

Dining and Reclining: a Greco-Roman Feast

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OVERVIEW

A Greco-Roman feast can be a great deal of fun and a wonderful cross-curricular, interdisciplinary project. It can also be a lot of trouble! The most difficult aspect of an ancient feast is doing the preliminary planning and obtaining supplies. Included here are suggestions, ideas, and a template for a feast for 30–60 participants in middle and high school. This Greco-Roman feast is an annual tradition at The Archer School for Girls, where the Latin, history, and archaeology teachers collaborate with English and theater teachers to host the event. The feast can be scaled down or be made monocultural (either Greek or Roman) for convenience. Archer calls its feast “Greco-Roman” and features Greek as well as Latin food, dress options, and Jeopardy-style game themes, but the featured language is Latin (aside from a reading in Greek as well as Latin from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*), because the students study Latin. Before the feast begins, students check in, receive help draping their garments, don a wreath, visit booths and recline in a Roman *triclinium* (three-bed dining room for nine reclining diners).

The feast is held in April as a reward for making it through the winter.

GRADE LEVELS

As described, the feast applies mostly to the 7th or 8th through 12th grades. Upper-level students can help organize the event, taking on responsibility for performance and authenticity. When the focus is on Middle School students, the feast requires more adult participation and greater oversight.

GOALS

The goals of the feast are to give students some hands-on fun and put them in the shoes (on the dining couches) of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Students’ knowledge of the



Buffet table decoration: the emperor Augustus wearing a wreath and a hieroglyphic scarf

ancient world, learned throughout the year in History, English, and other classes, is tested through quizzes, games, and performances. Ideally, a feast will be as authentic as possible while still allowing flexibility and fun.

By preparing for and participating in the feast, students will know

- the nature of the material and written evidence for: ancient clothing, ancient food, cooking and dining, dining rooms, party behavior, and gender distinctions during dining.
- the basis for modern ideas about widespread Roman gluttony, *vomitoria*, and unusual menu items (such as dormice and *liquamen*).

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- informal and formal Greek and Roman clothing styles, and basic information about ancient make-up and hairstyles.
- the appearance and function of Greek and Roman dining couches and dining rooms.
- basics of ancient cooking and the differences between ancient and modern Mediterranean cuisine.
- ancient party behavior, good and bad, for guests and hosts.
- ancient beliefs about divination (Fortune-telling booth, if used).
- archaeological, mythological, theatrical, and literary information about the ancient world (specific focus chosen by teachers).

After preparing for and participating in the feast, students will be able to

- drape and pin an ancient garment (*peplos*, *chiton*, *tunica*, *stola*, *palla*, *toga*—teachers' choice).
- recline properly on Roman 3-person dining couches.
- act like a low- or high-status Greek or Roman guest.
- be a good Greek or Roman host.
- recognize ancient Greek and Latin when read aloud, and understand how at least one Latin poetic meter sounds when read aloud.
- call out appropriate expressions of approval in Latin during performances.

MATERIALS AND PREPARATION

Curriculum

The feast is meant to be a culminating event, featuring topics that would have been taught anyway, rather than an extra burden on the teacher.

During the months preceding the feast, students in English classes at Archer read first the *Odyssey* and then a classical Greek play, and they discuss the ancient context of Greek and Roman mythological plays and other performances. They also study a variety of mythological stories from many cultures, not just Greek and Roman. During the feast, as the diners work their way through various courses, students perform excerpts of ancient plays or present their own monologues, dialogues, and plays based on myths, including modern versions of ancient stories. Teachers can assign these earlier in the year.

In Latin, archaeology, or ancient history classes, students learn about ancient food and drink, Greek and Roman dining behavior, the different roles of women and men at dinner parties, and relevant Latin phrases and vocabulary.

At the feast, students participate in quizzes and play Jeopardy-style games that reflect what they have learned in the past months. Festivities are interrupted frequently to raffle off relevant prizes (raffle tickets, of course, bear Roman numerals).



A male teacher is ceremonially robed in a makeshift red toga.

Guests are required to come attired in ancient dress, and simply wrapping a sheet around oneself is not acceptable; instead the *hospites* must pin their garments in ancient style. Handouts on dress are included with the invitations to the feast. It can be worth it to take a class period to discuss and model ancient dress before the Feast.

As a prelude to the opening toast, one of the male teachers is ceremonially robed in a 17-foot-long Roman *toga*; this requires some practice by the teachers before the event, or the *toga* will simply disintegrate into a pile of loose fabric, and all dignity will be lost!

If you choose to cater some of the food (see reasons why this may be a good idea, in **Pitfalls**), it is important to plan several months in advance. Some students may want to tackle Roman recipes, so information should be made available to them; some may even want to try to make *liquamen*.

Costs

Initial costs can be high—hundreds of dollars—for wreaths, decorations, and booth items, but most of these can be re-used. Some food, prizes, paper plates, plastic silverware, and

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Hercules tattoos are the ongoing sunk costs. Students can bring some of these items or help subsidize with a donation. Initial preparation time is high as well, since someone must buy supplies and, ideally, make examples of appropriate dress for teachers to wear, create small togas for teddies given as prizes, and sew a 17-foot-long *toga*. For those with a sense of humor and some spare time, it is also fun to make a model of the Piacenza Liver in clay and use it (in some modernized form) at the Divination Booth. Teachers must also develop categories and questions for games and quizzes. Some basic food should be catered or otherwise paid for even if not everyone contributes money.

Suggested materials

Decorations, basic supplies, and teachers' clothing

- Plastic tub to hold ice; bottle opener, knife and serving utensils
- Cloth, plastic, or paper table cloths of appropriate colors and designs
- Ivy wreaths (buy long ivy strands at a craft store and have students help make their own to save money, since luxurious, thick, pre-made wreaths often cost too much)
- Floral and ivy strands for decoration; drape them around the walls and on tables and podium
- Plaster busts and columns
- Ancient-looking cup for the introductory toast
- Roman tunics and *stolae* for teachers, and/or Greek garments
- Material for at least one really good *toga* (made of a fabric that will drape well; a bed sheet will generally look awkward. See Sebesta and Bonfante 2001 under **Resources** for a pattern.).
- Fake flowers, candy ring pops, chocolate coins, and relevant handouts for each table.

Supplies for check-in table

- List of guests (with space to add unexpected visitors) that includes boxes to check acknowledging monetary or food contributions
- Wreaths for each guest
- Nametags pre-labeled with status designation (actress, guest, servant, etc.)
- Black markers to label nametags
- Lists of Greek and Roman names
- Roman numeral raffle tickets
- Instructions (also on tables) for reading Roman numerals
- Information (also on tables) for meeting, greeting, and making small talk in Latin

Supplies for dress-check table

- Extra bedsheets and fabric for guests who have not arrived in proper dress
- Safety pins
- Instruction sheet

Supplies for Cleopatra make-up booth

- Mirrors
- Eyeliner pencils
- Make-up sponges
- Cleansing pads and hand wipes
- Tissues
- Bad comic books and childrens' books about Cleopatra
- Cleopatra paper dolls
- *Asterix and Cleopatra*

Supplies for Hercules tattoo booth

- Hercules tattoos
- Colored markers
- Pages of information and images to color from the coloring book *Adventures of Hercules*.

Supplies for divination booth

You are on your own here! Archer teachers have made a clay model of the Piacenza Liver; a student diviner wearing a long, enveloping veil "reads" the liver, modernizing its potential interpretive uses. This is not a very serious divination booth...

Supplies for Dine and Recline area

- 3 beds made of fitness mats, mattresses, and cushions arranged to form three sides of a square (theater departments can help with these)
- Fabric, sheets, or curtains to drape the beds
- A low table in the middle of the beds
- An elegant platter filled with grapes
- A poster illustrating the proper method of dining (lying on the left side with the weight on the left elbow) and with the chief guest and host spots indicated
- Teachers as servants

Suggested prizes

- Replicas of ancient coins
- Teddy bears or dolls in tunics or togas (see the AIA Dolls in Tunics and Teddies in Togas: A Roman Costume Project lesson plan)
- Parthenon-themed items from the Nashville Parthenon's Centennial Park Museum; see <http://www.nashville.gov/parthenon>
- Mythology stickers, bookmarks, coloring books
- Pencils and buttons with Latin sayings
- Inexpensive books
- Inexpensive jewelry with pendants relevant to ancient world (such as grapes)

Teacher participants needed

Two MCs to run the show, host Jeopardy-style games, and spell one another. At least 2 teachers should assist students with check-in and help organize food contributions (and oversee the food table). Dress check may need 3–4 people; stu-

dents who understand ancient dress can take over here. Several teachers should take turns waiting on students in the Dine and Recline area. The more cross-curricular the event is, the better. Generally, history, English, Latin, Greek, theater, and arts teachers should be involved, along with relevant administrators. At least 2 teachers and possibly some audience volunteers will be needed to hold the *toga* when it is being draped.

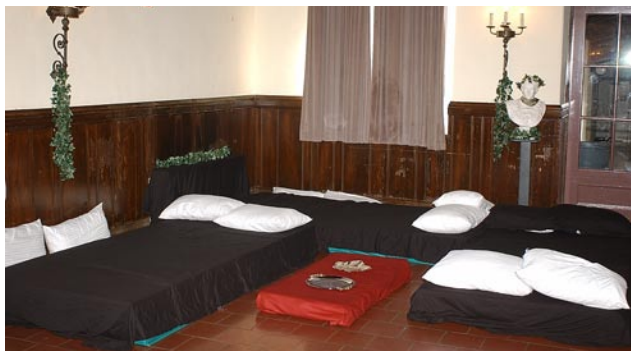
Suggested room layout and equipment

With good will and careful planning, feasters can make do with rooms of many different sizes and shapes! However, a large rectangular hall is convenient. At Archer, a door in one short end of the rectangle is designated as the main entrance. On either side as one enters is a table—one for check-in and one for dress check.



Fortune-telling booth: a veiled prophetess tells all.

The three booths (Cleopatra make-up, Hercules tattoos, and divination) consist simply of small tables with chairs on both sides. The 3 booths and the Dine and Recline area take up one long side of the room with a podium, cart for prizes, and game board (a large rolling white board) in the middle. From check in the sequence is: Cleopatra booth, Hercules booth, podium/cart/game board, divination booth, and Dine and Recline area with *triclinium* (three low “beds” around three sides of a low table).



Roman triclinium: three long beds for a total of nine diners, with a table in the middle.

At the short end of the room opposite the entrance, across from the Dine and Recline area, are the buffet tables. Plastic champagne glasses are stacked at one end in an elegant pyramid next to a cheap but appropriate bust of Augustus.



Close-up of table for 6-8 guests strewn with flowers, informative handouts, and ring pops.

In the middle of the room are a series of round tables for 6 to 8 guests each, and on each table are handouts of Latin phrases, an explanation of Roman numerals (taken from any standard textbook), an illustration of how to make and wrap a *toga*, a photocopy in Latin and English of some of the texts to be performed (Catullus, *Harry Potter*), and a program. Each guest may also have a candy ring pop at his/her place (a candy gemstone ring, available from many candy stores and bulk discount stores).

The cart flanking the podium will hold raffle prizes and copies of texts for the formal *Harry Potter* readings and other performances. A large rectangular rolling white board on the other side is sufficient for the Jeopardy-style game played after dinner. Alternatively, simple sheets of white cardboard can be taped together and held up by two volunteers.

A tv/vcr/dvd player may also be set up to play selections from relevant movies, such as *Ben Hur* and *Spartacus*. Guests watch the movies or visit the booths before the formal commencement of festivities.

CLASS TIME

Preparation is generally part of the curriculum, not special preparation for the feast, but the teacher may choose to use some class time for last-minute preparations and practice performing or draping clothing. Set-up takes several hours on the day of the feast. The event lasts at least three hours. Clean-up and re-packing all the reusable items may take several hours. Students should certainly be expected to assist.

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WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE FOR GREEK AND ROMAN FOOD AND DINING?

- ✦ Excavated houses and dining rooms (as at Greek Olynthos, Roman Pompeii)
- ✦ Excavated taverns and inns
- ✦ Excavated dinnerware, cooking and serving utensils, and food remains
- ✦ Images of food, dinnerware, and diners in art
- ✦ Descriptions in literature of crops, harvesting, and cooking
- ✦ Ancient cookbooks and recipes
- ✦ Literary descriptions of dinner parties
- ✦ Formal and informal clothing styles represented in sculpture and painting

PROCEDURES

All times may be set back to allow the event to start and end earlier. We recommend holding the feast on a weekday evening to avoid competition with weekend plans.

4:30–5:30 Set-up**5:30–6:30 Check-in**

(The Feast doors open at about 5:30 and check-in lasts until 6:30—but don't tell guests they have until 6:30 to arrive, because you will need at least a half hour to assist the costume-impaired.)

- ✦ Guests are welcomed at the check-in table. They select a category (teacher, guest, actor, slave, etc.) and a name from lists of Greek and Roman names, receive a name tag, choose a wreath, and take a raffle ticket. Instructions for reading Roman numerals are provided by Latin students, and handouts are available. If the guests are not Latin students, they learn how to introduce themselves in Latin. If they have not brought food or paid (\$5) in advance, they do so now; if they have arrived with a dish, a helper takes it to the buffet table on the other side of the room.
- ✦ The guests then move to the dress check table to have their garments checked; the helpers have extra pins, extra clothing (old sheets and fabric cut to the correct sizes), and handouts illustrating properly worn ancient clothing.



Dress Check area in operation: helpers assist a guest to drape a penguin-themed sheet.

Both tables should be staffed by sufficient helpers—at least 2 at the check-in table and 3–4 at the dress check table.

Now the guests may enjoy the booths, each staffed by one or two students, and some may also choose to recline in the Dine and Recline area and be served grapes (by at least 2 servers; note that students get the most pleasure from being waited on by their teachers!).



Invocation to the gods: The guests raise their arms or hands to Jupiter and Juno as the MC invokes the gods.

6:30 Formal commencement

- ✦ Guests tear themselves away from the booths and seat themselves at the tables.
- ✦ Masters of Ceremony greet the diners, explain the program, point out the explanatory flyers on the tables.
- ✦ Students carry placards with English and Latin “Bravo!” and “Boo!” terminology across the room and lead the audience in practice rounds of cheers and jeers to use during raffles and quizzes (students are urged not to jeer at the performers).
- ✦ Prizes are revealed.
- ✦ Masters of ceremony lead a toast (raise wine glasses or ring pops high to Jupiter and Juno).
- ✦ Get food!

6:50 Entertainment begins

- ✦ *Toga* robing! A male teacher or MC is ceremonially robed in a 17-foot-long Roman *toga* (based on the instructions and pattern provided by Goldman in Sebesta

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and Bonfante 2001 and shown in the video, *Lets Wrap: 100 years of Roman Costume*).

- Performances alternate with raffles and short quiz questions played for individual prizes. Performances commence with brief selections in English, Latin, and Greek from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (or other well known texts) and Catullus. Latin students read Catullus poem 13 aloud in meter. Quizzes include identifications of stories or characters described or quoted in snippets of familiar myths.



Guests learn Latin terms and phrases to call out during performances. A helper holds up a placard displaying EHEU (Woe!)

7:15 Get more food, or dessert

7:20 More entertainment

- Student performances alternate with quizzes and raffles
- *Coquus/coqua magna cum laude*: acknowledgment of any students daring enough to try Roman recipes, especially *liquamen*.
- Younger students of Latin or mythology (those present and thereby exhibiting enthusiasm) are acknowledged; at Archer our cut-off is 8th grade, and we give the 8th grade students ribbons to wear along with mythology stickers and public acclaim.
- Seniors are offered a special tribute.

7:45 Open raffle and acknowledgements

The room is divided into halves and the two sides compete. Categories include mythology, theater, dining, etc., and higher points are awarded for questions of greater difficulty.

- JCL initiation
- Food prize
- Costume prize
- Farewell to seniors

8:00 Jeopardy-style game

The room is divided into halves and the two sides compete. Categories include mythology, theater, dining, etc., and higher points are awarded for questions of greater difficulty.

8:30 Game finale

A cheap and easily shared reward for the winners on one side of the room is chocolate. The teachers should have forbidden it at the feast as a non-Greco-Roman food. At the end of the evening, it can serve as a fun, forbidden treat.

- Grand Finale and Farewell: reminder to help clean up!

8:30 Clean up

Collect wreaths and loaned pins and clothing.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FEAST MENU

"Catered" may just mean that adults who can be relied upon bring certain items. A local Mediterranean or Middle Eastern restaurant or grocery store can provide some staples. Mediterranean-themed paper plates, cups, and napkins, and plastic cutlery will need to be provided, along with bottle openers; an ice chest for drinks is also essential.

Possible catered items

- Olives
- Roasted vegetables
- Spinach-cheese pies
- Marinated feta-and-olive skewers
- Grapes
- Meatballs
- Cucumber-yogurt dipping sauce
- Flatbreads
- Baklava
- Cookies
- Small cheesecakes
- "Wine" (grape and apple juice)

Suggested contributions

- Breads
 - Crackers
 - Cheeses
 - Spreads and paté
 - Olives
 - Grape Leaves
 - Hummus
 - Halvah
 - Roman recipes (suggestions provided from cookbooks)
- No tomatoes, pasta, or chocolate!

PITFALLS

Food

Asking students to volunteer to bring food both saves money and invests the guests in the feast; however, students cannot always bring the food they promised! After a few feasts with too little food, Archer decided to cater (or otherwise provide)

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food for about 20 people, and ask everyone to bring either \$5 or a food contribution. The food “cushion” ensures sufficient, if not lavish, food for all and guarantees that no essentials will be missing.

Food table

This needs to be overseen by an adult, since chaos and mess will ensue if the food layout is disorganized. The feast can even be ruined if students start to eat too early. Knives and serving spoons should be available for the dishes guests bring.

Check-in and dress check

Keep track of arrivals’ monetary or food contributions as they check in, since it may be necessary to remind some participants to contribute. A list of guests who have already paid in advance should be at hand.

Many guests will be confused about ancient dress (even if they have been given instructions or illustrations showing them how to dress) and will give up on creating a proper garment. The dress check table must be staffed with clothing specialists able to expedite draping and pinning, and it is essential to have extra material and pins for those who come unprepared. The alternative is to disregard the dress requirement—but that will lead immediately to a party loaded with guests swathed in bed sheets and pseudo-Cleopatra costumes. Retaining high standards and providing assistance is a better idea if any semblance of authenticity is to be maintained.

Program

Keep it moving! Have breaks for getting food so that attention can remain on the MCs and performers during the program. Keep student performances to under five minutes in length, since some students will not give stellar performances. Deal with acoustics by using mikes or teaching students to speak considerably more loudly than they think they need to. Keep interest from flagging by offering frequent raffles and prizes.

ASSESSMENT

This has for the most part already been handled during regular classwork in the months preceding the feast. The teacher(s) will need to decide the relative advantages and disadvantages of giving credit for attendance, which can result in higher numbers, but fewer guests who really want to be there. It can be useful to give performers and cooks some form of credit for their efforts.

Handouts and templates

- Hold the Date
- Announcement/Press Release
- Invitation & Feast Sign-up sheet
- Sample Roman Menu (to inspire experimentation with recipes and, for fun, recipes for *liquamen* and dormice)
- Name Tags
- Feast Program
- Helpful or Fun Latin Phrases
- Resources
- Catullus poem 13 in Latin and English