Silver and clay

The art of the symposium in Ancient Greece

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Preface

The Archaic and Classical eras in Greece were the most dynamic in European history before the Renaissance and Reformation periods which they so much resemble, even exceeding them. Exploration and settlement encouraged questioning and experimentation. Hundreds of city-states burgeoned, with a range of environments, constitutions, social structures, cultures, economies, art, literature, science and philosophy. From c.630 to 480 BCE, the individual stood freer of family, clan, society, customs and religion than in any time or place before 1400 CE. Innovation was the rule.
Each generation and each individual vied with every other. Spurred by athletics and debates, competition encouraged excellence. The ideal of excellence, or bringing the best out of oneself (Agrete), and of aiming for "the beautiful and the good" (Elos kai agathos) invigorated innovation and self-fulfillment. Romans assimilated the Greeks’ creativity but, unlike even the Hellenistic Greeks, made no significant advances in math, science, or medicine. Behind almost every great Latin lurked a greater Greek, except in the applied sciences of law, government, engineering and the military. In philosophy and political science, too, the Romans failed to progress. Even in art and literature, although judgment will necessarily be subjective, Greek achievement must be considered superior unless the Satyric poets are to be counted.

One might suppose, therefore, that modern scholars would seek to understand Greek achievements as part of the cultural context in which they took place and which produced such exceptional and wide-ranging creative brilliance. One would not expect works of art and craftsmanship, in particular, to be evaluated in an historical vacuum, as though the particulars of history had nothing to do with their creation. But this has happened, as will be demonstrated through the case of sympotic ware¹, some which is so distinctive it can be dated and even

¹ The tableware used in a symposium. As will be discussed in more detail below, the minimum requirements for a symposium in Ancient Greece are debatable, but I mean more than just a mere drinking party. The term is here used to refer to the kind of elegant gathering described by Plato and Xenophon, a feast at which aristocratic men
assigned to particular masters in particular schools. In classifying and evaluating such work, antiquaries, aesthetes, collectors and curators, including such major figures as Edward Perry Warren, John Beazley, John Boardman, Dietrich von Bothmer, and Michael Vickers, have allowed their minds to concentrate on form, pattern, design and colors at the expense of the historical context. This tendency is most explicit in Vickers’ absurd insistence that the elite always supped and dined from precious metalware and Boardman’s that they adopted metalware after Alexander.

Neither side to this longstanding and bitter controversy comprehends the explosion in the availability of silver at Athens after 480 BCE. After that date, the elite went over to silver for the first time. Consequently, the ceramic ware produced after that time was not made for the elite and should not be thought of as highly today as that which preceded 480, which was made for the elite and produced to the high standards their resources could command.

In fact, many generations made far less significant changes in taste of their own. For example, in the generation before 500, when Ionians were fleeing to Athens, males often appeared in what some scholars decades ago characterized as female costumes; but really they were wearing Ionian men’s clothing of the period and were not cross-dressers. Again, in another

would enjoy performances of poetry and dancing as well as their own good conversation, in a refined setting with high-quality decorated tableware.
case, when the transition began from black-figure to red-figure vases\(^2\), some sympotic ware
was classified as “bilingual,” with black figures on one side and red figures on the other (c.520-
c.500). But these changes were minor in comparison to the major shift to silver after 480 BCE.

\(^2\) See Athenian Vase Painting: Black- and Red-Figure Techniques
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/vase/hd_vase.htm

Black paint on red clay replaced by
more delicate red incisions on black painted
red clay.
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