

registers of intellectual engagement. If we add to this the task Cicero sets us of following the conflicting and often intricate trains of argument he presents to us and making our own response to them, we find ourselves faced – I submit – with a uniquely challenging form of philosophical dialogue.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ In commenting on Alex Long's paper at the March 2006 colloquium, I offered some remarks that were the germ for this paper. Early versions were read to gatherings in Cambridge and Oxford in May 2007. I am grateful to Roberto Polito and Jean-Louis Labarrière respectively for invitations to speak, and my audiences for their comments. I would also like to thank Simon Goldhill for the opportunity of contributing to this volume, and for a number of kindnesses.

*Sympotic dialogue in the first to
fifth centuries CE*

Jason König

SYMPOTIC QUESTIONS

Many of the essays in this volume, the introduction included, interrogate the idea that Christian writers felt uncomfortable with the dialogue form, and so either neglected it completely or else used it very differently from their Greco-Roman or Jewish counterparts. There are reasons for expressing reservations about those formulations. Most strikingly, it is easy enough to amass a long series of counterexamples: many Christian writers did write dialogues.¹ However, one area where dialogue form does come to a very conspicuous halt is in the area of sympotic writing.² The Greek literature of the Roman Empire is saturated with descriptions of sympotic commensality and philosophical conversation. For whatever reason, literary representation of the symposium seems to have been an attractive vehicle for writing which explores and dramatises the relations between Greek past and Greek present (more on that below). But it is hard to find anything in Christian literature which resembles Plato's *Symposium* or Xenophon's, or even the more loosely structured, miscellanistic composition of Plutarch's *Sympotic Questions*, with their vivid sketches of social context and their conversational style, or of Athenaeus' more chaotic compilation of quotations and erudite sympotic discussions, the *Deipnosophists*. Methodius' *Symposium* is one exception. But there is little to match it within the landscape of surviving Christian writing throughout the long period of

¹ See Hoffmann (1966); Voss (1970).

² Martin (1931) assumes a clearly defined sympotic genre, and usefully outlines some of the recurring sympotic motifs which helped to signal membership of it; while I agree that there are many texts (including the four main texts discussed here, by Plutarch, Athenaeus, Methodius and Macrobius) which represented themselves as part of a sympotic tradition descended from Plato's *Symposium* – and I will sometimes use the phrase 'sympotic genre' as a shorthand for that tradition – it also seems to me important to go beyond Martin's excessively rigid model, and to recognise that many texts which contained sympotic motifs had a more marginal or hybrid relation with that Platonic tradition, though without being clearly separable from it.

