

# Directing the faithful, structuring the sacred space: funerary epigraphy in its archaeological context in late-antique Tipasa

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In 1972, an inscribed *mensa* mosaic was found in a late 4th-c. burial ground ('Matarès necropolis') outside the Algerian town of Tipasa.\* The text mentions the *convivium*, a meal celebrated here in *pax et concordia* (see no. 49 in the Appendix, where all the inscriptions are listed; fig. 1 in colour on p. 483).<sup>1</sup> What makes this inscription so valuable is the fact that its archaeological context was still intact. A water basin southwest of the *mensa* and a channel linking both structures were quickly interpreted by scholars as proof of the well-attested *refrigerium*,<sup>2</sup> a commemorative meal that was practiced periodically at tombs.<sup>3</sup> The inscription from Tipasa is the only example which names this rite *in situ*, and the vivid marine mosaic — especially when flooded or 'refreshed' — supports the notion of a rich meal in an allusive manner. A similar example from the same cemetery (no. 51) shows the direct integration of an epitaph into such rites.<sup>4</sup> There is no doubt that these installations reflect the rite of dining *with* the dead.

Such evidence of interdependency between an inscription's content, iconography and context in social practices is very rare. Here I wish to demonstrate the potential of contextual

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\* Frequently cited abbreviations:

Leschi, *Etudes* = L. Leschi, *Etudes d'épigraphie, d'archéologie et d'histoire africaines* (Paris 1957).

Alexander, *Tomb mosaics* = M. Alexander, *Early Christian tomb mosaics of North Africa* (Ph.D. diss., New York 1958).

Albertini & Leschi, "Sainte-Salsa" = E. Albertini and L. Leschi, "Le cimetière de Sainte-Salsa, à Tipasa," *CRAI* 1932, 77-88.

Gsell, *Recherches* = S. Gsell, *Recherches archéologiques en Algérie* (Paris 1893).

Y. Duval, *Loca sanctorum = Loca sanctorum Africae. Le culte des martyrs en Afrique du IVe au VIIe siècle* (ColLEFR 58, 1982).

1 M. Bouchenaki, *Fouilles de la nécropole occidentale de Tipasa (Matarès)* (Algiers 1975) 16-17; S. Lancel, "Modalités de l'inhumation privilégiée dans la nécropole de Sainte-Salsa à Tipasa," *CRAI* 1997, 803; P.-A. Février, "Kult und Geselligkeit: Überlegungen zum Totenmahl," in J. Martin and B. Quint (edd.), *Christentum und antike Gesellschaft* (Darmstadt 1990) 358-59; R. M. Jensen, "Dining with the dead. From the mensa to the altar in Christian late antiquity," in L. Brink, O. P. Green and D. Green (edd.), *Commemorating the dead. Texts and artifacts in context* (Berlin 2008) 128. On *pax* as acclamation, see A. Stuibler, *Refrigerium interim. Die Vorstellungen von Zwischenzustand und die frühchristliche Grabeskunst* (Berlin 1957) 117. For overviews on funerary dining *mensae*, see U. Volp, *Tod und Ritual in den christlichen Gemeinden der Antike* (Leuven 2002) 214-24; Jensen *ibid.*

2 H.-I. Marrou, "Une inscription chrétienne de Tipasa et le refrigerium," *AntAfr* 14 (1979) 261-69; Février (supra n.1) 358-59; Lancel (supra n.1) 803; E. Rebillard, *The care of the dead in late antiquity* (Ithaca, NY 2009) 144. There are many Early Christian scenes of liquids being poured on tombs and of meals that reflect the *refrigerium* rite; Février *ibid.*; M. Carroll, *Spirits of the dead: Roman funerary commemoration in Western Europe* (Oxford 2006) 263.

3 Tertullian (*De corona* 3.3) mentions *oblaciones pro defunctis*. Augustine (*Conf.* 6.2; *Ep.* 22.1.3; *Serm.* 48 and 361) cites the offering of wine and bread on tombs and repeatedly criticized such *convivia*; for more evidence from N African epitaphs, see *CIL VIII* 20277 (A.D. 299).

4 Bouchenaki (supra n.1) 110-11, figs. 214-15. On this occasion an epitaph was inserted into a *mensa*, the tomb of a certain Galosus. Again, the depression could be flooded, as is shown by a channel and a pouring spout in the border of the inscribed slab.