Wystawa czasowa
UCZTA NA PROGU WIECZNOŚCI

Temporary exhibition
A FEAST ON THE THRESHOLD OF ETERNITY

ENGLISH VERSION

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Customs that combined feasting with the cult of the dead were widespread in the ancient world. Men and women reclining on couches while offering wine sacrifices were portrayed on Egyptian tomb stelae dating back to the time when the state was under Roman rule. These depictions, together with the sacrificial altar and ancient vessels from the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw and the National Museum in Poznań, are displayed in the Górka Palace. The objects are accompanied by materials describing the care that the ancient Mediterranean people took to ensure that their loved ones could feast forever in the afterlife. The visitors to the exhibition also have an opportunity to explore the concept of syncretism – the fusion of ideas and elements of different religions. Reflected in the art created by the inhabitants of the land on the Nile, it prompts researchers to reflect on the religiosity of the Egyptians throughout the centuries that followed the conquest of this region by Alexander the Great.

Some beings pass away, perish; others take their place and endure. So make your day joyful and let it not bore you, for there treasures are not taken, for from there you do not return...

The Harpist's Song

UCZTOWANIE W CZASACH STAROŻYTNYCH
FEASTING IN ANCIENT TIMES

A feast is a sumptuous party at which a variety of foods are eaten. It is not a casual meal at the end of the day but a well-planned and prepared social gathering where everything must be in abundance (for both body and spirit). Feasting was a privilege reserved for more affluent groups of society. The vast majority of ordinary citizens did not have time, funds or opportunity to celebrate. Nevertheless, the idyllic vision of life after death (including eternal feasting at a lavishly set table) was and still is a common human desire, which is why the motif of feasting has often appeared in funerary contexts.

The ancient inhabitants of the fertile land on the Nile usually ate three times a day, focusing on a substantial breakfast and a nutritious dinner. Feasts were organised in the evenings when more pleasant weather and fewer work-related obligations encouraged relaxation and entertainment. The wealthy enjoyed lavish feasts, while the less affluent section of Egyptian society participated in public events. The Egyptian calendar was full of state and religious festivals.

Both men and women were invited to the Egyptian feast. Unlike their Greek and Roman counterparts, Egyptian women enjoyed much freedom, privileges and respect. They decided for themselves about their property and marriage and could perform various functions in socio-religious life. They took an active role in social gatherings on an equal footing with men and did not shy away from alcohol or other pleasures.

The staple food on the Nile was grain (barley and wheat), used to make bread and beer (a type of thick drink with low alcohol content) for daily consumption. Unfortunately, no recipes for more elaborate dishes have survived, and everything we know about ancient Egyptian cuisine is based on iconographic analyses and archaeological research.

Banqueting scenes, displayed in large numbers in the tombs of wealthy Egyptians, were supposed to magically ensure eternal access for the deceased and their family to a wide variety of foodstuffs, even if they rarely appeared on the table during their lifetime. By preparing for their

journey to the other world, the Egyptians hoped to experience the pleasures they had while alive, and feasting certainly was one of them.

In ancient Greece, the organisation of feasts was rather formalised. The feast usually consisted of a celebratory dinner followed by *Symposium*, which literally means "drinking together". Notably, this was a social gathering exclusively for men, usually from the same social group. The only women allowed to join the feasting circle were servants and *hetairai*. In the representative part of the house, couches called *klinai* (singular: *kline*) were set up, three in the shape of a horseshoe, making a comfortable *triclinium*. The Greek feaster would dine in a half-lying position, leaning on his left elbow, the right hand reaching for snacks or holding a *kylix* with wine. This position was supposed to emphasise the relaxed nature of the gathering and was believed to allow better digestion during the long feast.

The Greek feast had its master, the symposiarch, who kept the party in order, took care of the entertainment and even decided on the alcohol content (wine was usually mixed with water in different proportions). An essential part of the Greek feast involved offering in honour of Dionysus, with praise and a toast for the god. Such a libation could last "until the last guest".

The ancient Romans also usually ate three times a day. They did not pay much attention to the place of consumption, often eating out and enjoying specialties in local fast-food bars. The first two meals were quick and light. The afternoon dinner (Latin: *cena*) was the crucial moment of the day. The Roman aristocracy often held feasts, which were important social events.

Following the example of the ancient Greeks, the inhabitants of the Roman Empire dined reclining on couches, since eating while standing up during a feast was considered rude and disrespectful to the host. The company at a Roman banquet was mixed. The participation of women – free citizens, had evolved over the centuries. Eventually, on an equal footing with the men, they would recline on couches enjoying all the benefits of the gathering.

In terms of dishes served, the course of a Roman feast is perfectly reflected in the motto "Ab ovo usque ad mala" (from eggs to apples). It

began with small, light appetisers and ended with desserts. Everything was seasoned with spices and garnished with sauces (including garum, an intense-tasting sauce made of fermented fish). Roman feasts were famous for their sumptuousness and sophistication. The more bizarre the composition of the dishes and the more unusual the combination of ingredients was, the better. Food was not only supposed to taste good but, above all, to impress the guests with its appearance or the way it was served. The Romans, also following the Greek model, mixed wine with water. The feast could last long hours, sometimes ending at sunrise.

SYNKRETYZM RELIGIJNY
RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM

The term syncretism, which comes from the Greek word meaning "amalgamation", refers to the blend of different beliefs, practices or philosophies. In religion, it involves merging originally unrelated traditions, seemingly or actually contradicting each other. This process often leads to the emergence of a new religious system assimilating various rites, rituals and deities.

The syncretism was reflected in art, and the stelae from Kom Abu Billo are an excellent example here. Their iconography combines many intertwining elements of Egyptian and Hellenistic art. The depictions of figures and clothing bear characteristics of the Hellenistic style. The rituals shown on the stelae are also of Greek origin. On the other hand, many decorative elements carry references to Egyptian culture and religion. Motifs characteristic of Egyptian funerary art appear commonly on stelae at Kom Abu Billo, testifying to the persistence of Egyptian culture in the face of numerous social and cultural changes.

CMENTARZYSKO W KOM ABU BILLO (GR. TERENOUTHIS)
CEMETERY AT KOM ABU BILLO (GR. TERENOUTHIS)

The Kom Abu Billo cemetery was discovered in Lower Egypt, in the midwestern part of the Nile Delta. It was located on a hill with slopes descended gently to the south and east, while its western periphery bordered the higher plateau of the Libyan Desert. The neighbouring

settlemet played a particularly important role during the Greco-Roman Period (4th century BC - 4th century AD) when it became an important centre for the salt and soda trade on the route leading from Wadi Natrun to the Delta area.

Human remains discovered in the cemetery mainly date from this period. The bodies of the deceased were not deposited in coffins (as had been the case earlier) but directly in the ground. The corpses were oriented along the east-west axis, with their heads facing west. They had their eyeballs replaced with glass beads, and a row of coins was put on the body. The bodies were covered with a layer of plaster painted black and red. Richer burials were additionally decorated with elaborate gold foil.

Above-ground tombs made of dried bricks were built in a way that evokes the ancient Egyptian concept of the three realms of the universe. According to this idea, the tomb's vault would symbolise the skies, the lower part of the above-ground structure – the earth's surface, and the tomb's foundations – the underworld. The tomb stelae were placed in an east-facing niche in the upper part of the tomb structure – the “cosmic zone” inhabited by the gods.

Directly opposite the eastern wall of the tomb, the sun was born every day. The stele, placed in the niche, became a cosmic gateway leading to the west. During the day, the deceased would make a solar journey across the sky towards the western edge of the horizon and then re-enter the portal to the underworld.

During the excavation research carried out in the 1930s (University of Michigan) and between 1955 and 1976 (Egyptian Department of Antiquities), over four hundred limestone gravestones were discovered at this site.

PARENTALIA (łac. Dies parentales)
PARENTALIA (Latin: dies parentales)

Prentalia (Latin: dies parentales) was a nine-day festival held in honour of family ancestors. It began on 13 February with the official procession of the Vestals to the tomb of Tarpea, and ended on 21 February at

Feralia (according to Ovid) or 22 February at *Caristia* (according to John the Lydian). During this time, temples were closed, marriage was forbidden, and magistrates did not wear their insignia. Families held processions to perform rituals on the graves of their loved ones. They decorated burial sites with flowers and made offerings of water, wine, milk, honey, oil, and the blood of sacrifices. They greeted the dead with the words "Salve, sancte parens!" (Welcome, holy parent), symbolically shared a meal with them and asked them for favours.

Feralia was a public festival that marked the end of Parentalia. On that day, the living would make offerings at graves in the form of garlands, scattered grain, violets, and bread dipped in wine.

Caristia was a privately observed holiday when families reunited to dine together and offer food to the souls of deceased family members (*Lares*). It was a day of reconciliation when disagreements were to be set aside.

ANUBIS

Anubis was one of the most important deities in Egyptian funerary traditions. He was believed to invent a method of embalming human corpses to protect them from decomposition. Without his intervention, the dead could not begin their transformation into immortal beings. Anubis oversaw all aspects of mummification. He guided the dead to the underworld, opening successive monster-guarded gates for them to bring them safely before Osiris.
In the Book of the Dead, Anubis often appears in the scenes showing the judgement of the dead, during which the process of weighing their souls was carried out. It was this god who oversaw the fairness of the ceremony.

The vital role of Anubis in local beliefs is evidenced by the depiction of this god on over a hundred stelae at Qom Abu Billo – mainly as a small dog-like creature resembling the jackal. On some stelae, the jackal had not been part of the original relief but was engraved later in the remaining space, probably by another craftsman. Its presence indicates a strong local belief that the depiction of Anubis was proper and even

necessary on a gravestone. Those added engravings were not just decorative elements copied mindlessly but meaningful symbols, still vivid among the people of Qom Abu Billo.

HORUS
was the son of Osiris and Isis and one of the most important deities in the Egyptian pantheon. He was the protector of the Egyptian monarchy, the god of heaven and war responsible for the world order. Already the first kings of Egypt were viewed as the divine Horuses. In the Greco-Roman Period, all the mythical and magical aspects of royal power began to be attributed to this god.

There are many forms of the deity under this name, which scholars consider separate entities. All of them were portrayed as falcons or a man with the head of a falcon. At the cemetery of Qom Abu Billo, Horus-falcon appeared on stelae more rarely than the jackal, but when he was portrayed, it was always in the company of a jackal. On some stelae, he was carved with the double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt (Gr. ψχεντ) – a reference to his role as protector of the Egyptian monarchy.

None of the images of Horus-falcon on the stelae from Kom Abu Billo gives the impression of having been carved carelessly or amateurishly. On the contrary, their meticulous craftsmanship and the presence of divine attributes suggest that this symbol continued to be closely associated with Horus during the Roman Period and remained relevant to the local people.

UCZTA POGRZEBOWA
FUNERAL FEAST

The funeral feast was a popular motif featured in the art of many regions of the ancient world. Depictions of the deceased sitting in front of an offering table laid with food appeared on Egyptian objects already in the Old Kingdom. From the Ptolemaic Period (from the 4th century BC onwards), they started to resemble the depictions known from Greece (e.g. type of clothing, figures half-lying on the bed). Still, they remained formal, with human bodies stylised typically of the canon of Egyptian art.

The people portrayed are reclining on the bed, holding vessels with a drink in their right hands. Sometimes the vessel is tilted, indicating a drink offering.

The inhabitants of ancient Egypt may have viewed this representation as a way of providing the deceased with an endless source of food and joy. The depictions of funerary feasts on the stelae at Qom Abu Billo may have given a new symbolic meaning to the funeral custom originating in the Hellenistic Period or even earlier. The presence of this tradition in Egypt is confirmed by the discovery of so-called "funerary houses" with characteristic feasting beds (*kline*) in the Hellenistic tombs at Marina El-Alamain.

OFIARY DLA ZMARŁYCH W EGIPCIE CZASU FARAONÓW
OFFERINGS TO THE DEAD IN PHARAONIC EGYPT

The tradition of offering food to the dead in Egypt dates back to the Predynastic times (before 3000 BC). In the tombs of this period, the researchers found the remains of jugs and plates used as offering containers. The offerings included beef, poultry, fruit, vegetables, cake and beer. Later, different kinds of food or their representations were placed in the niches of brick graves and in front of a so-called false door.

A false door was a stone stele placed in the outer wall of the tomb or in an offering chapel – right next to the shaft of the burial chamber, over the area where the sarcophagus was located. It symbolically connected the actual resting place of the deceased with the site where offerings were made. A false door was covered with inscriptions with the offering formula, the names and titles of the dead, sometimes accompanied by detailed information about their lives. Its upper part was decorated with a representation of the deceased sitting behind an offering table. A false door was believed to be a magical passage for the soul, enabling it to travel to the world of the living and benefit from offerings made in the chapel to its *ka*. In the ancient Egyptian tradition, these offerings were essential to ensure life after death.

OFIARY DLA ZMARŁYCH W OKRESIE RZYMSKIM

MUSEUM COPY

OFFERINGS TO THE DEAD IN THE ROMAN PERIOD

In the Roman Period, offerings were left in front of a tomb stele depicting the deceased, on a platform outside the symbolic entrance to the grave. The presence of the stele "on the threshold of eternity" made the front part of the tomb a meeting place and a transitional zone between the upper and lower worlds. The image of the deceased depicted on the tombstone may have acted as a “lantern”, guiding the wandering soul (*ba*) on the way to the underworld.

On numerous stelae at Kom Abu Billo, figures are portrayed while making a wine offering by pouring the contents of the vessel over a small altar. This was a popular motif in Greek and Roman art. In dynastic times, wine was reserved for the gods and aristocracy; however, over the centuries following Alexander the conquest by Alexander the Great, the culinary tastes of the local population were influenced by the Hellenistic culture that was passionate about wine. As a result, wine consumption and demand for this beverage in Egypt increased considerably in the Greco-Roman Period.

Similar altars were also used for offerings made by burning incense. In the beliefs of the ancient Greeks and Romans, the rising stream of smoke from burning incense was a way to communicate with the gods.

UTENSYLIA BANKIETOWE
FEASTING UTENSILS

A set of utensils made in bas-relief or painted under the beds of the dead on tomb stelae at Kom Abu Billo included:

- a bunch of stalks - schematic representation of cereals or flowers
- an amphora - on a stand; sometimes equipped with a scoop
- a table - set with a jug and two mugs

When more people were depicted on the stele, the craftsman was given more space to fill with images of utensils. He added an extra bunch of stalks to the composition or a representation of a jackal (usually in the upper part of the stele) under the bed. Occasionally, small images of

human figures were portrayed among the utensils. These were servants taking a drink from an amphora with a scoop. Probably they had a similar role as ushabti – figurines placed in Egyptian graves, offered by the relatives to the deceased to serve them in the afterlife.

There is an interesting observation related to the scoop itself. If the amphora was depicted on the right side of the table, it lacked a scoop. However, if the table itself was on the right, the amphora was always equipped with this utensil. Researchers assume that the layout of the table and the amphora among the feast utensils may have been a trademark of different craft workshops.

ORANCI
ORANS

The orans posture – with the raised hands outstretched sideways and the elbows close to the sides of the body – used to be a typical prayer posture in ancient Egypt. In dynastic times, a figure portrayed in this way was shown in profile, facing the deity. At Kom Abu Billo, the figures with raised hands were depicted from the front.

The orans are dressed in Ionic chitons with folds marked by diagonal patterns. A characteristic line drawn over the heads of some figures may represent a strip of cloth ending with fringe. Such belts can be interpreted as shawls or scarves worn on the head by bereaved women. Male figures wearing this clothing item, on the other hand, evoke ancient Roman artworks, where priests and people making offerings were always portrayed with their heads covered.

In ancient Greece and Rome, figures of orans made in bas-relief often appeared on votive monuments, which were intended to portray the founder of the stele while offering thanks to the god. They were also depicted on Roman sepulchral stelae, where they served a similar function – depicting the deceased while alive, giving thanks to the gods.

Researchers point to the similarity of the figures portrayed with uplifted arms to the Egyptian hieroglyphic symbol meaning *ka*. In Egyptian theology, *ka* is an untranslatable term that defines a principal aspect of

the human soul. It is regarded as a carrier of creative and life-giving forces, a symbol of uninterrupted life energy passed on from generation to generation. It is created at a person's birth and continues to exist after death.

The dead buried at Kom Abu Billo portrayed on the stelae as orans, are depicted while performing the act of worship – a ritual, which in this case appears to be a prayer of thanksgiving.

ŁÓDŹ
BOAT

The boats depicted on tomb stelae at Kom Abu Billo can be interpreted in relation to the ancient Egyptian tradition. One of the earliest Egyptian doctrines regarding the afterlife refers to a postmortal journey in a solar barge. According to the Egyptian religion, there was a cosmic gateway on the eastern horizon where the deceased would emerge every day in the boat. During the day, they would make a journey across the skies, ending at the western edge of the horizon to re-enter the portal to the underworld. Since the Land of the Dead was located in the west, many Egyptian settlements located on the east bank of the Nile founded their cemeteries on the opposite side of the river. Thus, it was believed that the dead made their last journey in boats.

In some cases, the presence of a boat on a burial stele may indicate the profession of the deceased during their lifetime. For example, the figures portrayed may have been sailors or fishermen. The vessel could also commemorate the individuals who suffered death by drowning in a river or at sea. The location of Kom Abu Billo on the Nile suggests that the lives and deaths of its inhabitants were closely linked to this great river.