

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.¹ 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.² 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 Romano-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 élite to the para-historical culture of the provincials themselves;³ 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.⁴ *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 *kline* (couch). A three-legged table in front of it bears food and wine vessels (the emphasis is more often on drinking).

1 Cf. M. Henig, *The art of Roman Britain* (London 1995) 10–11. For fresh inquiry note, e.g., the stimulating range of studies in S. Scott and J. Webster (edd.), *Roman imperialism and provincial art* (Cambridge 2003) or the recent proceedings of the 7th international colloquium on problems of Roman provincial art: P. Noelke (ed.), *Romanisation und Resistenz in Plastik, Architektur und Inschriften der Provinzen des Imperium Romanum* (Mainz am Rhein 2003).

2 On the problem, cf. P. Noelke’s foreword in *Romanisation* (supra n.1) ix. Note as an exception M. Matter: “Die Reliefverzierten römischen Grabstelen der Provinz Britannia: Themen und Typen”, *KölnJb* 22 (1989) 707–801 (e.g., comments at 709–11).

3 For these authors’ reaction against Romano-centrism and the model of ‘Romanization’, see e.g., M. Aldhouse-Green, *An archaeology of images: iconology and cosmology in Iron Age and Roman Europe* (London 2004) especially 215–41; Scott and Webster (supra n.1). Note also comments by D. J. Mattingly in id. (ed.), *Dialogues in Roman imperialism* (JRA Suppl. 23, 1997) especially 9–11. Cf. R. Hingley, *Globalizing Roman culture* (London 2005) especially 14–48, a critique of Romanization; and G. Woolf, *Becoming Roman: the origins of provincial civilization in Gaul* (Cambridge 1998) especially 1–23. Note the attempts of Hingley, as a revisionist, to address the risk of parochialism; specifically on the problem of atomizing the empire, cf. id., “Recreating coherence without reinventing Romanization,” in *Digressus* 3 (2003): <www.digressus.org/articles/romanizationpp111-119-hingley.pdf>.

4 For a general introduction see K. M. D. Dunbabin, *The Roman banquet: images of conviviality* (Cambridge 2003) especially 103–10.