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**Women at the table: banquets in Roman Spain.**

In this paper, I will examine Spanish inscriptions which record the holding of banquets. Banquets were held under a variety of circumstances in Spain but most often accompanied the erection of a statue or the dedication of a public work. The number of Spanish banquets commemorated in inscriptions is remarkable because women financed about half of these banquets. In contrast, women sponsored about 10% of Italian epula and the number is only slightly higher in Africa Proconsularis (13 out of 81).

It may be that so many women sponsored dinners because it was a modest form of euergetism, within their means. This explanation, however, does not account for the prevalence of women in Spanish inscriptions who financed banquets. This anomaly has been explained as a consequence of high social position, which Spanish women are said to have enjoyed. Regardless of the exact nature of banquets, one can certainly imagine its effectiveness in displaying the wealth and status of the person or family sponsoring it. Its potency is probably the reason why the Lex Ursonensis (chapter 132) specifically prohibits the financing of banquets by those aspiring to a magistrature in the year prior to the candidature and during the year of the candidature itself. This regulation could partially account for the prevalence of women sponsoring them. An examination of the inscriptions shows that the majority of the women came from a presumably wealthy, decurionate family. It was likely, therefore, that their male relatives might be hoping to obtain a magistrature, and benefit from the exposure of a public dinner. The candidates could not hold an epulum but their women kin were not legally restricted. We cannot know whether a similar municipal law was in force in North Africa, where still more epula have been documented. An examination of the context of the inscriptions, however, may provide an answer. Of the 13 African women who sponsored banquets, only 3 acted independently. Of 23 Spanish female benefactors, almost all sponsored the epulum alone. It seems likely, therefore, that women in Africa Proconsularis did not have the social status necessary to perform benefactions, unless they were priestesses. Moreover, the dinners in any case served different purposes. In Africa, most of the men were magistrates while in Spain only three men were magistrates at the time of the benefaction.

It seems reasonable to conclude that the prevalence of Spanish women sponsoring epula was due to a unique combination of circumstances: one, the political and social importance of banquets in Baetica; two, the social prominence of women in Hispania; and three, a municipal law prohibiting political candidates from sponsoring epula.