

The Archaic Greek *Symposion* and the Culture of *Sophrosyne*

The Greek *symposion* was a drinking party for aristocratic males. It was a pan-Hellenic institution with specific customs and rituals, and its high point was the archaic period (Wecowski 11-12). After discussing the most important elements of the *symposion*, I will place it in its cultural context, arguing against those scholars who see it as the core of an aristocratic "cult of *habrosyne*" (luxury) that resisted political change (particularly the development of the polis), and with more recent scholars who see the *symposion* as a flexible institution that helped to make the polis possible. I will argue further that, far from being the center of an aristocratic cult of luxury, the *symposion* was part of a pan-Hellenic "culture of *sophrosyne*," that was endorsed by both the aristocracy and the rising middle class.

The *symposion* included 14-30 participants who reclined in pairs on banqueting couches (Murray 1990: 7), and it had its own culture and rituals, including libations to the gods, passing the drinking cup from left to right, a *symposiarch* (who would determine the nature of the games, the order of play, and the prizes and penalties), and the games themselves. These games included riddles, poetry contests, and tests of skill (such as *kottabos*), and they formed the heart of the *symposion* (Wecowski 40-49). There were prizes for the winners and penalties for the losers; importantly, these tests of wit and skill could not be performed well if the participants were excessively drunk (Wecowski 52). Much of the archaic Greek lyric poetry we possess today was originally composed for the *symposion* (Murray 2009: 509-10).

Leslie Kurke and Ian Morris, building on the work of Oswyn Murray (1990, 2009) have argued that the *symposion* was part of an aristocratic "cult of *habrosyne*" or luxury (Kurke 1992, 1994; Morris 1996). Kurke and Morris see *habrosyne* as both an elite lifestyle and a political creed, and they see the *symposion* as its central expression. On this view, *symposia* were

luxurious affairs, imported from Lydia, with hosts and guests dressed in their finest. The membership of each sympotic group remained relatively stable, and non-aristocrats were scrupulously excluded. The cult of *habrosyne* was the cultural expression of the aristocracy's desperate, and ultimately futile, attempt to maintain their political dominance against the rising middle class. The middle class, on the other hand, along with progressive aristocrats, endorsed an opposing ideology of moderation that found expression in the rise of the polis, and eventually triumphed (Morris 1996).

While some scholars have embraced this theory (Ferrari 2010), others have been more critical (Hammer 2004). Recently, Marek Wecowski has criticized Kurke and Morris' views based on a thorough re-evaluation of the symposium itself (Wecowski 2014). As Wecowski has shown, the *symposium* was not imported from Lydia (Wecowski 147), and the membership of sympotic groups was fluid, with new participants joining (including the rising middle class), as others dropped out (Wecowski 62). Most importantly, the *symposium* was not an occasion for the lavish display of wealth; rather, the focus was on the equality of the participants and their social interactions, expressed through poetry, games and other competitions (Wecowski 119).

I would argue further that, far from indulging in a "cult of *habrosyne*," both aristocrats and the rising middle class shared a common "culture of *sophrosyne*." Defined as "moderation, self-control, and the acceptance of limit," (North 10), *sophrosyne* is praised throughout Greek literature, from the *Iliad* (Nestor and Polydamas) to the *Odyssey* (Alcinoos, Eumaios and sometimes Odysseus), to Hesiod (*Works and Days*), Solon (fragment 4W), Archilochus (19W, 128W), Sappho (148L-P, 158L-P) and even Alcaeus (38A L-P). *Sophrosyne* was not confined to those who embraced a "pro-polis ideology," and it was not the exclusive purview of the rising middle class. While delight in luxury was certainly part of the *symposium*, the shared culture of

sophrosyne encouraged participants to indulge only moderately, so they could excel at the games.

Bibliography

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