

# A toast to history: 500 years of wine-drinking cups mark social shifts in ancient Greece

January 3 2011

---



The cups used at these gatherings reflected the social, political and economic trends of the time, just as items we commonly use reflect modern trends. Credit: Connolly & Dodge, "The Ancient City," Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 52.

How commonly used items – like wine drinking cups – change through time can tell us a lot about those times, according to University of Cincinnati research to be presented Jan. 7 by Kathleen Lynch, UC associate professor of classics, at the annual meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America.

Lynch will present the research at the event's Gold Medal Session, when archaeology's most distinguished honor will be bestowed on her mentor, Susan Rotroff of Washington University.

UC's Lynch will present a timeline of wine drinking cups used in ancient Athens from 800 B.C. to 323 B.C. and will discuss how changes to the

drinking cups marked political, social and economic shifts.

## **BACKGROUND**

Lynch's specific area of study, which will result in a forthcoming book, is what's known as the "symposium" in ancient Athens. These were gatherings held for nearly a millennia where communal drinking of wine was a means for cementing cultural norms and social bonds that carried over into the world of politics and business.

Think of these symposia as the ancient world's ultimate cocktail parties, with established rituals and rules. An important aspect of any symposium was the wine cup, and the form of and the imagery on the cups reflected the shared culture of participants, as well as the larger social realities and changes in their world during the following periods:

- Iron Age (1,100-700 B.C.)
- The Archaic Period (700-480 B.C.)
- The Late Archaic Period (525-480 B.C.)
- The High Classical Period (480-400 B.C.)
- The Late Classical Period (400-323 B.C.)
- The Hellenistic Period (323-31 B.C.)

### **Basic rules of Athenian symposia:**

- Couches or mattresses used by reclining participants were set in a

circle or square. So, there was no formal position of status or group "head."

- Drinkers imbibed in rounds, so consumption of wine (mixed with water) was equitable. In other words, everyone got drunk at about the same rate. No teetotalers permitted.
- Said Lynch, "The focus was on drinking communally and in equal amounts. Inhibitions were lost. In-group bonds were formed. "

Why study these items? "Because," stated Lynch, "People's things tell you about those people and their times. In the same way that the coffee mug with 'World's Greatest Golfer' in your kitchen cabinet speaks to your values and your culture, so too do the commonly used objects of the past tell us about that past. And, often, by studying the past, we learn about ourselves."

## **IRON AGE SYMPOSIA AND DRINKING CUPS (1,100-700 B.C.)**

- The drinking gatherings (symposia) were reserved for the elite, probably allowing political factions to consolidate power and set themselves apart from the population at large. In other words, the drinking gatherings were for the "in" crowd.
- At this time, even grave markers for the very wealthy came in the form of the mixing bowls (kraters) used to blend wine with water during symposia. In other words, the ability to sponsor these drinking events was what people wanted to be remembered for.
- The drinking cups during this period were simply decorated and rested directly on a base (no stem).

## **THE ARCHAIC PERIOD (700-480 B.C.)**

- After the turn of the 6th century B.C., changes in the fashion of drinking cups began, corresponding with Athens' rising political power and rising dominance in the ceramic market. Variety and quality were high during this period. It was the beginning of black-figured pottery production as well as plain, black-glazed versions. Stemmed cups became more popular, probably because they were easier to hold while reclining.
- The middle of the 6th century B.C. saw a rapid proliferation of cup types: Komast cups, Siana cups, Gordion cups, Lip cups, Band cups, Droop cups, Merry-thought cups and Cassel cups – last only a few decades in terms of popularity. Some of these remain popular for only a few decades.
- Explained Lynch, "Possessing what was newest in terms of mode and style of drinking cups was likely equated with knowledge and status. The elites may have been seeking cohesion and self definition in the face of factional rivalries and populist movements. This hypothesis underscores how the drinking symposia – and specific cup forms identified with specific factions – might have been used by aristocratic blocs to cement group bonds in the politically charged environment of the time."

## **LATE ARCHAIC PERIOD (525-480 B.C.)**

- The overall number of wine-drinking vessels increased dramatically during this period, pointing to the democratization of the symposium, as well as the democratization of the political and social arenas. The masses had become the political, if not the

social, equals of the elites, and these masses were now enjoying symposia of their own.

- It's estimated that drinking vessels for symposia comprised up to 60 percent of the terra cotta fineware (collection of dishes) in the typical Athenian home of this period. "The typical home had few useful dishes for eating in contrast to many vessels designed for drinking wine in communal settings," explained Lynch.
- This period ends with the devastating Persian Wars, which Greece won. The proliferation of cup types fell, with red-figured drinking cups, introduced around 525 B.C., becoming the most popular.



This three-foot-high Iron Age gravemarker is in the form of a mixing vessel (water and wine) used at symposia. It signals the importance of the symposia in Athenian society. People wanted to be remembered for their ability to sponsor these gatherings. Credit: The Metropolitan Museum of Art website:

## **HIGH CLASSICAL PERIOD (480-400 B.C.)**

- Red-figured cups (cups decorated with red figures vs. black) remain popular through the first part of this period of cultural development in Athens, but the cups grow taller and shallower.
- By the end of the 5th century B.C., Athens was weathering the Peloponnesian Wars and plague, and people were searching for an escape. This came in the form of an aesthetic restlessness. Fads in drinking cups came and went, but few developed into long-lived styles.
- These new cup innovations tended to emulate the fineness commonly found in silver work at the time. For instance, there were many more plain, black clay cups with shiny surfaces. And delicate stamped and incised designs in clay cup interiors imitated metal prototypes on the cheap.
- Stemmed cups had finally run their course, being 200 years old at this point, and a stemless form became more popular.
- Said Lynch, "People may have been seeking a visual antidote to the struggles of the period and a yearning for luxury at odds with daily conditions."

## **LATE CLASSICAL PERIOD (400-323 B.C.)**

- Trends toward pseudo luxury (designer knock-offs) in drinking cups continued; however, the variety of these "silver-inspired" clay cup designs diminished after the turn of the 4th century

B.C., probably because the forms were impractical. For instance, one clay cup – modeled on a silver drinking vessel – featured delicate high-swung handles that served no useful purpose in clay.

- Also "running out of steam" in this period was the tradition of decorating cups with human figures. A decorative innovation, called West Slope, became popular at this time. It consisted of colored clay applied atop black-glazed surfaces to create the effects of garlands and wreaths. Human figures were no longer depicted.
- Finally, as Athens fell under the sway of Philip of Macedon and his son, Alexander the Great, the symposium came full circle. It began in the Iron Age as a practice of the elite. Then, with the movement toward democratization in Athens, participation in symposia broadened. Now, in Athens' Hellenistic period, the practice was again the prerogative of the elites as a luxury and display of ostentatious consumption. Equality was no longer important in a state that was no longer democratic but monarchical.

Provided by University of Cincinnati

Citation: A toast to history: 500 years of wine-drinking cups mark social shifts in ancient Greece (2011, January 3) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-01-toast-history-years-wine-drinking-cups.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.