The Greek Symposium

The Greek symposium, or drinking party, took place in the andron, a room set aside for dining, with couches around the walls. The symposium followed the evening meal. The highly ritualized procedure began with a libation to the "Good Divinity," followed by the election of a president, or master of the banquet, who decided on the proportions of wine to water for the evening. The wine and water were mixed in a central mixing bowl, or krater. The president presided over the drinking, conversation, song, riddle-telling, and playing of games, all part of the events at a symposium. A female pipes-player was usually present, and sometimes hired performers danced, or performed acrobatics and mimes.

The best known of the games played at the symposium was the game of kottabos. Each guest would try and hit a target with the drops of wine remaining in his cup. The target could be small saucers floating in a bowl of water; the object of the game was to sink the saucers. Vase paintings also show a disk balanced on top of a pole. Before aiming at the target, the players would declare for whom they were playing and dedicate their turns to their lovers.

The symposium was an important social institution for the elite male population of Athens and other ancient Greek cities, bringing together adult male citizens. Wives and daughters did not attend, although prostitutes and hetairai, or courtesans, did. The most famous symposium is the one described by Plato, at which an imagined philosophical discussion took place on the nature of ideal love.

1. **Black-figured Pelike (Jar); Theseus Painter**
   Greece, Athens
   Ca. 500–480 B.C.
   Pottery (61.3)
   Chorn Memorial Fund

   Vessels of this shape are storage jars for liquids. At a symposium, a jar like this would have held wine or water. Depicted on both sides of the vase is a musical contest at a Greek festival. The man plays a lyre or kithara; the woman double pipes. In front of each figure stands a judge wearing a wreath and leaning on a staff.

2. **Kylix (Drinking Cup)**
   East Greece, Rhodes (?)
   Ca. 600–580 B.C.
   Pottery (76.99)
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The numerous, surviving drinking cups from antiquity attest the importance of wine drinking in the lives of the Greeks. This is an early version of the standard Greek drinking cup. Its low foot and rounded bowl place it in the first decades of the 6th c. B.C.

3. **Kylax (Drinking Cup)**  
   Greece, Athens  
   Ca. 550 B.C.  
   Pottery (61.27)

   The tall stemmed foot and bowl with decorated lip date this cup to a later time period than 2. As part of the decorative design, the potter, a man named Hermogenes, signed the vase in the handle zone below the ivy decoration. The lettering has now faded but is still legible.

4. **Black-figured Kylax (Drinking Cup)**  
   Greece, Athens  
   Late 6th c. B.C.  
   Pottery (66.11)  
   William and Anna Weinberg Purchase Fund

   The decoration, two dancing satyrs, is appropriate for the function of the vessel. Satyrs, mythical creatures, half-man, half goat or horse, were wild and bestial in nature. In later art and myth they appear as followers of Dionysos, the god of wine.

5. **Red-figured Bell-krater (Mixing Bowl)**  
   Greece, Athens  
   Ca. 420 B.C.  
   Pottery (92.85)  
   Weinberg Fund

   Since the Greeks drank their wine mixed with water, a bowl such as this was an essential element of the symposium. The president of the symposium decided the proportions of wine to water to be drunk throughout the evening. This varied from three parts water to one or two of wine to five parts water to three parts wine, depending on the desired strength of the mixture. The scene on the vase shows a woman preparing to dance a victory, or pyrrhic, dance. Her shield, helmet and spear remind one of the goddess Athena.
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6. **Red-figured Column Krater (Mixing Bowl); Leningrad Painter**
   
   Greece, Athens  
   Ca. 470–450 B.C.  
   Pottery (98.14a and b)  
   Weinberg Fund

   The Greeks used several different mixing bowls. These two fragments belong to a column krater, which had a broad outturned rim and two handles (see drawing). The scene on the front of the vase shows three participants in a symposium. Two recline on a couch while one plays the double pipes and the other holds a drinking cup. The third figure dances to the music. The scene on the back of the vase probably showed a *komos*, the procession, often drunken, that sometimes followed the symposium.

7. **Ladle**
   Late Hellenistic, 1st c. B.C.  
   Bronze (74.6)  
   Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Werner Muensterberger

   At the symposium, wine mixed with water was ladled from the krater into jugs or directly into individual drinking cups.

8. **Black-figured Eye-kylix (Drinking Cup)**
   Greece, Athens  
   Late 6th c. B.C.  
   Pottery (57.4)

   This kind of drinking cup bears two pairs of eyes as part of the decoration. Their meaning may have been apotropaic, to avert bad luck, or perhaps they were merely intended to be humorous. A third suggestion may be too fanciful. The eyes are likened to the eyes found on the prows of ancient Greek ships. Just as the sea could be dangerous, so also could consumption of too much wine.

9. **Sessile Kantharos (Drinking Cup); St. Valentin Class**
   Greece, Athens  
   Ca. 450-425 B.C.  
   Pottery (94.18)  
   Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund
10. **Skyphos (Drinking Cup)**  
   Greece, Athens  
   Ca. 400–380 B.C.  
   Pottery (59.53)

Drinking cups could take different forms. Nos. 9 and 10 are without the stemmed foot of nos. 2, 3 and 4, and the handles of the kantharos are vertical rather than horizontal. Both, however, also served as drinking cups. The shape of no. 10 resembles cups popular in the city of Corinth, Athen's rival.

11. **Moldmade Relief Bowl (Drinking Cup)**  
   Hellenistic period, 3rd to 1st c. B.C.  
   Pottery (87.137)  
   Weinberg Fund

Although this vessel is unlike earlier cups, it served the same purpose. In this time period moldmade vessels were common, allowing production of many examples of the same vessel.

12. **Bowl (Drinking Cup)**  
   Late Hellenistic period, ca. 40 B.C. to A.D. 50  
   Cast, pale green glass (61.58)

Cast glass vessels were a luxury item. The shape is a common one for drinking cups in this time period.

13. **Lagynos (Jug)**  
   Hellenistic period, ca. 200–50 B.C.  
   Pottery (59.54)

14. **Black-glazed Oinochoe (Jug)**  
   South Italy  
   Greek, 300–250 B.C.  
   Pottery (58.13)

The two jugs 13 and 14 may reflect a change in drinking customs over time. The black-glazed jug could be used at a symposium to dip wine and water from a mixing bowl, and this shape occurs in many ancient representations of the Greek symposium. The lagynos (13) is not known before the Hellenistic period. It could not be used as a dipper. Instead, its narrow neck and mouth required a funnel to fill it. The widespread use of lagynoi in the Hellenistic period suggests that the mixing of
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wine and water for communal use at symposia may have fallen out of favor. Perhaps individuals brought their own drink with them to the drinking party in their own lagynoi.