the company of the

nance of more horizontal and less hierarchical relationships among members. By contrast, in other associations these costs were mainly absorbed by the leaders and officers of the association⁵⁶. The provision of food and drink to fellow diners, together with the subsequent social debt of the obligation to reciprocate on the part of the guests, probably constituted an excellent means for the leaders of the association to acquire the honor, power, and prestige necessary to provide adequate leadership over the association⁵⁷. Therefore, when a member fulfills his legal obligation to contribute to the costs of the banquet, as seems to be the case of Ptolemaios, he is also accepting the group's shared code of values. For that matter, it may be interesting to look at Ptolemaios' justification for the need to meet the expectations raised by the participants in the κλίνη. The sentence «for a man cannot refuse our Lord Sarapis» states that it behooves a Sarapis follower to adopt a behavior that conforms to the group norms. Since Ptolemaios was still a novice, keeping up with his position and meeting his duty to defray the costs of the κλίνη was a requisite to complete his probationary period and be fully initiated afterwards into the mysteries of Sarapis.

The sense of obligation felt by Ptolemaios, the pressure felt by Eudamonis regarding the upcoming family wedding, as well as Apollonios and Sarapias's fear of being criticized as stingy may reveal that the celebration of a feast could entail a social debt and an understanding of reciprocal obligation. Furthermore, what these testimonies seem to imply is that the ethics underpinning an obligation to reciprocate may encompass diverse commensality contexts: from the dining practices of an association of devotees of Sarapis to friends and relatives, including those guests who were unable to attend.

president of the association] they shall hold a banquet each month on the 12th, each one contributing for his monthly dues the twelve silver drachmas assigned equally to each». Trans. by Boak.

⁵⁶ See, e. g., *P.Mich.* V 244. 14-15 (Guild ordinance. Tebtunis, 43 CE): ἐφ' ᾧ δὲ πίνετε (l. πίνονται) κατὰ μῆνα ταῖς τῶν θεοῦ Σεβαστοῦ ἡμέραις τοῦ αὐτοῦ Κρονίωνος προεκφέροντος πόσιν προπόσεως (l. προπόσεως), «and that they shall hold a banquet each month on the day of the god Augustus, the said Kronion furnishing drink for the toasts». Trans. by Boak. For sources of the Ptolemaic period see Kloppenborg 2020, p. 225.

⁵⁷ See de Frutos García (forthcoming).

4. *Conclusions*

When dealing with the corpus of invitations in papyri, scholars have often regarded these texts from the point of view of their function, without further reflection on the relationship between these artifacts and the social dynamics of banquets in Roman Egypt. Setting aside their eventual practical purpose, this paper aimed at gaining a better understanding of the role that the invitations in papyri played within the broader social context of commensality by analyzing them in combination with other documentary sources related to the celebration of feasts. By looking at the different roles played by the members of the community of commensals and asking what the implications were of inviting and being invited to a feast in Roman Egypt, some interesting aspects have been revealed.

Being that these feasts were a public display of the host's status and cultural or religious filiation, the attendees to the feast played a key role in validating the social position of the host. For a host, therefore, the celebration of a feast and the issuing of invitations often entailed a challenge to his or her status quo within the community. This was a challenge that needed to be responded to by the community, including a positive or negative outcome for the host. By accepting the host's invitation, the members of the community sanctioned the position and status quo of the host within the group.

Furthermore, the acceptance of an invitation to attend a banquet may entail a social debt and an obligation to reciprocate between commensals. And, as often happens with behavioral norms, the alignment that one may adopt regarding these norms may generate a positive or a negative reputation. Indeed, some private letters seem to imply that the inhabitants of Roman Egypt felt compelled to keep up with the reciprocal obligations that come from commensality. As we may infer from the fears that they expressed in their private correspondence, celebrating a feast also involved an invitation to its guests to either reciprocate or to resign themselves to be set aside into a position of inferiority.

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