

The Greek Symposium

Transcript

Lauren Dogaer

Have you ever found yourself asking why alcohol plays such a big role across so many cultures? Striking a balance between moderation and excess isn't just a modern struggle. It goes back to ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Roman Empire. I'm Lauren, and I'm a postdoctoral fellow in Egyptology at the University of Oxford. I'm fascinated by how today's issues mirror the past, from ancient health warnings to peer pressure at Greek symposia. We're exploring it all. Join me as we get drunk on history and uncover the timeless truth behind our drinking habits. Hello everyone, and welcome to the third episode of the Drunk on History podcast. This time we are getting drunk on ancient Greek history, and it is my pleasure to introduce Nadhira Hill. She is an assistant professor of Classics and Archaeology at Randolph Macon College in Virginia. She's mainly working on households, drinking practices, ceramic production, and cultural interaction in classical and Hellenistic Greece. And last but not least, she wrote a fascinating PhD on Decentering the Greek Symposium, which will also form the main topic of today's episode. So Nadhira, welcome to the podcast.

Nadhira Hill

Thank you so much.

Lauren Dogaer

Before we dive into the Classical Athenian Symposium itself, could you perhaps give a short temporal background for our listeners and explain a little bit what is the Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic period of Greece and give a few examples of the most well-known archaeological sites in those periods?

Nadhira Hill

Yeah, no problem. So the Archaic period is roughly from about 600 to about 480 BCE. And the endpoint of that is usually associated with the Persian Wars, so the kind of conflict between the Greeks and the Persian Empire. And then the 480 to about 323 BCE is the classical period. And again, we have kind of a historical event that goes with the endpoint of that, which is the death of Alexander the Great. And then the Hellenistic period usually is associated with the death of Alexander and then everything that happens kind of after him and how his empire gets divided up. And the endpoint of that can be kind of debated depending on where you're looking. So either the sack of Corinth by the Romans in 146 or the death of Cleopatra in Alexandria in 30 BC. So there's a little

more fluid endpoints for the Hellenistic period. In terms of locations or main archaeological sites, Athens is a big one, especially for the Archaic and Classical periods. I did my dissertation on Olynthos, which is a little lesser known in the wider world just because it's a smaller site in northern Greece, but it's really important for studying ancient households. And then the Hellenistic period, most of these sites are associated with Macedon, so Vergina and Pella, also in northern Greece, in that kind of region that was central to the Macedonian Empire.

Lauren Dogaer

Thank you so much. We are of course going to focus on alcohol and drinking practices in ancient Greece. And there are different forms of what you called group drinking. So you have formal versus informal, private versus public, and secular versus religious. Could you maybe clarify these terms a little bit and give some examples so our listeners get a bit of an idea of what these terms mean?

Nadhira Hill

Yes, definitely. So I kind of think about the divisions based on the kinds of evidence that we have for them. So textual accounts are usually the most usually referenced, and those give us mostly insight into private drinking practices. So private meaning drinking that happens in the home or in the household, so these kinds of private spaces. Then we have vase painting, which is a little more ambiguous. We have lots of depictions of group drinking, but where those parties are happening is a little harder to determine because they don't really take place in a defined space in vases. So usually those are compared with private dining practices as well, based off of what we know from texts. And then archaeological evidence gives us the most evidence across a broader range. So things like public spaces where magistrates potentially are eating and drinking when they're having their meetings about what to do in their city-state. Religious spaces, we have evidence of drinking equipment and spaces also in sanctuaries, for example. And then informal events, I would say, can be found in any of these spaces. They can be public, they can be religious, they can be private, but they're a lot harder to access because we're so primed to look for those more formal forms of drinking like the symposium.

Lauren Dogaer

Thank you for setting the stage with all of these terms. Now we can specifically look at the Greek symposium itself. And before we dive into the specifics of who, what, where, and so on, could you maybe provide us with a sort of generally accepted definition of what a Greek symposium actually is?

Nadhira Hill

Yeah. So the Most traditional definition of this Greek symposium is an all male, sometimes nocturnal drinking party that takes place at home. That's kind of the way that it's always been seen, but over the years it has acquired other pieces that change depending on who's looking at it. But yeah, an all male drinking party taking place at home.

Lauren Dogaer

And with taking place at home, you are referring to a specific place in the homes through these kind of dining halls or andrones, they are called, which really formed an important part of these elite homes. So these halls in which these symposia took place, how did these rooms actually look like? Which kind of features do we sort of need for such a room to be called an andron.

Nadhira Hill

Yeah, yeah. So these spaces are associated so closely with the symposium for a lot of reasons, but one of the reasons is because there are usually features of those spaces that map on to elements of that drinking party where people are reclining on couches and having an intimate gathering. So you're looking for a smaller space, usually in the classical period, that's usually rectangular or square in shape. There's usually an off-center doorway in that space so when you're entering it's off-center because of the length of the couches which kind of forces the door to be pushed to one side. And then there's a raised platform also associated with the couches that goes around kind of in a band around the walls of the room. And then finally, they're usually decorated. So that's kind of how we can identify them as well in the archaeological record in Classical period, especially, but also in the Hellenistic period. There's usually some kind of mosaic or painted plaster on the walls, even in the absence of the actual couches themselves, which don't usually survive because they were made of perishable materials.

Lauren Dogaer

Could we then identify how many people would have been taking part in a symposium and would it always have been the same amount?

Nadhira Hill

Yeah, so there have been some studies, again, since we don't have the couches themselves, like thinking about how many couches there could be based on a standard length. I think about a meter is how big they usually would be. And they would usually accommodate two people each, as we know from some textual sources and some recreations of these couches. So I think the most standard size or the standard number number of couches in a classical andron is 7, which would mean there's about 14 people in that space. Usually, but we have a range of sizes at the site of Olinthos. There

are the standard size with seven couches. There are smaller ones that maybe only accommodated three couches. There are much bigger ones, especially at the palatial sites like Pella and Vergina at their palaces. We hear of rooms that are 35, accommodate 35 couches, which would be about 70 people. And we have accounts of dining rooms that accommodated maybe upwards of 100, 200 people. So it depends kind of on the way that you're thinking about what this banqueting setting or what the purpose of the banqueting is, which changes from the classical into the Hellenistic period. So yeah, there is a range of sizes, but there's a relatively standard size for the classical period.

Lauren Dogaer

Very interesting. Would there have been a sort of, I mean, I know we don't have the actual couches, but do we know if there would have been a sort of seating arrangement? As in, is it all egalitarian? Is everyone who's taking part in the symposium sort of equal? Or is there like a difference in who was allowed to sit where?

Nadhira Hill

Yeah, that's a good question. I have seen some discussion of people trying to figure out if that hierarchy existed, especially in relation to like where people are sitting by the door. And that's mostly again from textual sources, but in just looking at the space and how it's arranged without any of the extra information, we can assume that in the Archaic and Classical periods, the people within the space are relatively equal because they're all sitting in a circle, right, they're all able to converse. There's usually taking turns of contributing to a conversation or singing or poetry, which I know we'll get into a bit more in a bit. But in general, just looking at the space and the evidence itself, like the physical evidence, it seems more egalitarian versus a much bigger space in the Hellenistic period that's situated in a palace, which has more, of a hierarchy embedded in it because the king or the royal is the one that you're supposed to be paying attention to. You're supposed to be not engaging in conversation with your neighbors, but you're supposed to be beholding the king or the royal that is putting on this lavish feast.

Lauren Dogaer

So what would actually have been happening at a symposium? You already mentioned it's mainly male elites. They're all sort of egalitarian. And I know it's always in the literature assumed that, okay, this is used for political discussions. The symposium was really the place where a lot of important decisions were taken. But of course, you already mentioned there was also poetry, there was dancing, there was reading. So how did these different activities work? Was there like a sort of fixed sequence of what was supposed to happen or was it more a spur of the moment thing?

Nadhira Hill

Yeah, so I think we don't have a whole lot of evidence for like what actually was happening, right? We have texts like Plato's Symposium, which is probably the best example of like how a symposium works from beginning to end. In that work, they all seem there is a host, but there is kind of agreement on what they're going to discuss and what they're going to do that evening. And because it's Plato, they're having a philosophical discussion the whole time. There is mention of entertainment of various kinds beyond the discussion, like flute girls, dancers, acrobats also mentioned in other works that feature a symposium. In addition, There are vase paintings, of course, that kind of reinforce those activities. So even though we don't know what they're talking about in the vase paintings, there's a suggestion of conversation and interaction between the participants of the symposium. There's almost always someone that is serving them wine. So drinking, of course, is central to this event. There's almost never or very rarely depictions of food. So that clear distinction between eating and drinking is emphasized in the vase painting. And frequently, we have depictions of games. So the kottabos is one that's pretty famous, I think well known from vase painting, but also from some textual sources where you basically are flinging the wine at a target across the room, which I always have associated with things like beer pong or some kind of drinking game like that.

Lauren Dogaer

I didn't know they were playing drinking games at the Greek symposium. This is an interesting revelation. Would there have been someone in charge of the symposium? And if yes, who would this person have been? Was it the same person as the one organizing the symposium?

Nadhira Hill

Yeah, so usually it would be the person organizing the symposium. So in Plato's symposium, the text Agathon I think is the person whose house they're at, but also the person who is technically in charge of the event. There's also other examples of this. But in general, we would assume that the person, kind of like today, you go to someone's house and they're having a dinner party, right? They're the one that's in charge of the dinner party because it's at their house. And usually, they're the one that provides the space, right? They've put in the effort to have this kind of andron that's been constructed in their house, which is not a small task. They've provided the entertainment, the food, if there's little hors d'oeuvres, the wine, but they also make decisions usually about the strength of wine, the rules for who gets to speak when or in what order. And generally they just try to prevent the party from collapsing into chaos, right? They try to maintain the order because someone kind of needs to, otherwise it'll get pretty out of hand.

Lauren Dogaer

Good to know they had someone who tried to calm them all down that they didn't, went too crazy. Of course, we already talked about it for a symposium, you need wine and in order the people to drink the wine, you need pottery. So both drinking and mixing vessels as the wine would have been diluted with water. Could you talk a little bit about the ceramic assemblage that would have been needed and how big we should imagine these kinds of vessels were they reused for several symposia or were they thrown away afterwards and so on.

Nadhira Hill

So in terms of the kinds of vessels, they need a large vessel to mix their wine in because they were diluting it. And we have lots of sources that talk about how much that dilution should be. And again, the symposiarch, the person that's in charge of the symposium, usually would be the one to decide how dilute or not their wine would be. So the krater is the most commonly associated vessel for mixing with the symposium. It would usually stand at the middle of the room, and then we have evidence of ladles or smaller vessels that would be used to distribute the wine out. And then we have lots of different kinds of drinking cups. I won't name them all because, you know, that's what I do. But the main ones for the Archaic and Classical period were the kylix, which is the shallower stemmed cup, very commonly associated with sympotic drinking, although we see them in lots of different contexts. So, right, public spaces where magistrates are drinking, we have them there, we have them in sanctuaries, so not necessarily just associated with that private drinking commonly associated with it. And then that shape kind of falls out of favor by the Hellenistic period and is replaced by the kantharos, which is another stemmed cup, but it has more elaborate kind of handles and is probably referencing a metal version of it to kind of make it more luxurious and more desirable for these elite groups in the Hellenistic period. So we do see a shift, but generally the same kinds of drinking vessels, relatively similar sizes or ranges of sizes because kylix, those can be also very large or very small depending on where you look. So in terms of how many vessels you need for a particular event and then whether they reuse them, I would say they probably are reusing them over a period of time and we do have evidence especially in the kraters which as you might imagine they're bigger so they're more expensive perhaps they're highly decorated so they get mended over time which suggests that they are valuable or potentially heirlooms and we have evidence of like lead clamps that would have been used to mend these vessels so we can imagine they're being used for a long time. Drinking vessels were probably also being reused, but they break easier, right? They're smaller, and people are handling them more, so you drop one and then maybe you have to replace it. So there's probably a higher number of drinking vessels to the kraters. So you might have one krater to like 30 cups in an assemblage.

Lauren Dogaer

Thank you for providing us with a little bit of numbers to the cups because I really had no idea how many vessels you would actually need for a symposium. And you already mentioned that there were some changes over time in the kinds of cups and vessels that they were using, but were there also other changes? So did the symposium at some point become more accessible for less elite people? Is there some kind of democratization going on, or is that not something we can see in the sources?

Nadhira Hill

Yeah, that's a good question and it is something that I tried to tease out in my research. I personally am of the opinion that the symposium was specifically an elite event. And I think the problem that I've seen or that I've tried to unpack in my research is whether we should use the term symposium to talk about all forms of drinking. Because I think, and I've tried to figure out a way to get at those more informal drinking practices and like how do we see them in the same way that we're seeing sympotic drinking. And I would say that everyone is drinking probably all of the time, they're just drinking in different ways. So I would say that the symposium is more squarely associated with elites and that sure there are other people that maybe are using the same kinds of vessels and maybe they're doing their drinking events in a similar fashion and they're doing similar things, but I wouldn't necessarily apply that term like symposium to those other forms of drinking in the sense that it's becoming adopted by everyone and everybody has access to it. Because technically, right, if you're thinking about the kind of space that they're using, if you're thinking about the higher quality materials that they're using, the higher quality wine potentially, right, that's not something everyone can access. So I wouldn't say it's not, it doesn't become more accessible to everyone, but that doesn't mean that everyone isn't drinking anyway.

Lauren Dogaer

All right, so everyone was drinking. Good. So we have very much focused on the symposium now, and you already are going a little bit into the direction of there were also other forms of group drinking. And you talked a little bit earlier about these kind of banquets, like royal and maybe ritual banquets. And could you explain a little bit what would then be the difference between these more official banquets or more religious banquets and a symposium. Because in my head at the moment, it's really the symposium is really this more private setting in a way where also, of course, a lot of politics is happening, but it's something else than going to a banquet where it's the royal who is center stage and everything is more hierarchical.

Nadhira Hill

Yeah. So I think there's Like the main thing is that there's a shift in the experience of the event from the classical to Hellenistic periods. In the classical period, as I mentioned before, as we've kind of touched on before, I think, it was more egalitarian right amongst

the people who were in that group. It's meant to reinforce those social and ideological bonds, political bonds between the people who are participating in a classical symposium. It also was based on the space, the size of the space, right? It never was super, super big. It was always a very intimate setting meant to... support that conversation aspect, right? If they're not talking about philosophical topics, they're talking about politics, or they're singing the same songs, or they're contributing the same poetry, right? It's more of an intimate gathering that allows for the reinforcing of those bonds between guests, but also between the guests and the host. So it's a very different kind of experience compared with, again, the more hierarchical Hellenistic banquets that are more geared towards the king and reinforcing the king's power. We don't have kings in the classical Greek world, so that would be very strange if somebody was trying to do something like that, but it makes sense in a palace context. So there's a shift towards emphasizing the power and generosity of the king or the royal host rather than encouraging that interaction and conversation between guests and hosts. And we can think about, you know, how do you set up a space like that that's so big? If you don't want people to be interacting with each other so closely, like a bigger space would mean that you can't because you're so far away from each other. You also don't want to have your back to the king, right? So there's been some suggestions that maybe there were smaller sympotic groups within a larger space, but that wouldn't really make sense given the focus needing to be on the royal host. There's also some texts that talk about the kind of chaos of Macedonian banquets and how they all drink very differently from the Greeks. And that's probably more of a biased reading of what happens at these banquets in the Macedonian world, just because they're seen as so different from the Greeks. But there are definitely things that are similar, right? Not all of those banqueting spaces are as big as a hundred people or some of them are smaller and replicate the symposium of the classical period, but there is generally a difference in the experience between those two periods.

Lauren Dogaer

And talking about Greek group drinking practices, we of course also have to maybe touch upon a little bit on the festivals and maybe specifically the god Dionysius and the festivals that were celebrated in relation to him and all of the rituals associated with his cults. So could you give a short glimpse into these kinds of rituals and as they are sort of opposite of, you know, the aspect of moderation at a Greek symposium and then you have all the let's go nuts and drink a lot at a Dionysiac ritual.

Nadhira Hill

Yeah, yeah. So I admittedly haven't looked so much into the actual practices, which would be interesting to see like how it compares to what we see in literature. But recently, actually last semester, I was teaching a class where we talked about Dionysus and we talked about women's participation in these festivals and how that's like a

reversal of their traditional roles in society, in Greek society. And so we talked about Euripides as the Bacchae and this yeah, unrestrained kind of chaotic event that happens because, right, we're told because of Dionysus's influence. So it really drives home the point that Dionysus, this god of wine, is inducing this chaos because he's disrupting the natural order of things. Women are getting involved, satyrs, right, are involved, and everybody's really being influenced by his power, which is very antithetical to the traditional view of what the symposium should be, right? You should be engaging with one another in kind of a convivial way. You're supposed to be reinforcing these bonds with your peers, but in the Bacchae, people get ripped apart, right? As a result of Dionysus' influence. So that I think is a really interesting comparison to what is seen as normal, and potentially because it's a play, right? They're probably trying to ramp up the drama and that contrast. But it would be interesting to look more into what actual experiences of Dionysiac cult was like to see if it really has any parallels with what we see in the plays. But that's not something I've explored a whole lot besides kind of talking about it with my students.

Lauren Dogaer

We have been talking a lot about wine and perhaps not in little quantities. However, you already mentioned that drinking wine in moderation was really a central feature of Greek culture. Overindulgence would really have been judged. Drinking too much would be a dangerous insult, especially for people with a political career. Drinking undiluted wine was really for barbarians. You have all of these tyrants like Alcibiades and Cambyses who are really seen as drunkards, as bad rulers, and so on. It's also a theme that appears very often in the literature. And I'm wondering, is this something that would have been used to urge for moderation amongst the elite or maybe not even the elite? Or is it really purely political propaganda?

Nadhira Hill

That's a good question. I think it's probably both because elites are the ones that are reading about these. these events or these people most often we can assume. And the elites are the ones that are at these parties where there's probably more of an anxiety about overindulgence than say in an informal drinking party where like people are just hanging out and they don't have any social or political worries to the same extent. So I think that the narratives of overindulgence being really bad and really chaotic and really associated with these people that the Athenians especially want to distance themselves from shows or reinforces the idea that what is right. Like the right behavior is supposed to be behavior at a symposium and drinking wine that is egalitarian, right? That is democratic, that is restrained and moderate, which is very different from or antithetical to the overindulgence that leads to unrestrained behavior and chaos and all of these bad things associated with these tyrants and even other people like Alexander. Plutarch talks about Alexander and he's kind of He's using the symposium and drinking

as a way to mark him as Greek, but he's also showing him in these bad scenarios where he drinks too much and he's not really promoting that same sense of camaraderie and closeness and intimacy that we would see in a traditional symposium. So I think it's meant to be instructive, but also like as a warning to elites who are familiar with these stories and these people and like, we don't want to be like that. Like, so don't do that because this is what will happen.

Lauren Dogaer

Yeah, and I think this... events are very often also seen or these bad acts of overindulgence as hubris. You even have the poet Eubulus, I believe, who describes very nicely what happens to you after each cup of wine. And he states that after the fourth cup of wine, so you can drink three, but the fourth cup, then it becomes hybris. Can you explain this concept a little bit, what this means?

Nadhira Hill

Yeah, so essentially what he he's saying or he's comparing this again with moderation, right? So moderation and self-control, which is typical or what is expected of elites that are participating in symposia and drinking wine. And he's comparing this with hybris, which is essentially the opposite, right? It's arrogance, it's violence. And he describes this in that passage as he goes through all of the steps, right? The behavior is characterized as creating black eyes or getting black eyes and bruises and inciting hatred and madness and sometimes even death, right? So he's warning against drinking so much that it leads to these chaotic forces that disrupt all of the things that are very foundational to Greek society, really, right? Not just the symposium. So yeah, so he's drawing kind of a clear line in the sand as it were between, you know, this is how much you can drink to feel good and to actually support that environment. And then this is where you've crossed a line and it's really going to get bad. And again, like we can compare that anecdote or that passage to what we see in these stories about tyrants, right, and these stories about other people who have certainly gone too far, whether it's because they diluted their wine and they drink a lot of it or they didn't dilute it because in some cases, right, there are specific mentions of people just drinking undiluted wine, which can also cause some chaos.

Lauren Dogaer

To get back a little bit to the symposium one more time. So you have this symposiarch who is in charge of diluting wine with water. And I'm wondering if this would have always been the same ratio and if we have any idea of how much people would actually have been drinking at a symposium. Can we put any numbers on this? Would there have been, I don't know, any peer pressure involved involved in this whole practice.

Nadhira Hill

Yeah, I think there are references to different ratios that might have been used, small fragments right here and there. I can't remember off the top of my head the specific ratios, but I know there was some variety. And even if I go back to Plato's symposium, right, they discuss as a group what they want to do and they decide that they don't want to drink too much because the previous night they did drink too much. So it does seem like there could be peer pressure to drink more, right? If you're having a really good time and you just want to keep drinking, right? They probably did. If they had access to enough wine to keep drinking, they probably did. If you ran out, then that was it, right? And potentially, we could think about other settings, right, where it might be more appropriate to drink less or drink more dilute wine, like in a public, civic setting, where you probably don't want to be super drunk in those settings because you're making decisions about things. Whereas at home, at a private symposium, it might have had looser boundaries, assuming that everybody was on the same page. So I think there definitely was some variety and the amount of wine that they drink, we can kind of get at based on the sizes of the cups. And there's been some research on capacity and you know, how much did these cups actually contain? Because right, if you're drinking out of a Kylix, which is shallower, it's a different experience than drinking out of a deeper cup. And you know, do you have just one deep cup of wine or do you have a bunch of shallower cups of wine, right? So it depends on, I guess, what cups they are actually actively using in a particular event, because all of these assemblages kind of have a range of cup shapes, not just the ones that we've been talking about.

Lauren Dogaer

To maybe finish up with one final question also related to the drinking cups, do we have any examples of depictions of sort of warnings on on drinking cups or vessels sort of yeah warning people hey you shouldn't drink you shouldn't drink too much is there any depictions that sort of give this give this away so.

Nadhira Hill

As far as I know, there's no direct warnings. Most of the warnings are probably like subliminal messages. If you have, for example, a krater in the middle of the room that has an image of Dionysus and satyrs, right, you may be reminded that Dionysus can influence you to do chaotic things and things could get out of hand if you drink too much because you remember that association. So there can be things like that, like scenes or images that warn you if you know the story and you understand the connection between the wine and that subject. There are others And I actually just was looking at this and it was an interesting take that I've not seen and I did try to find other people that may have touched on this subject, but eye cups was something I started to think about because... Usually these cups, usually they're, again, kylikes that have eyes on the sides of them. And usually people interpret them as kind of like a playful mask. So like when you tip it up and drink out of it, the eyes kind of cover your eyes and it looks

kind of fun and, you know, adds an element of joy, I guess, to the event. But it could also potentially be like a kind of surveillance interpretation, right? Like you're drinking out of the cup and then someone across the way is looking at you and like they feel like you're watching them and like trying to make sure that they are not overindulging or overstepping. There's lots of ways I think that you can interpret various aspects of this event and the images that are being kind of promoted at these events that might suggest that in indirect ways, they're being reminded, the guests are being reminded, you should maintain decorum and you should be moderate. Don't overindulge because someone is watching or because these are the things that might happen to you because you know these stories about other usually mythological figures who have suffered the same fate. We could also think about Odysseus and Polyphemus, the Cyclops, right? He's often depicted with a cup next to him, a wine cup next to him, which suggests that he's been drinking a lot. And because he was drinking a lot, he suffered this fate of being blinded by Odysseus. So I think there are lots of scenes like that where in the setting of the symposium, if you're sitting there staring at it all night, it's probably going to maybe warn you against overindulging because these are the things that might happen to you.

Lauren Dogaer

Thank you so much. I think this is an excellent way to end the episode. So drink like the ancient Greeks, enjoy your wine, but be careful because someone is always watching and bad things can happen to you if you drink too much. So thank you very much. Nadhira, the Greek Symposium was definitely a fascinating topic to get drunk on.

Nadhira Hill

Yeah, and thank you for having me.

Lauren Dogaer

We hope you enjoyed this episode of Drunk on History. If you're thirsty for more tales from the ancient world, don't miss our next episode. It's full of even more drinking stories from past civilizations. Drunk on History is made in cooperation with the new media center of the University of Basel.