Totenmahl reliefs in the northern provinces: a case-study in imperial sculpture

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Despite the wealth of documentation that exists for Roman provincial art, including various national and international corpora and countless regional or local studies, important aspects of the subject have remained until recently in a state of comparative neglect. Such is particularly the case with sculpture. Much of the existing work on provincial sculpture has tended to focus on individual provinces and regions without much regarding Roman art as an empire-wide phenomenon. The sculpture of Roman Britain, for instance, is unusually well published, yet comparison with related material on the Continent, especially in France and Germany, is relatively undeveloped. Paradoxically, even progressive, theoretical studies of Roman-British art adopting a broadly “post-colonialist” approach risk falling into their own kind of parochialism as they shift the orientation away from Rome and the Roman elite to the para-historical culture of the provincials themselves; at the same time, questions about the production and usage of provincial art are too easily left outside their theoretical frame.

This case study is an attempt both to highlight and, in a small way, to rectify, that situation. It is an examination of one kind of provincial sculpture, the Totenmahl (“funerary banquet”) relief, that was used by particular groups of people right across the empire. It has been chosen for its potential to raise specific questions about provincial sculpture that rely on a broad perspective, yet without resorting to problematic concepts such as ‘Romanization’ and ‘cultural identity’, which tend to inform the old and more recent scholarship, respectively. The focus is on Roman Britain but the intention is to show what can and should be attempted by looking across provincial boundaries, in this case between Britain and Germany. The reliefs allow us to appreciate how and why sculpture was made, its materiality and the processes of its manufacture — which should in turn have implications for a wider comprehension of art in the Roman empire.

Totenmahl reliefs

Totenmahl (‘feast of the dead’) is the conventional, if not necessarily explanatory, term applied to ‘funerary banquet’ scenes in sculpture, and sometimes in other media. Totenmahl scenes are varied but contain certain regular, formulaic elements. Typically, a man or woman (probably nearly always to be identified as the deceased) reclines on a linte (couch). A three-legged table in front of it bears food and wine vessels (the emphasis is more often on drinking).