

## Fish, Food, and Floors: A Mosaic from a House Near the Athenian Agora

While many texts from classical Athens survive, the excavated houses are less numerous and not very well known. Their unprepossessing remains account for some of this neglect; mudbrick walls have dissolved back into dirt and remaining today are only their lowest courses, some domestic assemblages, and three mosaic floors. It is argued here that, despite their exiguous ruins, Athenian houses provide evidence of the luxury (*tryphē*) that began to pervade the Greek domestic environment in the fourth century BCE. The decor also speaks of the symposium, continuing in the late Classical period and at least into the early Hellenistic. That event is known well from poetry, Plato's dialogue, and the representations on drinking cups. One particular theme flowing throughout the poetry, philosophy, paintings, and pavements is that of the sea, a metaphor for travel, drunkenness, and luxury.

This paper concentrates on a pebble mosaic in a fourth century BCE house on the slopes of the Areopagos. The mosaic decorated a canonical seven-seater (*heptaklinos andron*), the space where dining and drinking commonly took place. The figures depicted on the floor belong to the realm of the sea- a dolphin and a sea monster (*ketos*), with traces of fish seen on the sides of the floor at the time of excavation. The pavement can be read simply, as have many Roman mosaics depicting fish, as a vivid representation of *Xenia*. Seafood was generally expensive in classical antiquity and any host who served fish was treating his guests luxuriously. Arcestratos, the mid-fourth century Sicilian writer whose *Life of Luxury* was contemporaneous with the floor, chronicled the many delights of the table, exactly what would have been enjoyed in this room. Symposium, text, and decor thus all demonstrate the same overlapping themes.

The cooked fish and the mosaic fish who swim on the floor were also echoed on some of the tableware of the late Classical period. The fish-plate was developed in Athens in the early fourth century as a vessel to enhance the presentation of this desirable foodstuff. The upper surface of the plate was often decorated with images of fish and the theme of the sea was underlined by the wave motif often appearing on the edge of the central well of the plate and on its overhanging rim.

Several scholars have noted that the realm of the sea and the world of Dionysos came together at the symposium. Dionysos sails in Homer's *oinops pontus* in a cup by Exekias, thus echoing a passage in Hermippos (63 Kock). Warships ply the wine-dark sea on the rims of sixth century dinoi. Symposiasts were likened by Euripides (*Kyklops* l. 577) to sailing vessels or by Dionysios Chalkous (fr. 5 West; *ap.* Athenaeus 10.443c) as "sailors of a symposium and rowers of cups". Timaeos of Tauromenion (*ap.* Athenaeus 2.37b-e) tells of a house called the Trireme in Agrigentum where symposiasts became so inebriated that they imagined that the house was a sea-tossed ship. Wine was often mixed with sea water, perhaps in honor of Dionysos Pelagios, but also to aid digestion and to prevent hangovers.

Dolphins were more than simply denizens of the watery world of Dionysos Pelagios; they were also well known as saviors of drowning men. Pertinent to aural accompaniment of the symposium, the dolphin was regarded as a musical creature, *philaulos* or *philomousos*. The blowhole of the dolphin is called an *aulos* by Aristotle (*Historia animalium* 537a-b). Thus the dolphin swims on the Athenian floor but pipes for the drinkers above and is perhaps given voice by the actual *auletes* performing for the symposiasts.

The Athenian mosaic seascape may have been further enhanced by the spills and broken pottery left after a symposium. The game of kottabos, in which dregs of wine were tossed at little vessels floating in a bowl must have resulted in many a cup lying shattered on the floor. Choirilos of Samos (fr. 9 Kinkel; *ap.* Athenaeus 11.464b) referred to broken cups as "a shipwreck of feasting men". When the drinking game was over the mosaic seascape below was completed with the sherds of drinking cups lying like shipwrecks amongst the sea creatures. The drinkers themselves who were reclining on *klinai* in much the same position as Dionysos himself did on the deck of his ship on the Exekias cup had sailed around the watery expanse in which dolphins, fish, and sea monsters swim and where now sunken vessels lay. The grey pebbles of the floor's background were made darker with the spilled wine.

The Athenian floor connects well with the theme of Dionysos and the sea, long-traced as a theme in Athenian vases intended for the symposium but not until recently considered for the interior decoration of the *andron*.