

INTRODUCTION: VASE PAINTING AND THE SYMPOSIUM IN ATHENS

If we may judge from almost any handbook or museum display devoted to Athenian art, symposia were never very far from a vase painter's thoughts. These parties, at which citizens of the *polis* gathered for an evening of wine, conversation, and entertainment, are illustrated by the hundreds on Archaic and Classical vases; a psykter by the Kleophrades Painter shows a typical example, in which the drinkers encircling the vessel recline on long mattresses and occupy themselves with various sympotic pastimes (Figure 1).¹ A man guzzles wine from two cups at a time, while the youth turning to face him raises a cup for *kottabos*, a game that involved tossing the dregs of the wine at a target in hopes of winning the affections of a favorite slave or prostitute.² The figures are crowned with garlands and clothed in the typical himatia of citizen men.

Over the past few decades, scenes such as this one have assumed a central place in efforts to illuminate what has been called the social imaginary of ancient Athens, as scholars have increasingly come to see images on the vases as important primary sources for ancient Athenian mentalities.³ Lissarrague's *Un flot d'images* definitively established the importance of sympotic imagery to an understanding of ancient Athens, and every subsequent study of the symposium (and, arguably, of vase painting) remains indebted to his book.⁴ In addition to providing a compelling demonstration of the ways in which the vases offer a glimpse into the mental universe of the people who used them, his work contributed to a growing body of scholarship centered on ancient rituals



of commensality. Thanks to Lissarrague, along with Murray, Davidson, and a number of other scholars who worked on the topic in the 1980s and 1990s, the symposium is now widely acknowledged as a key to understanding Archaic and Classical Athenian society, since it played a crucial role in strengthening bonds among citizen men and defining the relationships around which the community was structured.⁵

Investigations of the symposium traditionally draw on a wide range of evidence, from poetry to architectural remains to comparative ethnography,⁶ yet the painted vases of Archaic and Classical Athens occupy a privileged place in our understanding of the institution. As objects that were sometimes used by the symposiasts themselves, and that are often decorated with scenes of symposia and related activities, the vases are commonly treated as a form of direct access to ancient life, a status that is not usually claimed for other kinds of evidence. This approach informs even the most sophisticated analyses of the imagery. To take one example, Lissarrague's close attention to individual vases enabled him to uncover numerous metaphors and associations that structured the Athenian experience of wine, and in insisting on treating the images as sources for ideas rather than for ancient realia, he established a new direction for the study of sympotic imagery.⁷ Nevertheless, his analyses proceeded from the assumption that the images were inspired by the lives of sixth- and fifth-century Athenians, a premise that subsequent studies of the symposium have almost unfailingly adopted.⁸

The notion that the so-called nonmythological vase paintings show contemporary life has exercised a firm hold on studies of vase painting for well over a century,⁹ but it has lately come under pressure from scholars dissatisfied with the intuitive and unsystematic manner in which "scenes of life" are recognized and interpreted.¹⁰ As Bažant observed more than thirty years ago, many modern ideas about what vase paintings represent are traceable to specific intellectual concerns of nineteenth-century scholars;¹¹ the familiar categories of "myth" and "life" do not arise naturally from the images themselves. More recently, Ferrari questioned the basis for the category called "scenes of contemporary life," which, on close inspection, turned out to be a chimera assembled from a variety of pictures whose only common feature is the absence of any detail that can be connected to a known myth.¹² It seems clear now that the subject



1. Greek, Attic. Attributed to the Kleophrades Painter. Red-figure psykter: Symposium (drinking party). Ca. 510–500 BC. Ceramic, h. 34.0 cm., diam. mouth 12.7 cm., smallest diam. neck 9.5 cm., diam. body 24.8 cm., diam. stem 11.1 cm., diam. foot 14.2 cm. (13 3/8 × 9 3/4 × 5 × 4 3/8 × 5 9/16 in.). Republic of Italy, Ministry of Culture, Department of Archaeology (L.2007.42.3). Photo: Bruce M. White.

matter of most “nonmythological” imagery on Athenian vases remains unknown.

The scene on the Kleophrades Painter’s psykter belongs in this broad category of “unknown” imagery (Figure 1); while nothing suggests a connection to a known myth, there is also nothing that positively identifies it as a depiction of contemporary life. The same has to be said of most sympotic imagery on the vases. In fact, it is remarkable that although modern studies generally define the symposium as a communal after-dinner party at which men reclined on couches in an *andron*, drank mixed wine and were entertained, and eventually participated in a komos,¹³ no



definition consistent with this description emerges from the pictures. The symposiasts on the vases recline on couches, on the ground, and outdoors; they are old men, mature men, young men, women, barbarians, heroes, satyrs, and gods; they drink alone and in the company of others; they drink wine mixed in kraters and neat from wineskins; and the subsequent komos may include a variety of activities and participants. Just how are we to understand the relationship between these images and the symposia that were occurring in Athens at the time of their production?

This is the question that inspired this book, and while it is one with which numerous previous studies have grappled,¹⁴ my own attempt at an answer is distinguished by a rejection of the premise that contemporary Athenian life is known to be the subject of (or inspiration for) any image under consideration. Because of the vast scope of the question at hand, I do not attempt a comprehensive treatment of the imagery; rather, it has been necessary to limit the sample of images with respect to both chronological range and specific subject matter. Chronologically, I have chosen to focus on scenes that fall between approximately 530 and 450 BC, a period that saw the production of hundreds of sympotic images in both black and red figure.¹⁵ This period also witnessed a decline in the political strength of Greek aristocracies, a point that has lately been brought to bear on our understanding of the symposium, and which will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.¹⁶

Choosing specific types of scenes on which to focus an investigation was a more difficult task than setting a chronological range. If so many practices depicted on the vases fit so poorly with what we believe the Athenians did at their symposia, then by what criteria should we define an image of a symposium? The problem of how to select a meaningful corpus for analysis, which dogs the study of Greek vase imagery,¹⁷ is compounded in this case by the lack of an accepted definition of the symposium. Only rarely have scholars attempted to define the symposium in a way that is more systematic than impressionistic, and it is telling that one of the most thorough existing efforts claims only to move “*Towards a Definition of the Symposium*.”¹⁸ My own use of the term to describe the images on the vases tends in the direction of the impressionistic: the word *symposium* is used in this book to designate any image that combines reclining figures and wine, although in

Introduction



5

some cases a reclining figure's surroundings make the sympotic context clear even in the absence of wine vessels. I have adopted this approach not because I believe that developing a precise definition of the symposium is unimportant, but because I want to resist defining the images in terms of a contemporary social practice when one of my central arguments is that contemporary life may not provide the best framework for understanding the scenes in question. It is for similar reasons that the terms *symposium* and *banquet* are used interchangeably in the chapters that follow. Modern scholarship observes a division between the symposium and the *deipnon* that preceded it,¹⁹ but the images often do not, so attempting to distinguish between the two here would in most cases be an exercise in false precision.

Developing a working visual definition of the symposium takes us only so far toward creating a manageable corpus, however. Hundreds of images fit this definition, so it was necessary to narrow the sample even further. There are numerous possible ways to do this, each arbitrary to some degree, but each also determined, in part, by the questions one is attempting to answer. Because one of the goals of this project is to move beyond the mode of thinking that posits myth and contemporary life as the only options for interpreting the sympotic scenes, I have chosen to focus on several types of the so-called nonmythological scenes that correspond poorly to the modern conception of Archaic and Classical Athenian sympotic practice. The core chapters of this study are thus organized around four (not always distinct) types of scene: the symposium without furniture, the symposium attended by handsome young wine-servants, the symposium with barbarian guests, and the symposium with female guests. The next section briefly lays out the arguments of each chapter.

The Symposium and the Past

The four types of scenes that form the core of this book were chosen because of their potential to expand our understanding of the sympotic imagery beyond its current focus on life in sixth- and fifth-century Athens, but at the outset it was not clear whether they had anything else in common. In each case, however, it gradually became apparent that ideas about the world as it once was played a significant role in



determining the content of the images. In many cases, the subject is the Hellenic past itself, while other images show the imagined lives of non-Athenians whose customs were understood to resemble something out of the early stages of human history; still other scenes may depict the present reconfigured to resemble the past. The book does not treat every image of a symposium in Athenian vase painting, and the conclusions do not imply that the past (or a world that resembles it) is the subject of every sympotic scene on the vases. Nor do they suggest that we should necessarily treat the less obviously problematic images as depictions of contemporary symposia. Rather, each of the following investigations is offered as a starting point for future study of the symposium and its imagery, since collectively they reveal an ancient understanding of the symposium and its place in the world that is different from what is now believed.

At least two distinct strands of thinking about the past can be detected in the images examined here. One concerns the lives and deeds of heroes and their contemporaries; the other involves sympotic practices, and sometimes human beings themselves, at their origins. This broad division corresponds roughly to a distinction Vidal-Naquet has observed between legends, on the one hand, and “myths of origin, or about the development of order,” on the other;²⁰ the further nuances of each category will become evident. Whether all these strands may be woven together into a single coherent narrative about the sympotic past is of less concern than the fact that they share many of the same implications for the ways in which symposia should be practiced in Archaic and Classical Athens. Together, the following chapters argue, the images define the symposium as an ancient Hellenic institution that owed its form to a long civilizing process in which proper relationships between male and female, adult and child, Hellene and foreigner were gradually worked out; in fact, the images suggest that thinking about the development of the symposium became a way of thinking about the development of civilization, a strategy comparable to one that has been documented for Rome.²¹ Though most evident in the imagery, these traditions are also remarkably consistent with the understanding of the sympotic past that can be gleaned from the surviving literature. They do not, however, cohere with many modern scholarly beliefs about the development of the symposium, and throughout the book I have tried to avoid assuming

Introduction



7

that the ancient Athenians shared our understanding of the history and development of this institution.

As the first chapter argues, in fact, Archaic and Classical ideas about the history and development of the symposium differed markedly from those that dominate current scholarship. This chapter aims to untangle ancient perceptions of the earliest symposia from our own, and in particular to demonstrate that a current widespread understanding of the reclining banquet as an Orientalizing import associated with luxury and moral decline is inconsistent with the evidence for Archaic and Classical Greek beliefs. Athenaeus, whose *Deipnosophistae* remains one of our most valuable sources of ancient testimonia about the symposium, apparently had some notion of sympotic reclining as a practice connected to luxury and moral laxity (8.363f, 10.428b), but the Athenians of the sixth and fifth centuries BC do not seem to have shared this view. On the contrary, the literary and visual evidence from this period associates the practice of reclining to drink with heroes such as Herakles, Achilles, and Theseus, as well as with the city's earliest autochthonous residents.²²

Building on the arguments of the first chapter, Chapter Two looks in detail at some of the ways in which the images on the vases present the reclining symposium as an ancient and fundamental part of Hellenic identity. This chapter focuses on the symposium that is held on the ground without furniture, a theme appearing on more than 200 Athenian vases from the period under review. Together with surviving literary evidence, these images suggest an ancient understanding of the banquet on the ground as a feature of primitive societies,²³ including those of the earliest Greeks. This kind of society was also home to the figure who forms the subject of Chapter Three, the nude adolescent who serves wine to the symposiasts. This figure has fit uncomfortably into modern scholarship, which tends to identify him as either an idealized slave or a young citizen in the making,²⁴ but I argue that he is instead one of the wellborn children that the Athenians imagined to have performed servile tasks both for their early ancestors and for the heroes. Together with the conclusions drawn in Chapter Two, this argument provides a foundation for the discussion in Chapter Four, which reevaluates a small corpus of vases depicting symposia attended by guests who wear barbarian headgear. Although these scenes have played a prominent role in discussions of the symposium as a site for the Athenian reception of Near Eastern



culture, the identities of the “barbarian” figures remain obscure.²⁵ Building on the previous chapters, I argue that these scenes (which share key features with the images analyzed in the earlier chapters) show the symposia of the earliest Hellenes, whom the Athenians envisioned as not yet distinct from *barbaroi*, and that they thus define the symposium as the common legacy of Greece and its eastern neighbors.

In a departure from the earlier chapters of the book, Chapter Five takes the world of the painters – Athens in the sixth and fifth centuries – as its starting point. This chapter focuses on the female symposiast, who is almost universally identified in scholarship as a *hetaira*, despite dramatic variations in her clothing, activities, companions, and surroundings. The chapter questions the standard identification of all female symposiasts as *hetairai*, particularly because the *hetaira* is a product of the Archaic and Classical *polis*, which is demonstrably not the setting for many images of symposia with female guests. Although the visual features that define a *hetaira* have yet to be established with any degree of certainty,²⁶ the vases examined in the fifth chapter make it clear that the painters’ interest in the female symposiast was more varied than the modern focus on the *hetaira* can accommodate. In fact, her frequent participation in primitive, foreign, or otherwise atypical symposia suggests that she is first and foremost a transgressive figure whose presence underscores her fellow banqueters’ distance from civilization.

The scenes analyzed in Chapters Two through Five comprise more than half the total number of sympotic scenes collected in preparation for this study and collectively suggest that the contemporary Athenian symposium was of less interest to vase painters and their customers than is usually assumed. Yet this estimate leaves a considerable number of scenes that fall outside the categories discussed in those earlier chapters, and the nature of their relationship to the Athenian symposia of the Archaic and Classical periods is poorly understood. These remaining scenes are the subject of Chapter Six, which uses select images to explore the claim that the pictures on the vases show the symposia of sixth- and fifth-century Athens. Building in particular on recent studies that cast doubt on the standard interpretation of naming inscriptions as reliable signs that a scene is based in contemporary life,²⁷ this chapter highlights substantial gaps that remain in our knowledge of the visual features that define the Archaic and Classical symposium.

Introduction



9

Although this book is primarily about sympotic images on Athenian vases, its arguments have consequences for our understanding of the symposium as a social institution. The realization that the painters – and, presumably, their customers – were deeply concerned with the symposium as a feature of the Hellenic past runs counter to a widespread assumption that the Greeks associated the origins of the reclining symposium with the cultures of the Near East. This belief is a central component of a popular hypothesis that defines the symposium as the exclusive province of the elite, particularly in the Archaic period. According to this hypothesis, a belief in the non-Greek origins of the symposium contributed to its close association with an aristocracy that defined itself by values antithetical to those of the *polis* at large, and by the late Archaic period, symposia had become havens from the “middling” values progressively encroaching on the traditional aristocratic way of life.²⁸ This idea, which has exercised enormous influence on our understanding of the symposium during the last few decades, is undermined by the discovery of a tradition that rooted the institution in Hellenic soil. In addition to calling for a reevaluation of our approaches to the sympotic imagery on the vases, then, this book joins a small but growing body of scholarship that argues against an exclusive connection between the symposium and an elite that identified itself with the cultures of the east.²⁹ As the following chapters will demonstrate, participation in the symposium was represented in the sixth and fifth centuries as an important element of Hellenic identity and a prerogative of all citizens; in fact, to the extent that they document the need to exclude women and underage boys from symposia, the images seem to be more concerned with the gender of the symposiasts than with their class.

Word and Image, Shape and Subject, and Foreign Markets

Three additional aspects of the book’s methodology, all subjects of some controversy, require discussion at this point. The first concerns the relationship between visual images and literature in Archaic and Classical Greece. Recent years have seen a flood of scholarship on this topic, with some scholars arguing for the relative autonomy of the two domains and others understanding images and words to be mutually influential components of a culture’s system of communication.³⁰ The scholars of



the Paris-Lausanne school who collaborated on the *City of Images* project in the early 1980s were especially influential in advancing the latter view, and they laid the groundwork for a tradition of approaching the visual imagery as a semiotic system analogous to language, alongside which it could profitably be analyzed.³¹ More recent studies have suggested refinements to their approach, emphasizing, among other things, the need for closer attention to the specifics of an image's content to complement the attention already paid to its place in the symbolic order in which it is embedded.³² This tradition of scholarship, which neither divorces the imagery from the literary evidence nor treats it as its slavish dependent, provides the methodological foundations of this study, which frequently brings ancient literature to bear on the interpretation of the pictures, on the assumption that visual and verbal representations are informed by (and themselves inform) shared ideas about the world.³³ It is in this spirit, too, that I introduce evidence from theatrical performance and religious ritual, which are treated in the following chapters as forms of representation subject to the same cultural influences as the visual arts and literature.³⁴

The second methodological issue concerns the treatment of the vases themselves. Over the past few decades, scholars have increasingly emphasized the importance of shape in the interpretation of imagery, a claim that is spectacularly justified by instances in which painted decoration transforms the surface of a vessel into something else – for example, a mask, in the case of the eye cups.³⁵ It is also clear that certain themes were especially suited to particular shapes: scenes of weddings frequently appear on *loutrophoroi*, and many white-ground *lekythoi* bear funerary themes. More often, however, the correlation between shape and subject is not so evident, nor is the significance of the placement of scenes on an individual vessel. For instance, does it matter that the *kottabos* player on a *kylix* in Boston appears in the tondo of the cup rather than on its exterior (Figure 2)?³⁶ It probably does, but because *kottabos* players also appear on the exterior walls of *kylikes* (as well as on other shapes), it is difficult to say precisely how the placement of the scene matters without a thorough examination of *kottabos* players and of the imagery associated with tondos. The connection between image and shape merits investigation in its own right, and in order to avoid a superficial treatment of the topic, this book does not comment extensively on shape, except to note