

Roman Feast

by Shelby Brown (J. Paul Getty Museum)

A Roman Feast (*convivium*, dinner party) is a wonderful opportunity for cross-curricular learning and student participation at all grade levels. Latin, history, English, and theater teachers – and all who want an excuse for a fun, antiquity-based interactive event – can borrow ideas found here, change them, and make them work for their own circumstances. And of course this can be Greco-Roman.

Overview

A Roman or Greco-Roman feast can provide an opportunity for students to practice skills and revisit course content in different disciplines, practice presenting publicly in a fun, low-stress environment, prepare for a Latin convention, or just relax. Ideally, students will learn some new facts about the ancient world in a collegial context. Having several teachers plan ahead together and assign relevant coursework (or just help) makes a difference, but even a solitary Latin teacher can do far less and still create a fun event.

Grade levels

As described, the feast applies mostly to middle and high school. Upper-level students can help organize the event, taking on responsibility for performances and authenticity. When the focus is on Middle School students, the feast requires more adult participation and oversight.

Goals

By preparing for and participating in the feast, students will learn about or revisit:

- unusual menu items (such as dormice and *liquamen*).
- basic information about ancient dress.
- the logic of Roman dining couch status and how to recline.
- the tragic absence of Roman rice, potatoes, pasta, tomatoes, and chocolate.
- archaeological, mythological, theatrical, and literary information about the Romans — specific topics chosen by teacher(s).

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

- drape and pin an ancient garment (*chiton, tunica, stola, palla, toga*—teachers' choice).
- recline properly on Roman 3-person dining couches and understand why one couch is intended for the least important guests.
- read a Latin text or poem aloud fluently.
- call out appropriate expressions of approval or disapproval in Latin.

Sample sign-up sheet

YES, I WILL BE COMING to the Roman Feast!

NAME _____

I cannot bring food, so I will contribute \$ _____

or

I am adventurous! I will try to recreate a Roman dish!

I prefer to try: an appetizer _____ a main course _____ a dessert _____

(I would like some recipe suggestions _____)

or

I will bring:

Appetizer for 10 _____

Main Course for 10 _____

Dessert for 10 _____

"Wine" (Grape juice) _____

"Wine" (Apple Juice) _____

Location, set-up, basic supplies

For a group of 20-40+, space in a **dining room** will be most effective.

- Six-foot table for food (dishes contributed by students and ordered from a Mediterranean restaurant)
- Check-in table and Dress check table
- Plaster bust of an emperor
- Dining tables with pretend ivy and flowers, ring pops for each guest, Latin phrases, brief Latin menu (pasta, tomatoes, chocolate **not** allowed as inauthentic)
- Podium or table for MC, draped with ivy, next to presentation space for students
- White board or large paper tablet stand for recording victories and Jeopardy scores
- Triclinium dining area set aside for 3 thick sports mats (Roman beds) arranged properly to form an open-ended square
- Two or three small tables ("booths"), each with two chairs (for a **temporary tattoo** artist, a **seer**, and/or a **Cleopatra makeup artist**)

Left: Minimal table set-up: information about table manners and proper dress, flowers and ivy, ring pops. **Right:** Buffet table decoration: plaster bust of the emperor Augustus wearing a wreath and a scarf.



Basic supplies

- Plastic tub to hold ice; bottle opener, knife, serving utensils, paper towels
- Cloth, plastic, or paper tablecloths of appropriate colors and designs
- Long ivy and floral strands from a craft store
- Ancient-looking cup for the introductory toast
- Fabric and pins for Roman tunics and *stolae* for teachers and students
- Soft material for at least one good toga, if desired (made of a fabric that will drape well; a bed sheet will generally look awkward)
- Fake flowers, candy ring pops, chocolate coins, and relevant handouts for tables

Prizes

- Small plastic or Lego figures of ancient people and mythological beings
- Replicas of ancient coins
- Mythology stickers, bookmarks
- Pencils and buttons with Latin sayings
- Inexpensive jewelry, key chains, pendants with ancient symbols/designs

Program overview

Keep it moving! Have breaks for getting food so that attention can remain on the MCs and performers during the program. Keep performances to under five minutes in length and arrange for variety. Deal with acoustics by using a hand mike. Hold interest with frequent raffles and prizes.

Check in: Participants check in, receive a Roman numeral raffle ticket, choose a Roman name, go to the Food table and to Dress check.

Dress the part: participants are assisted to pin tunics appropriately (including a Greek *peplos* or *chiton*) by trained student or faculty greeters.

Students try reclining properly in the triclinium, **learn their future**, **select an ancient tattoo**, or try **Cleopatra makeup** as they wait for the event to start.

Latin welcome, MC toasts with grape juice: Jupiter (powerful) and Minerva (scholarly).

- **MC leads practice rounds of Latin cheers and lamentations** to use during raffles and quizzes (students are urged not to jeer at the performers).
- **Prizes** are held up and guests admire and exclaim in Latin.
- **Everyone gets food** and settles in. Schedule visits to get food multiple times.

Entertainments are sprinkled throughout with **prizes**, except during food refills.

- Short **recitations and performances** in Latin and English (excerpts of an ancient play or epic, Harry Potter in Latin and English, all of Catullus 13)
- **Best costume** awards (most accurate, ridiculous, etc.)
- Option to **wrap a toga** (See AIA's *Roman Clothing Project: Clothing in Roman Art*)
- Lots of **raffles** and quick **quizzes** with ancient prizes (mythology quizzes, recite the emperors from Augustus to Commodus in 15 seconds. . . whatever will be fun)

Finale: MC and teachers lead the two sides of the room in a short **Jeopardy game** with antiquity and mythology questions. Glory and un-Roman chocolate to the victors.

Optional: Teachers acknowledge the youngest attendees, graduating seniors, others?

Check-in table

- List of guests (with room to add unexpected visitors)
 - acknowledge monetary or food contributions
- Nametags for a Roman name
- Black markers to label nametags
- Lists of Greek and Roman names
- Roman numeral raffle tickets
- Instructions for reading Roman numerals

Students go to the Food table to leave a dish and to Dress check for garment advice.

Food table

This needs to be overseen by an adult to create a clear organization and to ensure that no one starts eating before the official start. Knives and serving utensils should be available for the dishes guests bring, and paper towels and wipes.

Depending on school rules, students can be asked to bring some food. It can be fun to hand out recipes for ancient dishes. It is safest to arrange for a Mediterranean restaurant to provide food for a least half the crowd. Everyone else might choose to bring either a food contribution, or a small, voluntary fee (unless asking for monetary contributions from students poses a difficulty). The bought food “cushion” ensures enough food and essentials.

Dress check (See AIA’s *Roman Clothing Project: Clothing in Roman Art*)

The dress check table must be staffed with clothing specialists able to drape fabric around (still-dressed) students and pin it properly. Students should bring fabric, but it is essential to have supplies for the unprepared and to assist. A good *convivium* is not loaded with guests without tunics or badly dressed in bed sheets or pseudo-Cleopatra costumes. Needed:

- Lots of material and pins
- Cord or fine rope for belting and blousing tunics
- Instruction sheet for tunics
- Pre-cut sections of faux ivy strands and green pipe cleaners so guests can make a wreath

Make a tunic (or wrap yourself in a rectangle of cloth, a standard cloak shape)

Fold a rectangle of cloth around a student to create a **tube from shoulders to knees or ankles**. The open side can be left open since students are already dressed. For Romans, tunics were knee-length for males and floor-length for females.

- A calf-length tunic is acceptable for everyone if it makes things easier!

~**For men:** Pin the shoulders entirely closed. Belt the tunic and adjust the hem.

~**For women:**

- Fold the fabric over at the top and let it hang down in a Greek-style **peplos**.
- Pin along the shoulders leaving gaps to create loose Greek-style **chiton** sleeves.
- Pin once on either side at mid-shoulder to make a married woman’s **stola**.

Cleopatra makeup booth supplies

Pop culture Cleopatra is a contemporary invention. This booth is for fun, but it should highlight how off-base her image usually is.

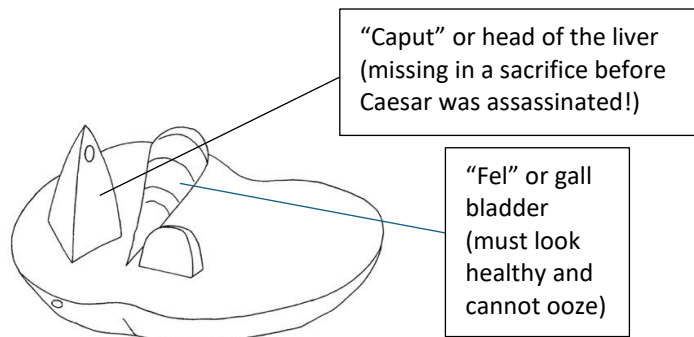
- Mirrors
- Eyeliner pencils and sharpeners and wipes
- Small disposable make-up sponges
- Cleansing pads, hand wipes, tissues
- Exaggerated images of Cleopatra today and some from antiquity

Tattoo booth supplies

There are many online sources for temporary tattoos of ancient Greco-Roman mythological beings, Medusa in particular, and Egyptian images. Needed:

- Several small spritz bottles of water, paper towels, hand wipes, and a student who can apply a temporary tattoo effectively are all that is needed.
- Having students choose their tattoos to be applied at a “booth” is more fun than simply handing out tattoos.

Divination booth supplies



Left: Bronze sheep’s liver. Piacenza, Archaeological Museum. Shonagon, CC0 1.0, via Wikimedia Commons. **Right:** Illustration by Wilhelm Deecke (1831–1897), Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

See Thomas M van Gulik. “The Bronze liver of Piacenza.” In *Hepatobiliary Surgery and Nutrition*, Aug. 10 (4) 2021: 433. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8351000/>

Divination may take many forms. Given how much we do not know about the fine details of ancient omen-reading, it can be handled with a sense of fun. Students especially enjoy little-known practices of the Romans, such as **liver reading**. Someone can make an air-dried clay model of the Piacenza Liver, a bronze model of a sheep’s liver used to train Etruscan priests to read sacrificial livers. A student diviner/*haruspex* can invent the readings. (But students should be mindful that this was a serious practice carried out in antiquity for thousands of years.)

Livers taken from an animal during a sacrifice often simply gave a “positive” or “negative” response to a relatively simple question, such as, “Is this a favorable day to engage in battle?” If a response was not positive, it was acceptable to ask the god again, later. Clearly, many interpretations allowed for nuances we do not understand today. It helps a modern diviner to be able to point out “some positive, but also negative signs,” rather than just “Yes” or “No.”

Alternatively, the diviner can simply be a mysterious **astrologer**, or an ancient **charlatan seer** of some sort (of whom there were many) who told people the future—perhaps by opening the *Iliad* or the *Aeneid* at random and picking a spot on the page and then interpreting the next lines to tell the future. This was divination by lot (*Sortes Homericæ* or *Virgilianæ*).

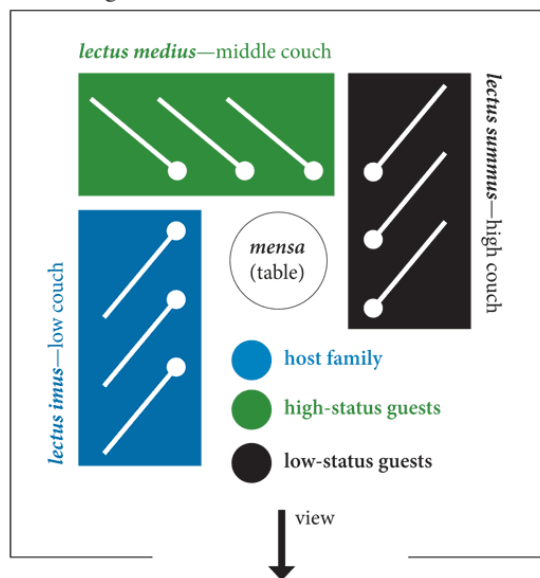


The fortune-telling booth: a veiled seer tells all. This seer borrowed a Roman wedding veil, but no one noticed.

Dine and recline supplies

- 3 beds made of fitness mats, mattresses, and cushions arranged to form three sides of a square (theater departments can help with these)
- Fabric or sheets, to drape the beds
- A few pillows
- A low table in the middle of the beds
- An elegant platter filled with grapes
- An illustration of 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
- Teacher-attendant to feed grapes

Reclining in the Roman *triclinium*



When using thick sports or yoga mats as practice Roman dining couches, pull the black couch (*lectus summus*) on the plan down further so that more of it is parallel to the blue couch.

Brown, Shelby. Aug. 10, 2012. "Reclining and Dining (and Drinking) in Ancient Rome," *Getty Iris*: <https://blogs.getty.edu/iris/reclining-and-dining-and-drinking-in-ancient-rome/>

Since all guests reclined on their left sides, leaning on their left elbows, the host family (green couch) will be looking at the important guests (blue couch) and all of them can look easily at the view, an important aspect of high status. The three low-status guests (black couch) are looking toward the hosts and can't see the view without a hard twist left. Guests did not lie down. They propped the left elbow on a pillow, and they often bent their right leg, foot braced on the dining couch, to keep their balance. Even lefties had to eat with the right hand.

DURING THE FEAST: Helpful phrases

Salvete omnes!	Hello, everyone!
Discumbamus.	Let's recline.
Sedeamus.	Let's sit down.
Esurio!	I'm hungry!
Sitio!	I'm thirsty!
Felix convivium!	Bon appetit!
In vino veritas.	In wine is truth.
Propino tibi salutem!	Cheers! (I drink to your health!)
Eugepae! or Euge! (EH-oo-geh)	Yay!
Eheu! (EH-heh-oo)	Woe! Oh no!
Eu! (EH-oo)	Bravo/Brava!
Bene! / Optime! (OP-tee-may)	Well done! The best!
Iterum!	Encore! Again!
Pro Iuppiter!	Oh Jupiter!
Me Hercule!	By Hercules!



Teachers model saying Euge! and Eheu

Roman recipes

Students might try ancient Roman recipes rewritten in contemporary styles. There are many relevant cookbooks. These two blogs below borrow from a well-known cookbook with a variety of recipes:

“Cook a classical feast: nine recipes from ancient Greece and Rome,” June 18, 2020, from Dalby, Andrew and Sally Grainger. 2012 (2nd ed.).

The Classical Cookbook. London: The British Museum.

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/blog/cook-classical-feast-nine-recipes-ancient-greece-and-rome>

Hart, Mary Louise. July 1, 2020. “Excavating your Pantry for an Ancient Roman Meal,” *Getty News and Stories*.

<https://www.getty.edu/news/excavating-your-pantry-for-an-ancient-roman-meal/>

Recipe “challenge” (to pique interest, not to encourage an actual dish)

- 1) **Recipe for *Liquamen*** (after the 1st century CE this started to be the same as *garum*): Combine small fish intestines and blood with dried herbs such as coriander, oregano, and mint in a container. Add a layer of fish, then a layer of salt two fingers high. Repeat multiple times. Let it rest for two days in the sun. Then mix daily for twenty days.
 - Chef Sally Grainger says Red Boat, a Vietnamese nuoc mam nhi made with black anchovies and salt, is the closest fish sauce to liquamen available today in markets.
- 2) **Recipe for *Dormice*** (tree-dwelling rodents)
 - Stuff dormice with pork and dormouse meat, spices, and broth. Roast. (Apicius, *De re coquinaria*)
 - Bake dormice, sprinkle with honey and poppyseeds. (Petronius, *Satyricon*)

Catullus poem 13

Listen to the Latin here:

PantheonPoets: <https://www.pantheonpoets.com/catulluss-perfume/>

You'll dine well at my house, my dear Fabullus,
 in a day or two, gods willing, if you bring
 a good, big dinner with you, not forgetting
 a fair girl, and wine, and wit,
 and plenty of hearty laughter. If
 you bring this with you, as I say, my charming friend,
 you will dine well, for your Catullus's
 purse is full of cobwebs. On the other hand,
 you will get undiluted love, if not undiluted wine,
 or something nicer and more elegant,
 for I will give you an unguent
 that the Venuses and Cupids gave my girl,
 and when you smell it, you will pray to the gods,
 Fabullus, to turn you into one big nose.