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Review of: Saints and Symposiasts: The Literature of Food and the Symposium in Greco-Roman and Early Christian Culture. Greek culture in the Roman world.

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Jason König, *Saints and Symposiasts: The Literature of Food and the Symposium in Greco-Roman and Early Christian Culture. Greek culture in the Roman world.* Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. xi, 417. ISBN 9780521886857. \$115.00.

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Saints and symposiasts focuses on works involving dinner conversations (symposium or table talk literature) from the second to the fifth centuries A.D. König briefly traces the genre from its roots in early Greek poetry to Plato's seminal *Symposium* and Xenophon's work of the same name. Subsequent examples (as by Aristotle and Epicurus) survive only in fragmentary form, and it seems to have been Plutarch who revived or at least repopularized the genre in the early second century A.D. with his *Symposium Questions*.¹ As König points out, the majority of scholarship on symposium literature focuses on the archaic, classical, and Hellenistic Greek authors while the Roman era writers of the genre have been generally overlooked, even though the genre was even more prevalent at that time. In fact the last major work to analyze the whole tradition of symposium literature was written over 80 years ago.² König redresses this neglect admirably by examining the major Roman era pagan and Christian writers of the genre (particularly Plutarch, Athenaeus, Methodius, and Macrobius), as well as other works dealing with dining, without any pretense at being exhaustive.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part, "Conversation and Community", looks at how symposium literature often idealized the after-dinner conversation. This was an occasion not simply to speak, but to perform and show off one's erudition and talent, to secure goodwill and friendships, to celebrate the Greek cultural heritage and relive the past by reviving knowledge of its great authors, and, perhaps most importantly, to express and reinforce an exclusive, elite, intellectual communal identity, which readers could imaginatively partake in. Some of the writers of symposium literature further had didactic and moralistic intentions in explaining to the reader proper behavior and etiquette, such as moderation in eating, drinking, and speaking as well as respect for fellow conversationalists. Roman era composers also combined the then popular tradition of miscellanistic compilation to the table talk book. While Plato and Xenophon had their characters speak about philosophical topics, Plutarch and Athenaeus have theirs converse about a wide variety of different subjects (literary, musical, historical, mythological, scientific, etc.), often presenting extremely abstruse information and recondite quotations. Moreover, Plutarch was influenced by the Pseudo-Aristotelian *Problems*, in centering each of his table talks on a question which could admit many different solutions, thereby fostering inquisitiveness, freedom of speech, and self-assertion, as well as skills in citing authorities and debating. Athenaeus was less focused on particular questions and problem-solving than on scholarly inventorying, and he was further strongly influenced by gastronomic and culinary texts.³

König goes on to show that in general Jewish and Christian authors, even those who readily adapted classical literary forms, were wary of the table talk genre, perhaps in general because of its apparent promotion of elitism and hedonism. Symptotic literature seems to have influenced Luke's gospel and also Clement of Alexandria reshaped it briefly in a sermonizing way in a section of his *Paedagogus (Educator)*, but few other Christian writers engaged with it (Lactantius apparently wrote a *Symposium* which is not extant and Julian's *Symposium or Caesars* shows contempt for symptotic debauchery) and some even seem to have purposely avoided it (such as Augustine). The only complete surviving Christian symptotic dialogue was written by Methodius in the late third or early fourth century A.D., who tailored the genre to his own theological interests. He based the format on Plato but buttressed it with scriptural authority and subverted the genre by having a group of women rather than men meeting to talk about chastity rather than love. König shows well how the classical emphasis on convivial debate is replaced in the end by divinely-inspired authoritarian consensus. This is closely paralleled in the "last great symptotic miscellany of the classical world" (p. 201), Macrobius's *Saturnalia* (written around the 430s A.D. and surviving incomplete in 7 books), which is a celebration of Rome's pagan past, particularly through an appreciation of Virgil and Varro. As König shows, though Macrobius was indebted to Plutarch, Athenaeus, and Aulus Gellius, like Methodius he emphasized harmony and certainty over competition and indeterminacy in convivial dialogue.

The second part of the book, "Consumption and Transgression", features accounts of excessive, disruptive, and in general non-ideal dinner parties. König here goes beyond works strictly in the symptotic genre, which tend in any case to idealize the after-dinner conversation, to examine instead various prose narratives which satirize and mock it, or otherwise subvert it, often by undermining claims of high status and philosophical virtue through depictions of transgressive consumption. Thus Lucian, for one, presented the symposium (in such works as his *Symposium*) as an occasion for the display of hypocrisy, posturing, pretentiousness, pettiness, absurdity, and the trivial. König also looks at such diverse texts as Alciphron's epistolary fictions (particularly those involving parasites), the novels of Achilles Tatius, Petronius, and Apuleius (especially in terms of grotesque eating and drinking), and the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles and various hagiographical texts (which often mark the separateness and self-marginalizing of Christians through their anti-symptotic tradition of fasting and asceticism, just as pagans distinguished themselves from Christians through claims that Christians indulged in cannibalistic feasting).

Like many of the works he discusses, König's *Saints and symposiasts* is very rich and complex, and a short review cannot do it justice. The work is extremely well documented, very current in its scholarship, and quite carefully composed. An impressive range of primary sources and modern scholarship is marshaled and the topic is analyzed in great breadth and depth.⁴ Indeed, sometimes König includes excurses which, while fascinating, seem only tangentially relevant to the central topic of the literary symposium (such as on speaking to the dead, Eucharistic rites, or the use of dialogue in Christian works). There are few mistakes,⁵ none of which take away from the fact that overall this is a wonderful book which should be able to spark interest in a neglected genre of Roman literature as well as provide much food for thought for modern symposiasts.

Notes:

1. While König suggests that Plutarch revived the genre (p. 16), it may never really have died out. König mentions Dio the Academic from the first century B.C. as the last in the Greek tradition (p. 12) but also shows that works in the genre were written by Maecenas in the first century B.C. and Asconius Pedianus in the first century A.D. (p. 27). Even if he may not have revived the genre, Plutarch at least repopularized it, and he was imitated by Aulus Gellius and Macrobius, among others.
2. Josef Martin's *Symposion: die Geschichte einer literarischen Form* (Paderborn 1931).
3. Also, while Plutarch's *Symposium Questions* (in 9 books) recounts 95 conversations in diverse settings with various different characters (including Plutarch himself), Athenaeus's *Deipnosophists* (in 15 books) seemingly describes a single, fantastically extended gathering in Rome.
4. Other recent works of interest not mentioned by König include Dirk Schnurbusch's *Convivium: Form und Bedeutung aristokratischer Geselligkeit in der römischen Antik* (Stuttgart 2011) and Kathryn Topper's *The Imagery of the Athenian Symposium* (Cambridge 2012).
5. König notes that *QC* stands for *Quaestiones conviviales* (p. x) but does not explain *VS* (*Vitae Sophistarum*) (p. xi); the c in Tecusan (p. 6, n. 19, p. 11, n. 40, p. 14, n. 54, p. 383, and p. 392) should have a cedilla; a word (such as "work") is missing on p. 175 ("His [] has a tendency towards miscellanism"); note "the transgressiveness of *Leukippe and Kleitophon*[']s many feasting scenes" on p. 273; page numbers (25-38) are missing for Alan Cameron's 1966 article on p. 362; Libanius's name is missing from the title of Norman's translation on p. 383; and the date of Powell's book should be 2003 on p. 385 (as correctly cited on p. 234, n. 6).