

Caesar's triumphal banquet of 46 BC: a hypothesis on its political significance on the basis of a recent epigraphic discovery from Pompeii

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Caesar's triumphal banquet of 46 BC: a Hypothesis on its Political Significance on the Basis of a Recent Epigraphic Discovery from Pompeii

by Annalisa Marzano

The celebration of a military triumph in late-Republican Rome was a grand affair encompassing many different types of celebrations in addition to the traditional triumphal procession¹. One recurring element, probably originating from an earlier tradition to stage a meal for Roman adult male citizens in the precinct of Hercules at the Ara Maxima, was the large-scale banquet that a number of late-Republican generals offered to the Roman people². Caesar, on occasion of the celebration of his triumph in 46 BC offered a particularly grand banquet: 22,000 *triclinia* were prepared for the occasion, as reported by Plutarch³. This feast was probably staged in the Forum Boarium and in the other major public areas of the Campus Martius, such as the *villa publica* and the *porticus Minucia*⁴.

As pointed out by John D'Arms years ago, '*triclinia*' (in Plutarch's text, *τρικλίνοι*) means a set of three dining couches, which, assuming the standard number of nine diners, meant that Caesar staged a banquet for 198,000 people⁵. While several other late-Republican generals had offered banquets when celebrating a triumph or *ovatio*⁶, the scale of the entertainment offered by Caesar (and the complex logistical organization it must have required) was probably larger than other past events, even though in the case of L. Licinius Lucullus' triumph in 63 BC we are told that he 'gave a magnificent feast to the city, and to the surrounding villages called *Vici*'⁷.

* This article was written during a period of research leave funded by the Leverhulme Trust.

¹ On the triumph: Beard 2007, with previous bibliography.

² On the connection between the Ara Maxima, the triumph, and the banquet for the people, see Marzano 2009.

³ Plut. *Caes.* 55, 2; note that the Loeb edition incorrectly translates this as 20,000 couches. I am of course well aware that numbers as reported in the ancient texts are highly problematic, prone to have been rounded, exaggerated, and, in the case of textual transmission, prone to scribal error. However, since it is not possible to verify the figures handed down to us, and both the number of couches for this banquet and of the corn dole recipients I mention later, prior to and after Caesar's reform, are generally considered to at least represent the right order of magnitude, I consider it legitimate to take these figures as probable and to attempt their historical interpretation.

⁴ D'Arms 1998, p. 40.

⁵ D'Arms 1998, pp. 38-39: since D'Arms uses 22,000 *triclinia*, his suggested number of people feasting on this occasion is 198,000.

⁶ See Marzano 2009.

⁷ Transl. by B. Perrin, Loeb edn. Plut. *Luc.* 37, 4: ἐπὶ τούτοις τὴν τε πόλιν εἰσίσιασε

With this article I wish to return to the issue of the number of people Caesar feasted in 46 BC in the light of a recent epigraphic discovery from Pompeii; this text opens the serious possibility that the number of individuals accommodated on one *triclinium* set at public banquets, including Caesar's, might have been higher than the traditional nine.

During renovation works on the early-19th century building which houses the offices of Pompeii Archaeological Park in the area of the Stabian Gate, a monumental tomb was discovered, in part damaged and robbed on occasion of the construction of the modern 19th-century building. The lower part of this funerary monument had still in place a very interesting and long inscription. The text, recently published and commented on in the *Journal of Roman Archaeology*⁸, gives a list of benefactions that the unnamed prominent individual commemorated had offered to the inhabitants of Pompeii at various stages of his public career⁹. The euergetic acts listed in the text include gladiatorial games, distribution of bread, selling grain at a lower price than the market price on occasion of food shortages, and also a public banquet, to celebrate the assumption of his *toga virilis*. The lines about this specific benefaction are of relevance to my discussion:

Hic togae virilis suae epulum populo pompeiano triclinis CCCCLVI ita ut in triclinis quinidēni homines discumberent

On occasion of assuming the *toga virilis*, he offered to the Pompeian people a banquet on 456 three-sided couches so that upon each set of three couches 15 persons reclined.

The remarkable thing about this information is that the text does not only tell us about the number of *triclinia* that were set up for the celebration, but also how many people reclined on each set of three: not nine but fifteen individuals, giving a total number of participants in this Pompeian public banquet of 6,840¹⁰. Such a precise figure, which may have represented the adult male citizens of the town, has obvious important implications for the debate on the total size of the population of Pompeii. It can also be a guide, I suggest, to reconstruct the number of participants in Caesar's triumphal banquet.

λαμπρῶς καὶ τὰς περιουκίδας κόμας, ἅς οὐίκους καλοῦσι. Crassus feasted the people setting up 10,000 tables in the Forum Boarium following a sacrifice to Hercules during his consulship in 70 BC, possibly in an attempt to boost the memory of the *ovatio* he had celebrated in 71 BC: see Marzano 2009; Plut. *Crass.* 12, 2.

⁸ Osanna 2018; Bodet et al. 2019.

⁹ The name of the deceased with his *cursus honorum* must have been on another inscription placed on the upper part of the monument, which is lost. Perhaps, as suggested by Osanna (2018, pp. 320-322), it was Cn. Alleius Nigidius Maius, one of Pompeii's most prominent figures in the last decades prior to the eruption.

¹⁰ The scale of this celebration put up on occasion of the official entering into adulthood of this individual was truly on a grand scale; we can compare this event with the size of the *epulum* offered to the *decuriones* of Arelate (Arles) by C. Iunius Priscus, a candidate as *duumvir quinquennalis* and a *flamen*: only fourteen *triclinia* and thirty-four *biclinia*: CIL XII, 697; AE 1965, 270, dated to the 2nd century AD.

The two benefactions, Caesar's and the one in Pompeii, are separated by almost a hundred years. It is, in fact, thought that the tomb had been erected shortly before the eruption of AD 79. The surviving part of the monument shows little signs of wear and the reference in the inscription to games organized *ante / senatus consult(um)* ('before the decree of the senate'), is taken to refer to the *senatus consultum* prohibiting gladiatorial games in Pompeii for ten years after the famous fight in the amphitheatre between Pompeians and Nucerians in AD 59¹¹. If the identification of the individual commemorated by the Pompeian inscription is accepted, Osanna suggests that he would have assumed his *toga virilis* sometime between AD 30 and 40.

Despite the chronological hiatus between Caesar's banquet in 46 BC and the celebration of the assumption of the *toga virilis* held in Pompeii sometime between AD 30 and 40, we should entertain the hypothesis that in the case of benefactions in Rome a set of *triclinia* could also be used to accommodate more than nine people. If we suppose for a moment that in the case of Caesar's triumphal banquet fifteen people could have reclined on each set of three couches listed by Plutarch, we would have a total of 330,000 people. If, for the sake of the argument, we assume this number to be close to the number of people actually feasted by Caesar, some interesting connections with the impact of Caesar's wider socio-political reforms emerge. It may give an additional political dimension to the triumphal banquet of 46 BC and help explain why Caesar decided to stage a feast on such a grand scale¹².

As is known, 46 BC is also the year when Caesar passed his *lex frumentaria*.

According to the fragmentary information we have from the literary sources about the number of recipients on the *annona* list, Caesar intervened to reduce the number from 320,000 to 150,000. This was achieved by first having an accurate list made out of all the recipients and then by excluding from this privilege every person who could not prove he was a Roman citizen¹³. According to Plutarch, this exercise took place in 46 BC, *after* the celebration of the triumph, the banquet, and other entertainment that Caesar staged in commemoration of his daughter Julia. Plutarch writes:

μετὰ δὲ τοὺς θριάμβους στρατιώταις τε μεγάλας δωρεὰς ἐδίδου καὶ τὸν δῆμον ἀνελάμβανεν ἐστίασεν καὶ θεαῖς, ἐστίασας μὲν ἐν **δισμυρίοις καὶ δισχιλίοις τρικλίνιοις** ὁμοῦ σύμπαντας, θεὰς δὲ καὶ μονομάχων καὶ ναυμάχων ἀνδρῶν παρασχωὺν ἐπὶ τῇ θυγατρὶ Ιουλίᾳ πάλαι τεθνεώσῃ. Μετὰ δὲ τὰς θεὰς γενομένων τιμήσεων ἀντὶ τῶν προτέρων δυεῖν καὶ τριάκοντα μυριάδων ἐξητάσθησαν αἱ πᾶσαι πεντεκαίδεκα, *Caes.* 55, 2-3.

¹¹ Tac. *Ann.* 14, 17; Osanna 2018, pp. 317-318.

¹² A vast bibliography exists on Caesar, his life, and his military and political achievements. The classical treatment is Gelzer 1968; see also Yavetz 1983, Canfora 1999 (published in English in 2007), and Griffin 2009. For a synthetic treatment of Caesar's life, Kamm 2006.

¹³ See Virlouvet 1995, pp. 166-185 for discussion of Caesar's reform and analysis of the ancient sources; domicile in Rome seems to have been an important criterion taken in the revision of this list. More briefly, Yavetz 1983, pp. 156-158.

After the triumphs, Caesar gave his soldiers large gifts and entertained the people with banquets and spectacles, feasting them all at one time on twenty-two thousand dining-couches, and furnishing spectacles of gladiatorial and naval combats in honour of his daughter Julia, long since dead. After the spectacles, a census of the people was taken, and instead of the three hundred and twenty thousand of the preceding lists there were enrolled only one hundred and fifty thousand (Transl. B. Perrin, Loeb edn, with my correction of the twenty thousand given in the translation into twenty-two thousand, see emphasis in the Greek text).

Here Plutarch mistakes the counting and checking of the citizenship credentials of the recipients of the corn dole with a population census; that it was the former and not the latter is, however, specified by Suetonius¹⁴.

It seems relevant to me that the number of individuals who were on the *annona* lists before Caesar's reforms is said to have been 320,000, and that the number of people feasted on occasion of Caesar's triumph in 46 BC would have been 330,000 if we accept, following the example of the Pompeian inscription, that fifteen people reclined on each set of three couches. What I would like to suggest is that the participants to Caesar's massive *epulum* were actually, by and large, the same people forming the *plebs frumentaria*. The other 10,000 people would have been officers from his army, people close to Caesar's entourage, and other individuals, such as senators and equestrians, who were not on the *annona* list¹⁵. If we accept this hypothesis, one could speculate that the reason for staging such a large banquet was to soften the blow that was about to come with the reduction of recipients on the list.

Gelzer, in his seminal work on Caesar, had already accepted that the distribution of money and foodstuff on occasion of the triumph of 46 reported in the sources was addressed to the 320,000 citizens receiving the corn dole¹⁶. Combining the information given by Suetonius and Cassius Dio, we see that Caesar's largess to the people had consisted of 400 sesterces per person, plus ten pecks of grain and ten pounds of olive oil. If this was not enough to show his generosity, Caesar had also remitted one year's rent for a number of people in Rome and in the whole of Italy¹⁷. Accepting that c.330,000 people were

¹⁴ Suet. *Iul.* 41, 5.

¹⁵ It ought to be remembered that the *annona* recipients were not the poor; the measure was never a poor relief scheme.

¹⁶ Gelzer 1968, p. 285.

¹⁷ Suet. *Iul.* 38, 1-2: *Populo praeter frumenti denos modios ac totidem olei libras trecentos quoque nummos, quos pollicitus olim erat, viritum divisit et hoc amplius centenos pro mora* («To every man of the people, besides ten pecks of grain and the same number of pounds of oil, he distributed the three hundred sesterces which he had promised at first, and one hundred apiece to boot because of the delay», transl. J.C. Rolfe, Loeb edn). Suetonius then continues giving the detail about the rent remittance. Dio Cass. 43, 21, 3: Οὕτω μὲν δὴ τὰ ἐπινίκια ἔπεμψε, καὶ ἐπ' αὐτοῖς τὸν τε δῆμον λαμπρῶς εἰστίασε καὶ σῖτον ἔξω τοῦ τεταγμένου καὶ ἔλαιον προσέδωκεν αὐτῷ. καὶ τῷ μὲν σιτοδοτουμένῳ ὄχλῳ τὰς τε ἐβδομήκοντα καὶ πέντε δραχμὰς ἅς προὔπeschητο καὶ ἑτέρας πέντε καὶ εἴκοσι, τοῖς δὲ δὴ στρατιώταις πεντακισχίλιας ὅλας ἐνεῖμεν («After the triumph he entertained the populace splendidly, giving them grain beyond the regular amount and olive oil. Also to the multitude which

treated to a formal banquet would add to these distributions an additional benefaction to the benefit of the recipients of the corn dole in particular, of which a bit less than half were about to lose their right to the grain distribution. Considerations about the logistical difficulties of organizing this kind of entertainment for about 330,000 individuals at once should not put us off: it is perfectly possible that these people were feasted over several days and that the 22,000 set of three couches was the total number of couches set up over the course of the celebration. Indeed Velleius Paterculus, when reporting on the entertainment staged by Caesar to mark his quadruple triumph in 46 BC, refers to the 'celebration of a public banquet which was continued through several days'¹⁸.

A possible connection between the corn dole reform and the two banquets that Caesar had offered to the people one year after the event I am discussing has already been suggested by D'Arms¹⁹. In 45 BC, after the Spanish triumph, Caesar gave two banquets (*prandia* is the term used by Suetonius), first a relatively modest one, followed, five days later, by a second one, because Caesar thought that the first event had not adequately conveyed his *liberalitas*.²⁰ The Falernian and Chian wines that Pliny says were served by Caesar on occasion of his Spanish victory probably refer to the second of these two *prandia*: these were both high-quality wines and would have been suitable choices to impress an audience²¹. As has been argued, these *prandia* were addressed to the Roman people and were probably staged in Caesar's *Horti trans Tiberim*, showing how the *Horti* could be put to political use²². D'Arms observed that:

[O]ne year after the *lex Julia frumentaria* of 46, which had reduced the number of those eligible ...by more than half... Caesar may have seen special point in gathering the entire *plebs Romana* as he had reduced and redefined them, at his own property and on his own terms²³.

Maintaining popularity among the masses was crucial for Caesar in those years. Since offering a banquet to the people on occasion of a triumph had become an established tradition in 1st-century Rome as a means to win popularity, it makes sense to see the celebrations of 46 BC as the opportunity to do something for those who were about to be removed for the corn dole list to counterbalance the unpopular reception the provision would have encoun-

received doles of corn he assigned the three hundred sesterces which he had already promised and a hundred more, but to the soldiers twenty thousand in one sum», transl. E. Cary, Loeb edn).

¹⁸ Vell. 2, 56, 1: *epulique per multos dies dati celebratione replevit eam*.

¹⁹ D'Arms 1998.

²⁰ Suet. *Iul.* 38, 2.

²¹ Plin. *nat.* 14, 97.

²² On the basis of Valerius Maximus 9, 15, 1, who writes that after the victory in Spain Caesar "*populum in horti suis admisisset*", and also of the fragment of the consular *fasti* from Cupra Marittima published by Gentili in 1948. These are the same *Horti* that Caesar left to the people in his will.

²³ D'Arms 1998, pp. 41-42.

tered on the part of those struck off. I am not suggesting that the triumphal feast, however grand it might have been, would have necessarily calmed those affected by the *Lex Julia frumentaria*, but it certainly would have been a way to indicate that they were not excluded from Caesar's own *liberalitas*, even though the Roman *state* would no longer distribute free grain to them. The detail about how the places on the list were to be filled when one died, by lot, was certainly a way to further separate the person of Caesar from the administration of this privilege: fate would decide, not the dictator or a committee / magistrate influenced by him²⁴. Thus, the feast of 46 BC can be understood as the opportunity to maintain a degree of group cohesion and give every participant a sense of belonging in light of the separation that the revision of the *annona* list was necessarily about to create.

The feast provided during this celebration must have truly been a considerable treat for many people and further put Caesar in a very different category compared with what other prominent Romans at this time could have aspired to do in terms of courting the masses. In 46 BC Caesar, as 'Prefect of Morals' with censorial powers, had passed several sumptuary measures²⁵. As noted by Cassius Dio, Caesar passed many 'stern measures' to curb the extravagant expenditure of the wealthy²⁶. These included measures regulating the sale of foods in the market, apparently banning certain delicacies. We do not have full details on what exactly Caesar's measures entailed, whether it was a re-proposal of the earlier *Lex Aemilia*, which banned from banquets molluscs, dormice, and exotic birds²⁷, or whether it contained different rules. Suetonius' account gets almost farcical when he writes that, besides having inspectors stationed in the *macellum* 'to seize all eatables forbidden by the law', sometimes lictors and soldiers were sent 'to banquets to take away everything which was not allowed by the law'²⁸. It is thought that Cicero refers to this sumptuary law in two of his epistles²⁹. From one of these letters it is clear that gourmand food must have been the target and that vegetables were exempt. It has been argued on good grounds that Caesar's sumptuary legislation was a reaction on the part of the *populares* to Sulla's acceptance of luxuries having become a value of the Roman *nobilitas*³⁰. Calls for more severe sumptuary laws

²⁴ Suet. *Iul.* 41, 5; Viriouvét 1995, p. 185.

²⁵ Cfr. Cic. *fam.* 9, 15, 5 = 196. On sumptuary laws during the Republic, see, among others, Clemente 1981; Gabba 1981; Baltrusch 1989; Bottiglieri 2002; Zecchini 2016.

²⁶ Dio 43, 25: (...) καὶ τὰ ἀναλώματα τῶν τι ἔχόντων ἐπὶ πλείστον ὑπ' ἀσωτίας ἐξηγμένα οὐκ ἐν νόμῳ μόνον ἐμετρίασεν, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῷ ἔργῳ ἰσχυρῶς ἐν φυλακῇ ἐποιήσατο. «The expenditures, moreover, of men of means, which had grown to an enormous extent by reason of their prodigality, he not only regulated by law but also practically checked by stern measures» (Transl. E. Cary, Loeb edn).

²⁷ Plin. *nat.* 8, 57, 223, attributing the law to 115 BC; Gellius dates it to 78 BC. See also André 1961, p. 109.

²⁸ Suet. *Iul.* 43.

²⁹ Cic. *fam.* 7, 26 and 9, 15. Cicero's letters also suggest that when Caesar was not in Rome this sumptuary law had not been observed: Cicero, *Att.* 13, 7.

³⁰ Zecchini 2016, 17-18 (the references are to the paragraphs in the online version of the article).

in that period had come from as diverse actors as Cicero and Sallust. But, as had happened in the case of Sulla and his sumptuary legislation³¹, in the Late Republic the proposers of such laws considered themselves exempt and used this to their political advantage.

Caesar's triumphal feast probably featured a wide range of foods of different quality, including, at least for some of the higher-ranking guests, delicacies such as the 6,000 eels provided by A. Hirrius and the highly appreciated Falernian and Chian wines³². It is therefore very hard to consider the sumptuary law promulgated in the same year as completely separated from the banquets Caesar offered in 46 and in 45. On these occasions, he provided a range of delicacies, foods whose sale was now prohibited on the market;³³ Caesar showed off his power and emerged as the only one who could provide these foods on a large scale³⁴. The social value of his benefaction was greatly enhanced. There might have also been more practical considerations surrounding his sumptuary law in the light of the logistics behind providing a banquet for over 300,000 people: possibly curbing the commercial market for certain types of food was also connected, besides the moral purposes, to procuring supplies for the triumphal banquet.

Regardless of how much one wants to push the connection between the legislative measures passed by Caesar in 46 and the public entertainments he offered, the political value of Caesar's banquets is very clear. Distributions of food and other gifts were part of late-Republican electioneering, as can be appreciated, among other things, from the archaeological evidence offered by the terracotta bowls with the names of candidates for elections scratched on them: these were handed out to the people with food inside and after eating the recipient would see the electoral message and have a 'souvenir' to bring home.³⁵ Rome's politicians, including Caesar, were well aware of the advantage a candidate may gain in election when able to offer banquets to a large

³¹ Zecchini 2016, 11-14.

³² Plin. *nat.* 9, 171: 6,000 *murenae* for the 46 BC triumphal banquet; cfr. also Varro *RR.* 3, 17, 3. On the Latin *murena* referring to any eel-like fish (moray eel, conger, eel, lamprey): Higginbotham 1997, pp. 43-44. For the wines, see *nat.* 14, 97: *Non et Caesar dictator triumphi sui cena vini Falerni amphoras, Chii cados in convivio distribuit?* («Did not Caesar also, when dictator, at the banquet in celebration of his triumph apportion to each table a flagon of Falernian and a jar of Chian?», Transl. H. Rackham, Loeb edn). The same two wines were also served for the banquet he offered after the Spanish triumph in 45 BC, probably the second of the two *prandia* mentioned above.

³³ Note that the other banquet to which Pliny refers in this same passage, offered by Caesar during his third consulship and when, for the first time, four different types of wine were served, also took place in 46 BC (*nat.* 14, 97: *Epulo vero in tertio consulatu suo Falernum, Chium, Lesbium, Mamertinum...*).

³⁴ On a similar link in the case of imperial sumptuary laws on the sale of food and control of public banquets/distribution of food, see Marzano 2019.

³⁵ See the two bowls on display at the Museo Nazionale Romano in Rome bearing, scratched in their interior, electoral messages in support of Cato and Catilina, CIL VI, 40897 and CIL VI, 40904 (*M. Cato quei petit tribun(at)u(m) plebei* = Marcus Cato who is running for tribune of the people).

sector of the population and consequently tried to either use this or control it³⁶.

Explicit recognition of the 'unfair' political advantage public banquets could offer comes from one of Caesar's last act, the *lex Ursoniensis*. The charter of this Spanish *colonia* clearly spells out, in section 132, that:

No person in the colony Genetiva, being a candidate or standing for election to any magistracy within the colony Genetiva Julia, after the issuance of this law, in order to seek such magistracy, or during the year in which he is a candidate, or stands for or intends to stand for such magistracy with malice aforethought shall provide entertainments, or invite any person to dinner, or hold or provide a banquet, or with malice aforethought cause another person to hold a banquet or invite any person to dinner with a view to his candidature, but, nevertheless, the said candidate himself, who is seeking a magistracy, may invite, if he so desires, without malicious intent, during the said year daily any persons not exceeding nine (Transl. Johnson, Coleman-Norton, and Bourne 1961).

Note the number nine as the maximum number of daily diners allowed: this is the normal 'occupancy' of a regular dining room. This law confines the banqueting of candidates and anyone seeking public office to small-scale diners in the private sphere of the house.

Once Caesar had become Dictator, public feasting was not so much a possible tool of electoral propaganda, but a means to winning popular support (together with other measures such as the building projects), while curtailing what other members of the elite could do. Cicero stresses this point in the *Philippics*, writing that Caesar 'had conciliated the ignorant multitude by shows, monuments, largesses of food, and banquets'³⁷.

The possibility, suggested by the recent epigraphic discovery in Pompeii, that about 330,000 people were treated to a feast during the triumphal celebrations of 46 BC should make us seriously consider that it was the favour of the *plebs frumentaria* in particular that he was seeking by laying out 22,000 sets of three dining couches, right before passing the reform that reduced the recipients of the corn dole from c.320,000 to 150,000.

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³⁶ Gruen 1974 remains a classic work about the complex socio-political situation in the late Republic.

³⁷ Cic. *Phil.* 2, 116: *Muneribus, monumentis, congiariis, epulis multitudinem imperitam delenierat.*

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Abstract

This article focuses on the issue of the number of people Caesar feasted, in the triumphal banquet dating from 46 BC, in the light of a recent epigraphic discovery from Pompeii; this text opens the serious possibility that the number of individuals accommodated on one *triclinium* set at public banquets, including Caesar's, might have been higher than the traditional nine.

Keywords: Caesar - triumphal banquet - *triclinium* - Pompeii - Epigraphy - civil wars - *lex frumentaria*.

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