

ATHENS AND ROME: LIFE AND CULTURE IN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

Lecture 11 – Symposia and Strigils

CLCS4007

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Symposia

Symposium

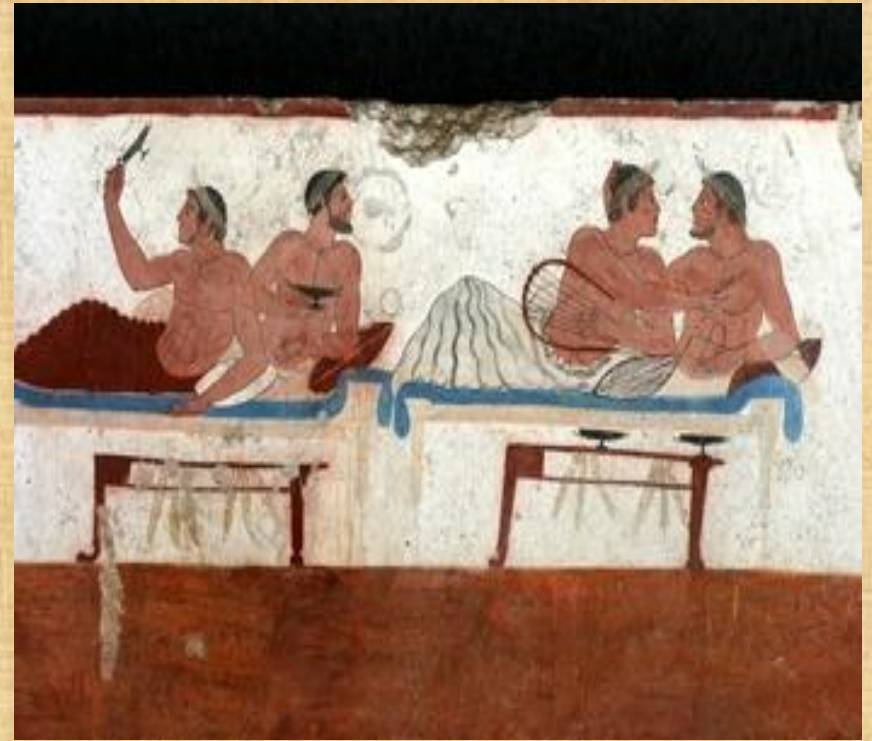
- ❑ Συμπόσιον – a drinking party, entertainment.
- ❑ Strictly speaking the symposium is the post-eating stage of the banquet where drinking for pleasure took place.
- ❑ Recreation in the form of conversation, dancing music.
- ❑ Gathering of male friends (no wives or citizen women were present) – popular among the elite.

“When the tables had been removed and they had made libation and paeon (poem or song of thanksgiving), they were joined by a Syracusan, with a view to entertainment. He had with him a girl who was a good aulos-player, and a dancing girl who was one of the top stunt-artists, and a very pretty boy who was particularly good on the kithara and at dancing.” – **Xenophon** *Symposium* 2.1-2.



Location and Organisation

- ❑ The symposium would often be held in the *andron* (men's-room) of one of the participants houses.
- ❑ Usually reclined on couches.
- ❑ Wine usually mixed with water to prevent excessive drunkenness.



Banquet scene – Paestum,
Italy – c. early-fifth
century BC.

Symposia as Highbrow Affairs

- ▣ A place for philosophical discussion and thought among friends.
- ▣ Plato *Symposium* – discussion on the origin, nature and purpose of love.
- ▣ Xenophon *Symposium* – witty banter between those present.
- ▣ Plutarch *The Banquet of the Seven Wise Men* – fictional diner conversations of some major figures, like Socrates.
- ▣ Athenaeus *Deipnosophists* – historical and literary conversations.

“... Well then, said Eryximachus, ‘ now that this is the decision, that we’re to drink as much as each of us happens to want, with no compulsion on anyone. I propose that what we should do next is to let the aulos-girl who came in just now go off and play her instrument to herself, or if she likes, to the women in their quarters, and that for today we should entertain each other with talk...” – Plato *Symposium* 177.

Symposia as Lowbrow Affairs

“The old man was a wild beast at the party. Awful, simply awful! The worst piece of drunken behaviour I’ve ever seen! Drunker than all the rest... After he had gorged himself with food and drink, he jumped up and began to dance about, farting and insulting people and laughing... That’s how he insulted every one of them, all of them one by one! Laughing at them all, like a real peasant and spouting off all sorts of stories, totally inappropriate to the situation. Then, after he’s thoroughly drunk he makes his way for home, belting the hell out of everyone he comes across...” **Aristophanes *Wasps* 1300-1324.**

Socially Destabilising Events

- ▣ Mystery of the Herms and profanation of the Mysteries:

“Accordingly, I told the Council that I knew the culprits, and I gave convincing proof of what had happened. I told them Euphiletus had brought up the idea while we were at a drinking party...” –
Andocides 1 *On the Mysteries* 61-63.

The Civic Banquet

- ▣ Often followed a public sacrifice in which the sacrificial meat would be distributed to those present.

“The Athenian populace realises that it is impossible for each of the poor to offer sacrifices, to give lavish feasts, to set up shrines, and to manage a city which will be beautiful and great, and yet the populace has discovered how to have sacrifices, shrines, banquets and temples. The city sacrifices at public expense many victims, but it is the people who enjoy the feasts and to whom the victims are allocated.” – **Old Oligarch 2.9.**

Cleanliness and Hygiene

Gymnasium



- ❑ Communal bathing in the Gymnasium – exercise followed by washing down.
- ❑ Rub oil, and sometimes perfume, on each other then remove it with a strigil – a curved tool designed to remove sweat and dirt from the body.



Red-figure Attic vase c.
460 BC – Vatican
Museum.



Bronze strigil c. first
century AD – Walters
Art Museum

Hot-Baths as Morally Dubious

“[Just-Discourse speaking] But you [Unjust Discourse] teach the children of to-day to bundle themselves quickly into their clothes, and I am enraged when I see them at the Panathenae forgetting Athena while they dance... follow justice and truth; you will then be able to shun the public place, to refrain from the baths...” – **Aristophanes** *Clouds*.

Public Baths in Classical Greece

- ▣ Archaeological and literary evidence attest the existence of public baths outside the Dipylon Gate in Athens from fifth century BC onwards.



Greek baths at Gortys (Crete) c. fourth-third centuries BC.

“But a report having been circulated, that some of the gold had been taken away and had been adulterated with silver, Hiero was indignant at the fraud, and, unacquainted with the method by which the theft might be detected, requested Archimedes would undertake to give it his attention. Charged with this commission, **he by chance went to a bath, and being in the vessel, perceived that, as his body became immersed, the water ran out of the vessel.** Whence, catching at the method to be adopted for the solution of the proposition, he immediately followed it up, leapt out of the vessel in joy, and, returning home naked, cried out with a loud voice that he had found that of which he was in search, for he continued exclaiming, in Greek, εὕρηκα (I have found it out). – **Vitruvius *On Architecture* 9.10.**

Greek Baths in the Roman Period

- ▣ Construction of baths under Imperial or local benefaction (civic euergetism).

“The emperor Caesar Flavius Vespasianus Augustus built the bath from the money saved by him for the city.” – Cadyanda, Lycia – *IGRR* 3.507.

“Proklos Bito, in three years, built the Bath of Imperial Apollo and Serapis, along with all its decorations, after Titus Catius, the benefactor and patron, proposed it.” – Smyrna (west coast of Turkey) - *IGRR* 4.1440.