Banquets in Ancient Egypt

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Abstract: The elite of the ancient Egyptian society celebrated private affairs by throwing banquets. Besides private affairs, banquets were also held to celebrate national and religious occasions. The most significant source to understand these banquets are the scenes painted on the walls of the private tombs at Thebes belonging to the New Kingdom. Besides these depictions, there are references in a few literary texts of the period regarding the conduct of the banquets. A few depictions of banquets of note include those at Nakht TT 52, Neb amun TT 17 and the Userhat TT 65. Through these depictions, we get a fair idea of the lifestyles, drapery, ornaments and objects of daily use amongst the elites during the New Kingdom in Egypt.

Keywords: Banquets, Musical Groups, Blind Harpist, Tempera, Tombs, Resurrection, New Kingdom

Introduction

The elite of the ancient Egyptian society celebrated private affairs, national and religious occasions by throwing banquets. Information regarding the nature and significance of these banquets are limited. The most significant source to understand these activities are the scenes painted on the walls of the private tombs at Thebes datable to the New Kingdom. In addition to these, literary texts of the period also provide useful clues regarding the nature of the banquets and the expected mode of conduct between the host and his guests (Gardiner 1931: 8-26).

Linguistically, there is no word in ancient Egyptian language expressing the term ‘banquet’ or ‘to attend banquet’. The closest word for banquet in ancient Egyptian language is ‘hby’ which means to celebrate. Similarly, the term ‘irhwntfr’ used in ancient Egyptian language roughly translates as ‘to have a vacation’, which was probably also used to express a banquet.

There was a strong link between both the banquets and offering tables. The latter were provided to the dead through the burial operations and accompanied with magical spells in order to be renewed during celebrations. The banquet scenes were linked with other religious scenes with the sim priests providing offerings for instance at the
opening of the mouth ritual, during which banquets were thrown by family of the deceased (Hartwig 2004: 98).

Since the Pre-Dynastic period, the theme of showing the deceased seated in front of the offering table was common, with various ritual texts referring to different types of offerings being made (Englund 2001: 566). In art this theme was depicted independently in the form of banquet scenes.

**Nature of Ancient Egyptian Banquet Scene**

The banquet usually began at the middle of the day. The guests were received at the main entrance of the host’s house and are shown wearing expensive clothing and sporting stylish hair styles and accessories. The banquets were restricted to the relatives and close friends of the host, and were thrown in the hope that the host would be able to meet the deceased relative in the next world.

During the Pre-Dynastic period couples were always depicted together seated on chairs or stools. During the New Kingdom men and women were seated separately, probably in separate rooms (Manniche 1988).

The position of the seated guests reflected their status. The more distinguished guests were seated close to the hosts and the less important guests were seated a little away. The nature of chairs used also reflected the status of the deceased. The embellished chairs were meant for the members of the family and invited guests of high status while guests of slightly lesser importance were seated on stools. Slightly further away from the host sat guests of very less importance on mats or on the ground (Ikram 2001: 164).

**History of Banquet Scenes in Ancient Egypt**

One of the oldest banquets scenes depicted is found at the tomb of kahif “kAHif” at the eastern necropolis at Giza plateau (no. G2136) belonging to the sixth dynasty. Over time the depictions of banquet scenes became more elaborate, during the Middle kingdom, the banquet scenes show more members of the family, while the depictions belonging to the New kingdom show all members of the family and friends (Ikram 201:162). The depictions of banquet scenes reached its peak during the 18th dynasty and the depictions of these scenes reduced drastically during the later periods (Ikram 2001:163).

**Examples of Banquet Scenes**

A few significant banquet scenes belonging to the New Kingdom are discussed below:

**Tomb of Nakht TT52** (Scribe and Astronomer of Amun, Age of Thutmose IV)

The banquet scene (figure 1) is depicted on the southern side of the western wall of the vestibule hall. Although certain parts of the wall are damaged, the scenes depicted on the wall include rich artistic details making it unique in the art history of ancient
Egypt. A closer examination of the painted scene reveals several novel features. Under the chair of the host, is shown a cat painted in detail eating a fish. The aforesaid symbolic representation refers to the notion of resurrection. In front of the Nacht, there are four registers including the guests. The lower register reveals female guests fronted by a musical group (figure 2) consisting of females playing the harp, oboe and lute, one of them fully naked. Davies (1917:58-59) is of the opinion that it probably was either a mistake on the part of the artist during depiction and that she may have not been fully naked or that it was common to be in this form in front a family she knew closely. Another register includes three gentlemen seated on chairs, surmounted by another one which includes three female guests seated on the ground and fronted by the ‘Blind Harpist’. Some scholars however argue that he was not blind but had his eyes closed in order to focus on the song he was singing (Weeks 2005: 438).

**Figure 1: Banquet scene of Nakht Tomb**

**Tomb of Nebamun TT17** (Scribe and Physician of the King, Age of Amenophis II)

The banquet scene (figure 3) was located on the southern side of the western wall of the vestibule hall. It was later quarried from its original context, cut into three pieces and moved to the British Museum by an amateur Greek painter Giovanni D’ Athanasi (Parkinson 2008: 71). One of the most significant aspects of this banquet scene is the depiction of musical instrument players (figure 4), the treatment of whom are quite rare in ancient Egyptian art. The two nude female dancers and the group of female musicians are depicted in a façade form. The dancers in front of them are shown with soft bodies waving to the music (Spencer 2003: 113). Besides the aforesaid depiction,
Figure 2: Details of the Female Musicians, Nakht Tomb

Figure 3: Banquet Scene of Neb Amun Tomb, British Museum
food plates, drink jars and other items of cutlery along with the accessories of the females are depicted in detail and in bright colours. The last two registers contain three couples served by maids, then two groups of male and female guests, the former served by male servants while the latter served by maids.

**Figure 4: Details of the Female Musicians, Neb Amun Tomb**

**Tomb of Userhat TT 65** (Royal Scribe and Child of Nursery, Age of Amenophis II)
The banquet scene (figure 5) is located on the southern side of the western wall of the vestibule hall. Most archaeologists and scholars believe that the banquet scene depicted here was created by three artists working in unison (Weeks 2005: 421). The panel depicts Usherat with his wife seated on chairs, with a monkey depicted under her chair holding a mirror referring to resurrection. In front of the seated couple are their two daughters and a son presenting him offerings with the offering table depicted with bright colours (Beinlinch-Seeber and Shedid 1987: 53). Behind the son are three registers depicting various individuals. The upper register has female guests seated on chairs with a monkey underneath the chair similar to the one depicted under the seat of the host. There are also female guests shown seated on the ground with the ‘Blind Harpist’ and a female musical group. The two lower registers depict a couple seated on chairs and attended to male servants. Above the seated couple is a group of women seated on the ground and served by maids. In front of them are a row of male servants holding various goods and walking in a symmetrical way.

The artist here has brilliantly depicted minute details with bright colours for the food jars and actions of the characters especially the monkeys.
Conclusion

The banquets in ancient Egypt were governed by certain customs and traditions. In their depictions on the walls of the tombs, the host of the banquet was always depicted larger than the guests. The banquet scenes were usually depicted on the southern side of the western wall of the vestibule hall. They were done by the tempera style of painting consisting of coloured pigments mixed with water and a soluble binder medium (usually a glutinous material such as egg yolk). The banquets usually included musical groups of male or female musicians and dancers. Besides music, wine was an essential item in ancient Egyptian banquets, represented in the painted scenes through decorated jars besides the huge quantities of food. The banquet scenes included domestic animals such as cats, dogs, birds and monkeys symbolically representing notions of resurrection and rebirth in the other world through their actions or expressions (Bryan 2009: 21).

References


