In a speech given sometime around the mid-second century B.C., Cato the Elder referred to Rome as “a belly without ears.” The notoriously conservative statesman, who held traditional Roman values above all, was upset with what he perceived to be a loss of integrity among Romans. This “belly without ears” had become obsessed with overindulgence and was under the negative influence of luxury goods, which were imported from all around the known world. The rich and attractive nature of such items was something Cato believed to be the cause of neglect of the long-standing principles upon which Rome was built. In his eyes, the world was going to hell in a hand-basket, and the growing opulence of banquets was a symptom of that.

Rome was nothing if not a belly, filling itself first on surrounding territories and enemy troops, and then on whatever foodstuffs it could get its hands on. But what if that belly did have ears? What if the belly that had begun to greedily gobble up everything set in front of it could stop its mindless self-indulgence for a moment and listen? What would it hear? What was the soundscape of a Roman banquet? This paper will show that the soundscape of a Roman banquet was part of a holistic system of dining, wherein power dynamics and social connections were perpetually being established and evaluated, and that sounds were an effective and long-lasting means of upholding the patron/client relationship.

It is true that in Cato’s time many people had begun to spend exorbitant sums of money on food. So much so that in 161 B.C., the lex fannia was passed. This was the first of a series of sumptuary laws enacted over the next 150 years that sought to curb the growth of culinary excess that had become so popular. In the following century and a half, numerous legislative measures put spending caps on feasts, restricted certain foods, and limited the number of guests one could invite to a banquet. In the end, the prohibitions on dining were relatively toothless: those who could afford to do so continued hosting ever more grand banquets, expending untold resources in the process. However, these banquets were not merely ostentatious displays of wealth. By inviting people to a banquet the host engaged his guests in the patron/client system in
an effort to establish his own social superiority while gaining political traction.

By this point in Rome’s history, food had become a type of political and social currency. In the relationship between patron and client, food was one of the agents through which exchanges were brokered. Together, patron and client were linked in a kind of symbiosis wherein each party benefitted from the other. Roman friendship had a strongly instrumental side to it. Romans were users, and they themselves expected to be used. Such relationships were not thought to be dishonorable.1 Hosting the most exquisite banquet that one could afford ensured that those people lucky enough to be invited saw not only the host’s wealth and power on display, but also ensured that guests were now beholden to him in future endeavors. Additionally, by attending a banquet, it was possible to ingratiate oneself to a powerful figure (or one whose power was on the rise) with the hopes of future rewards in the political and social realm. All that was in addition to the ancillary benefit of a meal.

It turns out the curmudgeonly old Cato was right: such wanton consumption of food and lavish dining was indeed ruining traditional Roman values. Newly rich men who were not from old Roman families were gaining prominence, members of long-established patrician families were increasing their sway over average citizens, and neither was doing it in the old way. They were not working their way up the cursus honorum through prudent politics or military success. They were doing it in the old way. They were not working their way up the cursus honorum through prudent politics or military success. They were doing it at the table. This is not to say political and military achievements were no longer important, but a man who made an impression with his wallet could greatly enhance his rank and add gravitas to other exploits. The most common way of doing that was through food. Cato would be disappointed, but would surely feel vindicated were he able to see just how prescient his comments were.

Shifting gears and historical epochs momentarily, two thousand years after Cato lived, R. Murray Schaffer’s book, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, began the field of historical soundscapes. In it, Schaffer worries that the audible space we inhabit has reached an “apex of vulgarity.” He states that “when the rhythms of the soundscape become confused or erratic, society sinks to a slovenly and imperiled condition.”2 Replace Schaffer’s notions of sound with Cato’s notions of food, and the two become peas in an “end-times” pod. Schaffer might be surprised to find he has such a connection with Cato, but his introduction to soundscapes studies allows us to connect with Cato and the rest of antiquity in numerous other ways. By taking up Schaffer’s work, historians have begun to reinterpret historical texts and data through a new kind of sensory filter. If we pump up the volume on the past, we can shed new light (or sound) on tired histories, or perhaps, create something new altogether.

One such historian who has taken up that cause is Emily Thompson. Building upon the work of Schaffer and noted French historian Alain Corbain, she provides a highly instructive definition of the word “soundscape,” stating it is “an auditory or aural landscape. Like a landscape, a soundscape is simultaneously a physical environment and a way of perceiving that environment; it is both a world and a culture constructed to make sense of that world.” A soundscape is not merely a record of the sounds of a particular place; it is a consideration of the sounds made by a culture along with that culture’s perception of those sounds. It seeks not only to record or recreate the sounds of the past, but also to understand the way people of the past perceived what they heard. Considered in this light, we can use soundscapes to learn more about a past that is long gone and whose sounds might be impossible to accurately recreate.

To understand the soundscape of a Roman banquet we need not know, or even concentrate on, its audible minutiae. Rather, by looking at the aural components from a very broad perspective, and coupling those with what is known about social conditions of the time, we can further apprehend what the soundscape of a Roman banquet meant.

By examining Roman commensality and its three variations, it can be demonstrated that banquets were far more than the act of eating togeth-

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er. Each type (extraordinary, segregative, and transgressive) carried a distinct weight and was imbued with meaning far beyond that which we can fully empathize with today. The sharing of a meal was a way in which Romans came to identify themselves and their place in society. Knowing that everything held significance, and that every aspect of a banquet was meant to further the power and prestige of its host, allows us to look at specific incidences and illustrate the way which sound aided in doing just that. Be it through the sheer size of a banquet, the attendees' reactions, the entertainment offered, or the varying levels of communication that took place, the sounds of a Roman feast can tell us a great deal about the power and social dynamics at play. Finally, connections between the senses, called synesthetic bonds, can be linked together in such a way that the stimulation of one sense can trigger another, creating the potential for any display of power that comes through sound or food, something that will be recalled time and again throughout a person's life. As great a tool as sound is for asserting one's immediate power, its greater strength may be its ability to carry over into the future.

Before addressing the sounds of a Roman meal and the social implications therein, it is important to take a brief look at the food being consumed. When thinking of Roman food, most people immediately bring to mind images of a feast. Though feasts and banquets will certainly bring to mind images of a feast. Though feasts and banquets will be the main focus of this paper, it is crucial to make a distinction between a Roman feast and the everyday food of average Roman citizens.

A common Roman meal was nothing like what most people picture, where course upon course of exquisitely decorated plates containing all manner of creatures were shamelessly shoveled down, only to be vomited up in order to eat more. The food of most Romans was simple. Subdued. Quiet. In fact, the vast majority of Romans existed at a subsistence level. Of the one million or so inhabitants of the city, most were living on a diet composed largely of grains and little else. Pliny the Elder quotes from Verrius Flaccus, who lived in the Augustan period, noting that all Romans lived on far (a kind of wheat) for nearly 300 years. Most often this was consumed in the form of puls, a type of porridge usually made with far or emmer (a kind of hulled wheat), that might be livened up with the addition of herbs, fruits, nuts, vegetables, or cheese. While this habit was certainly one born more of necessity than preference, it also illustrates the early Roman dedication to moderation. Valerius Maximus summed up this sentiment well, as quoted by Nicholas Purcell, saying, “the early Romans were so interested in moderation that they consumed more puls than bread.” Given, this was in the city’s early years, and by the time of the Republic bread had become a mainstay. In whatever form they were consumed, it can be safely said that throughout the history of Rome, grains were the major source of a Roman’s caloric intake. For most, meat was a luxury, and its inclusion in a meal was an exceptional occasion, coming mostly on one of the 160 potential feast days counted in the Roman calendar.

In time, the gustatory restraint showed by early Romans gave way to the pleasure and excess-seeking that is now associated with Roman feasts. Food became more complex and unrestrained. It became loud. Without naming names, Tacitus puts the blame for the most glutinous behavior squarely on the Julio-Claudians. “The luxuriousness of the table,” he wrote, “which, from the end of the Actian War to the hostilities which brought Galba to the acquisition of power, was practiced for 100 years with surging expenditure.” By that time, excess was the order of the day. All manner of foodstuffs appear, including quantities of meat that most Romans could scarcely consume in a lifetime. Foreign delicacies were also given high priority. In *Attic Nights*, Aulus Gellius, copying from a manuscript of Marcus

5 Many of the herbs used by Romans, such as hyssop or asafoetida, would be too astringent by today's standards, and seem more like medicine to the modern palate. See John Wilkins, “Land and Sea: Italy and the Mediterranean and The Roman Discourse of Dining,” *The American Journal of Philology* 124 (2003), Special Issue Roman Dining; and Patrick Fass, *Around the Roman Table: Food and Feasting in Ancient Rome*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994).
7 Fass, *Around the Roman Table*, 23. Fass notes this number was constantly increasing and places this figure during the reign of Claudius, c.40 C.E.
8 The Julio-Claudian line took power, ostensibly, with Augustus' victory over Marc Anthony at the battle of Actium in 31 B.C. and ended with Nero’s suicide upon learning Galba's legions had revolted in 69 C.E.
have served birds that imitated the voices of men at a “quasi-cannibalistic” banquet, making it an occasion when the food could, literally, speak for itself.  

Though it would be fascinating to do a more specific recreation of the sounds made by various foods being consumed, it simply is not possible. Save for the works of satirists like Juvenal, Martial, and Petronius, the food-laden text left by the Plinys, and an ancient cook book written by Marcus Gaviinus Apicius, the culinary world was not a matter that many Roman writers felt was worthy of their time. To record the pleasures of taste was considered to be simplistic and trivial. Matters of the body were secondary to those of the mind. The Stoic philosopher Epictetus sums up the feeling of most writers saying that “It is a mark of want of intellect, to spend much time in things related to the body; as to be immoderate in exercise, in eating and drinking, and in the discharge of other animal functions. These things should be done incidentally and our main strength be applied to our reason.” This prevailing notion lasted throughout antiquity, a fact that limits any study of ancient foodways. The fleeting nature of sound, let alone archival food references, compounds the problem. Intriguing as it would be to have an ancient account of the sound of a dormouse between one’s teeth, no such thing exists.

Fortunately for modern scholars, the items being consumed were only one component in the large-scale production that was Roman feasting. In order to understand the meaning that a Roman would derive from the soundscape of a banquet or any other sensory input, it is important to know the cultural milieu in which they lived. Hirschkind states, “Any inquiry into the sensorium as historical fact must begin with the historically specific categories and symbols that organize experience, that shape the perceptual skills by which culturally sanctioned modes of discrimination are learned and practiced.” To be a part of a meal in Rome was to navigate a web of social and political interest that went well beyond simple nourishment. A meal taken together by Romans that extended further than that of a small family dinner was

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10 Varro, 3.6.6.
14 Mary Beard, *The Fires of Vesuvius: Pompeii Lost and Found* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 172. Several carbonized loaves of bread have been found in Herculaneum with the inscription, “Made by Celer, the slave of Quintus Granius Verus.”

fraught with social implications. Relationships of power and patronage were always being created or solidified. Festal activity was part of the theatricality of Roman life. Every appearance was an event. Christopher Jones, writing about the entertainment one might find at a Roman feast, notes that “there is an inevitable link between dinner theater and the theater-dinner. They are complementary aspects of the same system of benefaction.”¹⁸ The complex system of Roman patronage included the idea of *hospitium*. Those who dined together were very often bound by the act and expected to then support each other in other walks of life, namely the political arena. Being invited to a feast, or not being invited to a feast, served to strengthen or weaken one’s place in the community, one’s self-identity, and one’s rank in Rome. For Romans the saying was less “you are what you eat,” and more “you are who you eat with.”

Commensality at a Roman feast was more complicated than any recipe found in Apicius. French sociologist Claude Grignon defines commensality as “a gathering aimed to accomplish in a collective way some material tasks and symbolic obligations linked to the satisfaction of a biological individual need.”¹⁹ Grignon has worked towards creating a typology of commensality, designating three varieties: exceptional, segregative, and transgressive. These variations are not mutually exclusive and will often overlap. The significant scholarship of John F. Donahue and Richard S. Ascough has applied these typologies to particular varieties of Roman feasts. A closer look at the forms of commensality, along with a few examples of each, will further illustrate the point that a Roman feast was less about acquisition of calories than it was about acquisition and maintenance of power.

Exceptional commensality includes events that fall outside the scope of everyday life: holidays, personal landmarks like birthdays and weddings, and professional achievements, such as a graduation or promotion. In Grignon’s typology, exceptional commensality is limited to a circle that includes only family and friends. We can impose his terminology upon Roman festal activities because the spheres of public and private life were not so clearly defined. Dunbabin writes:


²³ Even at the end of the first century C.E., the emperor was only supposed to be the “princeps” or first among equals. That he had absolute power was by this point accepted, but largely unspoken.

In the Roman world, dining was often a public activity, conducted before an audience. It is of course, an oversimplification to speak as though there were a clear dichotomy between public and private; the two were closely intertwined, and public concerns penetrated deep into what we would classify as private life.²⁰

In Roman terms, we might think of exceptional commensality taking place during elections or triumphs. Games and spectacles were often accompanied by feasting, as were marriages and funerals. Public or private, feasting highlighted the social dynamic connecting host and guest. Be it between the emperor and the whole city, or a newly rich patron and assorted nobles, feasting is never done out of charity, but the ever present need to put one’s status on display.²¹

In his *Kalends of December*, the poet Statius tells of one particular feast given by the emperor Domitian. The food was typically exotic, composed of various items collected from far-flung corners of the empire, emphasizing the luxury of the event. Taking place in the Colosseum, some fifty thousand Romans gathered to enjoy a day of eating. It was on this occasion that we begin to hear the sounds of power being realized. Statius describes the scene as the day wears on and the effects of wine begin to take hold. “Buxom Lydian girls are clapping hands, here tinkle the cymbals of Cadiz, there troops of Syrians are making an uproar...vast flocks of birds suddenly swoop like clouds from among the stars and countless voices are raised to heaven, acclaiming the Emperor’s festival; with loving enthusiasm they salute their lord.”²² Filled with the day’s largesse, a stadium’s worth of Romans cried out in praise of Domitian’s generosity. In doing so, they are giving voice to what everyone knows, but which cannot always be expressed: the Emperor reigns supreme, and it is only through his munificence that the citizens of Rome can celebrate in this way.²³
It might be hard to imagine a bigger dinner party than one filling the Colosseum, but more than a century prior to Domitian’s banquet, Julius Caesar gave what must still rank as one of the biggest feasts in history. In 46 B.C., Caesar held a triumph of unprecedented size to commemorate victories over enemies on four fronts. He “entertained the people with banquets and spectacles, feasting them all at one time on twenty thousand dining couches.” If the dining couches referred to by Plutarch are the standard triclinia or klinai, each of which would seat three people, the total number engaging in Caesar’s feast must have approached 200,000 – and this includes only those who were seated in the traditional manner. Unlike Domitian’s banquet, there was no structure which could accommodate everyone attending the feast and games that accompanied it. Donahue speculates, “the Campus Martius, the Circus Maximus, the Field of Mars and various fora were likely filled to capacity. We must believe that any and all available outdoor space was utilized.” Suetonius records that so many people came from outside of the city to participate, that many of them took to sleeping in tents pitched along the streets, roads, or roof tops, and that the crowd was so great that the pressure crushed many to death, including two senators. This was a celebration occurring simultaneously throughout the entire city, one so grand that people were literally dying to be a part of it. The feast, which was on an order of magnitude bigger than any before, and perhaps since, continued for three days. Over the course of that time an intense din must have ruled over the city, and the only thing that could hope to rival its power was the man who created it: Julius Caesar.

Instances of exceptional commensality were not solely a way to assert one’s political power. Social bonds were just as likely to be strengthened as were political. The annual feast of Anna Perenna on the fifteenth of March to celebrate the traditional Roman New Year serves as one example. Ovid gives an account of Plebeians gathering near the banks of the Tiber where, according to tradition, each person would drink one cup of wine for every year they had been alive. “There they sing whatever they’ve learnt in the theaters, beating time to the words with ready hands.” Ovid’s description of the event ends with people drunkenly dancing together and staggering home, “a tipsy old woman dragging a tipsy old man.”

Public feasts also strengthened existing social contracts and conditions. By coming together before their fellow Romans, each and every citizen was reminded of his or her place in society. From top to bottom, the highly stratified nature of the Roman population found expression in the collective sharing of food and drink. This, however, does not mean that the notion of a private event was lost on Romans. Exclusivity was sought, often by those who had achieved some level of success, but were not able to make political headway. The traditional means of advancement had been shut down during the principate and ambitious Romans looked outside the realm of politics in order to exercise what little power and prestige was available to them. This was manifested by membership in private groups known as collegia, where a form of segregative commensality ensued, allowing those who could not rule the country to exert power in their immediate social circle.

Segregative commensality is a means by which a group is set up or restored by restricting membership. In this way, the group gains identity, and can monitor its individual members. “By its very nature, such an arrangement also strengthens the ‘We’ against the ‘Not We,’ since the decision to invite some to a meal necessarily involves excluding others.” Grignon argues that these groups were most often found, and were strongest, in societies where “the very principle of structure and social life” is in its hierarchy, a condition Rome certainly met. “Segregative commensality is not limited to those in the upper ranks - its strength lies in the ability of groups to be (self) selective about who can join in the eating and drinking.” Roman collegia, organizations similar to guilds, were comprised mostly of freedmen, but sometimes contained slaves. The desire for exclusivity among the lower ranks was met in these organizations, and they feasted together often. “The guild of flute players held a regular banquet in the temple of Jupiter. Such events were notoriously lavish: Varro complains of the innumerable dinners of the collegia, which [were] sending the prices in the market through the roof.”

24 Plutarch, Life of Caesar, 55.
26 Suetonius, Julius Caesar, 39.
27 Ovid, Fasti, Book 3, March 15.
28 Donahue, “Typology,” 432.
30 Dunbabin, Images, 72-73.
Epigraphic inscriptions provide evidence that these organizations were often defined more by the fact that they dined together than any other commonality. Inscriptions reading “college of messmates,” “drinking buddies,” and “table companions who customarily share banquets together” show the importance of shared meals in these groups. As Donahue says, “to eat and drink well among pleasant company seemed to strike at the very essence of what a collegium was all about.”

Even within the confines of the collegia, patron and client relationships were being forged. Membership in many of these guilds was tiered, and one’s status in the group was reflected by the amount of food, entertainment, money, or gifts he could provide. One of their most important functions seems to have been providing wealthy freedmen, who were barred by their status from holding municipal magistracies, with opportunity to acquire prestige. The leader of the college, called the quinquennalis, could extend his power by financing a particularly luxurious feast. In a world where power was concentrated at the very top (limited only to the emperor and a small group near to the imperial family), this was the place a common citizen, though perhaps a wealthy one, could try to become the leader of a group. As this type of evidence suggests, food played an undeniable role in shaping and reinforcing Roman attitudes toward rank and status. Any festal undertaking in Rome was, in terms of social dynamics, highly structured. At a public banquet everyone was absolutely sure of his place in the order of things. The collegia met in private only to recreate this same power structure behind closed doors.

The final type of commensality to be examined, transgressive commensality, is like the previous two in that it seeks to reaffirm existing relationships of control, but it does so by diverging from the bounds of every day social interactions. The act of crossing those typical parameters is the very thing that highlights the idea of transgressive commensality. Crignon writes that it “plays upon the oppositions between social groups and the borders which separate them.” By reversing roles or relaxing social constraints that usually separate the parties involved, attention is called to the fact they exist in the first place, thereby strengthening them.

Saturnalia was an annual feast that took place in December, and during this festival, the highly stratified conditions that ruled life in every-day Rome were relaxed, allowing for an unusual commingling of people from different levels of society. For one of the most well known instances of this, we can return to Statius’ Kalends of December. The feast given by Domitian is said to have mixed people from all classes together. “Every order eats here at one table. Women, children, knights, plebs, Senate: Freedom has set aside reverence...Now all, now whoever, rich or poor can boast of dining with our leader.” On this day, in spite of their differences, each and every attendee of the banquet could consider himself a guest of the emperor.

Here we might explore speech communities to consider in what way the differences among guests from opposing classes might make themselves known. The idea of speech communities was the creation of Dell Hymes in his work with Native Americans. He defines a speech community as one that shares rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech, as well as rules for the interpretation of at least one linguistic variety. These communities extend to include writing, song, and all types of music. In The Acoustic World of Early Modern England, Bruce Smith elaborates on Hymes’ idea, noting that in order to be a part of a shared speech community, people must see and speak to one another regularly and in a way recognized as their own. “A common locality and primary interaction are the most visible markers of a speech community.” In the scene described by Statius, where people of all ranks rub elbows at shared tables, it is easy to assume that there must have been a collision of multiple speech communities. People whose lives rarely intersected were now thrown together, and the communication between partici-

31 Ascough, Richard S., “Forms of Commensality in Greco-Roman Associations,” Classical World 102 (Fall, 2008): 34.
32 Donahue, John F., The Roman Community at Table During the Principate (Michigan: University of Michigan), 85.
33 Donahue, “Typology,” 434.
34 Crignon, “Commensality,” 30.
35 Statius, Vihar, Book 1.6.
pants, though ostensibly to bring them into union, only served to highlight their differences in what we might call a transgressive speech community.

Senators were highly skilled speakers and educated far beyond the average citizen. Most would have been fluent in Greek and would have known the classic Greek texts well. Playing games with words was common, and oratorical skills were given high value. The speech of such men was, as Ruden describes, “poetic, full of similes and metaphors, alliteration, unnatural word order, and rhythm and rhyme; and it was rhetorical at the same time, with a dense concentration of rhetorical devices.”37 Plebs might have known about such things, and some might have had a cursory knowledge of Greek and the classics, but they certainly were not able to utilize speech in order to elevate their level of communication. To be seated near a senator and thrust into conversation was not only to be confronted with one’s own limitations, but to be forced into an interaction with someone who was speaking almost an entirely different language; something that was surely a source of anxiety and insecurity. Martial writes of a Saturnalia feast where he needed his cup to be filled faster and faster, as he could do nothing without wine to settle his nerves, but once drunk could harness the power of fifteen poets.38 Juvenal wondered if a dinner with members of a higher class was worth all the insults one must suffer to pay for it, and said, “[i]f you ever dare utter one word as though you were possessed of three names39 you will be dragged by the heels and thrown out the door.”40 These transgressive speech communities forced people to interact outside of their regular speech communities, and certainly played a large part in affirming in the minds of everyone involved that they were indeed from different classes.

As the words of Martial and Juvenal indicate, transgressive commensality was not always a lighthearted undertaking, and as Donahue points out, not as complete an inversion of roles as it might seem. He notes that in the Kalends of December there are still indications of people being separated by class, something expressed even in the quality of foods they received. Rare occasions saw complete transformation of roles, but more commonly it might have been a shared meal together between a master and his slaves.41 No matter the level of change from normal festal activity, transgressive commensality and the resulting transgressive speech communities were a means by which social standing was reinforced. It crossed the boundaries of everyday interactions and emphasized that the participants were separated by a chasm of social inequality.

Each category of commensality reveals that no matter the setting or size of a meal, the social implications were beyond simple conviviality. A good time might be had, but this was not just a good time. Social hierarchies being strengthened, lines were being drawn and re-evaluated, and in the balance hung Roman identities.

Having established that every kind of communal meal, no matter the scale or expressed reason for the event, was a way in which power was demonstrated, we can look more closely at the specific sounds one might have been privy to in the course of a banquet. Whether the sounds were born from entertainment or conversation amongst the participants (or lack thereof), each was yet another way the host could further convey his status. Removed from its context, any single one of these elements or sounds might not have carried much meaning, but considered within the social framework referenced above, where relationships of patronage and power were forever being defined, the soundscape of a Roman banquet could be exploited to great effect.

The most obvious source of sound produced at any Roman feast would certainly have been from the entertainment. Slaves might act out dialogues or short plays. Acrobats sometimes performed stunts and gymnastic routines. Poetry recitations or readings from well-known books were also popular, as was dancing and various comedic performances. The most popular source of mealtime amusement, however, was music.

The instruments used by musicians can be divided up in much the same way we do today in terms of strings, woodwinds, brass, and percussion. Most

37 Ruden, (2000), 144.
38 Martial, Book 11.6.
39 To be a Roman citizen of standing was to have a three part name, a praenomen, nomen, and cognomen.
40 Juvenal, Satire 5.
of them would also have a present-day analog, or would be fairly recognizable as something close to an instrument still in use. The most popular instrument, the tibia, is one of the few that might not have a modern equivalent. Though commonly referred to as a flute, which was also a popular instrument, the tibia differed in that it was a double, reed-blown pipe. Lyres, harps, and lutes were among the stringed instruments that found favor with Romans, along with a variety of percussion instruments. Brass instruments is a term that must be used loosely, as Roman instruments were not actually made of brass, but a wide variety of metal trumpet-like instruments were utilized. Trumpets were particularly common because of the loud sounds they produced. In addition to their musical function, they were used in military situations and to sound alarms of all kinds. The specific instruments that came into play at a Roman feast were not as important as the relationship Romans had with music and musicians in general.

As was the case with much of Roman culture, the music Romans enjoyed was appropriated from older, neighboring cultures. What is unique is the fact that the Romans never sought to improve upon their predecessors. The early empire saw the growth of professional musicians, most of whom were foreigners - first Etruscans, then Greeks. Romans “were prepared to admit that when they had come across the Greeks’ very sophisticated tastes and techniques in music they [chose] to be listeners and admirers rather than competitors.” This attitude discouraged amateur musicianship, further increasing the need for foreign musicians, and boosting the prestige that came with being able to afford to hire them to perform at an event one was sponsoring. Virgil writes of a “fat Etruscan” playing ivory pipes at a sacrifice (which would no doubt be followed by a feast). In his satires, Juvenal describes Greek musicians who had achieved a level of success akin to the pop stars of today.

This rare instance of humility, in which Romans generally accepted that they were not the best at something, did not prevent music from becoming an integral part of civic life. “Trumpet players were indispensable to public entertainments of every kind. A tradition that can be traced from the late Hellenistic period to the second century of the Roman Empire ordained that musical and theatrical contests begin with competitions of trumpets and heralds...trumpeters were also necessary for the gladiatorial games.” The use of musicians and the playing of instruments was a way in which an event could call attention to itself, and by virtue of that, the person responsible for the event. Music could beckon onlookers, or even control them. “Needless to say, there was an element of ostentation involved, and for the gossips after a wedding the burning question would be, ‘How many trumpeters did they have?’” In Petronius’ satire *Trimalchio’s Dinner*, Trimalchio, a newly rich freedman, hosts a dinner where guests are made uncomfortable by the trumpet blasts which come between courses. Later in the dinner, when the guests were drunkenly enacting their host’s funeral, there was such a racket made by the trumpeters that the local fire brigade burst in, having mistaken the noise for a fire alarm.

A story from Plutarch’s *Roman Questions* also illustrates music’s importance. In 311 B.C., having been deprived of their privilege of dining at the public’s expense in the Temple of Jupiter, the *collegia* of musicians withdrew from the city of Rome, leaving no one to play music for sacrifices, festivals, or banquets. The musicians, after refusing to return to the city, were lured to a banquet in Tibur where there would be “women present, as well as wine, and a party lasting all night.” Having drunk until dawn, the musicians passed out and were gathered up and brought back to the city. Upon waking, they were convinced to remain, but only after having their dining rights restored and being given permission to commemorate the occasion annually by parading around Rome in drag. Apparently excess and eccentricity are traits that have been common to musicians for quite some time.

That such efforts were made to trick the musicians into returning, and that they were given such considerations upon doing so, show

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that the Roman elite knew well of music's ability to harness power. Attali writes, "When power wants to make people forget, music is ritual sacrifice, the scapegoat; when it wants them to believe, music is enactment, representation; when it wants to silence them it is reproduced...Thus [it] heralds the subversion of both the existing code and the power in the making, well before the latter takes place." The act of having music at a banquet or public event was not simply a matter of entertainment. It could placate. It could reaffirm existing notions of social order. It could control. The sounds of entertainment could also be used to gain dominance in far subtler ways. In smaller, private dinners, readers could be used to show that the patron was a person inclined toward more republican, traditional values. Titus Pomponius Atticus, a good friend of Cicero's and a proponent of the aforementioned values, was said never to have employed more than a reader at his dinners. Pliny the Elder was said to enjoy taking notes on a book that was read to him while he dined. Though not the type of control that inspired fear, these instances were designed to say something about the host and his ability to assert power, not politically, but intellectually. In Trimalchio's dinner, the host fails in his attempts to show off how learned he is, bungling several references to the Odyssey, and confusing historical facts with fiction. Though he may not have been the most erudite man present, he was the wealthiest - a fact that trumped his scholarly inaccuracies.

Trimalchio notwithstanding, intellectual prowess was a very coveted thing among the learned Roman upper class and was most often proclaimed through one's aptitude for oratory. "Ciceronian" is still an adjective used to describe a person whose speech is characterized by their facility with words. Competition in conversation during any banquet must have been fierce, with each man doing his best to top his fellow diners. The only person exempt from this brand of gamesmanship would have been the emperor. To engage in verbal sparring with the princeps was to put oneself at odds with the source of patronage one was seeking, a fact that was not lost on anyone, including the emperor.

Some emperors, like Augustus, endeavored to alleviate the tension a situation such as this might create. "He cultivated a simple and easy oratorical style, avoiding purple passages, artfully contrived prose-rhythms, and 'the stink of far-fetched phrases', as he called it; his main object being to say what he meant as plainly as possible." His presence at feasts was expectedly intimidating for guests, and knowing this, Augustus took pains to include himself in the general discussion of the evening. By adopting this plain-spoken manner of speech and mixing freely with his dinner guests, Augustus minimized the differences between him and the other citizens, and gave assurance that he would uphold the very republican values that had been destroyed when he became the emperor. Not everyone to hold the title of princeps was so prudent as to use conversation to marginalize the fact he was in absolute control. Caligula was a notoriously vicious emperor and given to all manner of excess, two characteristics he never attempted to hide. "At one particularly extravagant banquet he burst into sudden peals of laughter. The consuls, who were reclining next to him, politely asked whether they might share the joke. 'What do you think?' he answered. 'It occurred to me that I have only to nod and both your throats will be cut on the spot.'" Where Augustus demurred, Caligula demonstrated.

To showcase dominion over the people attending a banquet through lavish entertainment or through speech was one thing, but another way to display one's authority was through silence. To hold sway over people in such a way as to eliminate sound is to state control in a fashion that even the most cacophonous noise or threatening words cannot. One way in which this can be exemplified was by the behavior of slaves.

Slaves were an important part of a banquet of any size. In addition to serving food they carried out numerous tasks, and a high value was placed on having as many as possible. Sometimes the number of slaves was greater than the number of diners. Pliny the Elder remarked that "nowadays, our food and

52 Suetonius, Life of Augustus, 86.
53 Ibid., 74.
54 Suetonius, Life of Caligula, 32.
drink need to be protected from the crowds of dining room slaves.” It was often the case that, unless their job specifically involved making notifications of some kind, slaves were forbidden to speak. Seneca the Younger paints an awkward picture of mute servants standing everywhere. “Slaves may not move their lips, even to speak. Their slightest murmur is repressed with the rod; the chance sound - a cough, a sneeze, or a hiccup - is visited with the lash. There is a grievous penalty for the slightest breach of silence. All night long they must stand about, hungry and dumb.” Some slaves might have used this restriction as a passive-aggressive way to assert themselves. Juvenal complained of a page silently ignoring his request for water, while others grumble under their breath. While this was not always the case, we must imagine there were times when a mob of noiseless slaves, sometimes outnumbering the guests, loomed over a banquet, each one an inaudible, but poignant reminder of their patron’s power.

The control of sound extended beyond servants and could be exerted on guests, but in a less direct way. Any appearance made by the emperor was a kind of theater. It was an act, of sorts, meant to display imperial grandeur. Total silence was not required for this, but by examining how people were seated it can be demonstrated that conversation between guests sometimes took a back seat to sitting in awe of the emperor.

Traditionally, Roman diners were seated in a fashion adopted from the Greek symposium. Guests reclined on a kline, a bench fitting three people. Three klinai were placed together with one end left open, creating a squared U. This basic shape was called a triclinium, a word that became a catchall for the benches used, and for the room in a house designated for banqueting. Being set up in this manner with guests facing each other, the triclinium lent itself well to conversation. As banquets grew during the empire and the number of guests swelled, the triclinium became a less tenable configuration. Its shape, though conducive to small groups, did not allow for all attendees to face in one direction and have a similar focus. For this reason, the triclinium was eventually supplanted by the half circle shaped stibadia. Between five and twelve people could now sit at one station, but more importantly, the stibadia could be arranged in such a way that every guest was facing the same direction. Rather than two-thirds of each table facing each other as in the old way, which allowed for a more convivial atmosphere, a diner’s gaze was now directed towards one end of the room where the emperor would have been. Imperial banquets were no longer social events, but became almost ceremonial in function. Diners were meant to behold the emperor, and show him their respect.

Domitian, host of public feasts in the Colosseum, ensured his private banquets were no less colossal. He famously built a huge dining hall on the Palatine Hill, called the Domus Flavia. Flanked on either side by elaborate gardens and fountains, his triclinium was perhaps the grandest of them all. At banquets, he sat on a raised couch placed in a large apse at one end of the room and stared down intimidatingly at his clients. The guests, now seated in stibadia and with nowhere else to look, gazed forward to their patron on high. And with voices hushed, they watched, waited, and listened for what the emperor would do next. The Roman banquet, which had begun from the tradition of the Greek symposium where interaction between equals was expressly the point, was transformed into an event whose purpose was not about verbal exchange among equals, but quiet reflection on the power of one man.

It might seem like requiring quiet from wealthy, high-ranking men who were supposedly free was the ultimate display of power, and to those men, it likely felt that way. However, one must consider the long-term implications of these events and the way in which they might continue to influence people in the years to come. The very fact that modern people still pay mind to many of

55 Pliny the Elder, Natural History, 33.26
56 The nomenclator would have been one such exception. A sort of mealtime crier, their job was to announce guests as they arrived, each course of food as it was brought out, and the gift each person received when leaving. The vocator was tasked with assigning places at a meal, a position that also required speaking. See D’Arms, “Slaves,” 171.
57 Seneca the Younger, Moral Epistles, 47.3.
58 Juvenal, Satire V.
59 Reclining at a meal was an Assyrian practice that the Greeks had taken up. See Wilkins, (2008), 5.
these practices is a testament to their enduring power. In name alone, Julius Caesar retains a gravity that most will never approach. If that kind of dominance rings out so loudly after two thousand years, we can safely assume it was strong enough to stick with a Roman banquet guest for many years, if not a lifetime.

The formation and recollection of sense memories in human beings is a peculiar thing, as anyone who has ever been reminded of an event through the stimulation of a sense can attest. How we recollect past events is determined by which portions of the brain are activated in the future. There is no storage closet in the brain where something is placed and then taken out when needed. Siegel states “Memory storage is the change in probability of activating a particular neural network pattern in the future. The neural net of the brain can activate a set of anatomically and chronologically associated firings in response to the environment.”

A simple explanation of this can be found in pioneering work of Donald Hebb. Hebb’s Law says “neurons that wire together, fire together.” In essence, a memory, once formed, can be aroused by any number of things associated with it.

Going further, senses can also be cross-referenced with one another so that a taste might evoke the memory of a sound, or vice versa. These synesthetic bonds can be particularly strong in the case of the senses mentioned above. Westgate writes, “The memory of taste is often primed by sound. According to priming theory, prior presentation of a noise or a sound can trigger a memory which makes a concept, such as taste, more accessible.” Being linked in that way, hearing and taste can come together to form a single sense. Synesthetic bias frequently makes it impossible to consider the secondary senses separately. For example, taste is often referred to as a secondary sense, since it is also dependent on smell. Taste and smell are so intertwined that they are referred to as one thing: the oral sense. Consequently, this requires a more complex approach than the usual aesthetic interpretation. Though the sensory inputs might come from multiple channels and stimulate multiple senses, they can combine to form one message.

In his essay “Waterfalls of Song,” Steven Feld addresses the expression “sense of place,” exploring what “sense” means in this case. He says that “as place is sensed, senses are placed; as places make sense, sense make place.” As such, we can speculate that when a person attending a banquet is subjected to an expression of power by way of sound, that sound is then registered within him and becomes a signifier of his subordinate role, and will remain so after the banquet is over.

Given all this, the soundscape of a Roman feast was not an evanescent thing, fading into the night, and out of memory when the last guests went home. With the auditory and gustatory senses in concert, memories of an event could be recalled by a person over and over again throughout his life, and with those memories, the accompanying assertion of power. A Roman banquet, indulgent as it might have been, was not simple hedonism or a conspicuous show of wealth. It was a way in which one could display power in a very specific and long-lasting manner. “Consuming food and drinks together may no doubt activate and tighten internal solidarity; but it happens because commensality first allows the limits of the group to be redrawn, its internal hierarchies to be restored, and if necessary to be redefined.” The relationship between patron and client was not only a dynamic one, but one of dynamics. It required constant updating and reinforcement, and those who had power or wished to gain it used feasting as a means to that end. Whether it was a public celebration, a private dinner amongst colleagues, or an imperial banquet, the company one kept at the table defined host and guest alike. Within that complex framework of Roman commensality, the soundscape was an element which could be intentionally manipulated to strengthen one’s social standing. Be it through entertainment or to

61 Siegel, Developing Mind, 26.
62 Ibid.
control who spoke and when, the soundscape of a Roman banquet was quite important, and its effects would reverberate beyond the walls of a triclinium for many years to come, providing potent reminders of who was in power.

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