

Μηδὲν Ἄγαν: Overindulgence in Sympotic Imagery

The Greek symposium was an important social institution that allowed the male citizenry to socialize, drink, and showcase their engagement with the arts. The symposium of Classical Greece has received much attention in the past few decades, particularly thanks to the extensive scholarship of Oswyn Murray (1994). However, much of the scholarship avoids in-depth discussion of overindulgence at the symposium and its social, not to mention physical, consequences and taboos as conceptualized by the participants. Cook et al. (2007) provide a cursory analysis of alcohol misuse in the context of a symposium as described by Greek texts and there are generalized descriptions of drunkenness in popular histories (cf. Davidson 1997), but they do not mention the breadth of sympotic imagery of over-intoxication. While there are comprehensive analyses of meta-sympotic imagery (Topper 2012 and Lissarrague 1990), these largely ignore depictions of excessive inebriation. Alexandre Mitchell (2009) published an in-depth analysis of humor in Greek vase-painting, including that which is found in over-intoxication; however, this analysis does not fully explore the social implications of open drunkenness in a Classical Greek *polis* or the meaningful interaction between the reveler and his own representation on the vessel from which he drinks.

In this paper I show that there is a particular type of imagery that depicts symposiasts defecating, vomiting, and urinating after overindulging in alcohol consumption. This ultimately serves as a type of playful warning to the citizenry of Classical Greece: be wary of excess! The common scene of a reveler who has overindulged and, consequently and embarrassingly, lost control of his own bodily functions appear on drinking paraphernalia that would have been used to service the convivial event. Such drinking paraphernalia includes the *kylix*, the drinking cup

par-excellence, as well as other vessel shapes used to hold wine like the *krater* and *pelike*. Interestingly it is the type of vessel and the location of these pictures that add an interactive element for the drinker. These images appear in prominent places on drinking vessels meant to be used in symposia, most notably the tondo of the *kylix*, where scenes of a partygoer expelling bodily fluids immediately confronts the drinker in a very intimate way. As a participant drinks from the vessel, an image reveals itself.

In order to better understand the social implications of excessive drinking expressed through sympotic imagery, I further contextualize the concept of *metron* (moderation), or lack thereof in this case, through literary evidence. These cultural understandings of excessive drinking and *metron* are well-expressed in Greek texts, including Eubulus and his levels of intoxication (*Frag.* 94), a poem by Theognis describing moderation with wine consumption (837-840), and Plato with his warnings against such drunkenness until a proper age when the participant may appropriately call on Bacchus to ward off general crotchiness (*Laws*, 666) as well as his descriptions of embarrassing intoxicated behavior in his *Symposium*. Only non-human, anti-*polis* creatures get intoxicated to the point of uncivilized behavior, not the male citizens who are most commonly depicted in these sympotic scenes disregarding the rules of *metron*.

Participating in a formal symposium had deeply rooted social implications for its participants; sympotic imagery would have encouraged upright social behavior and civility in a comical and whimsical way. This imagery also appears to target the male citizenry who would have been actively participating in civic duties and most at risk for tarnishing reputations and undermining social obligations.

Bibliography

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