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Drinking Songs, The Politics of Opposition and the Symposium in Classical Athens

Viewed as "a place apart from normal rules of society", characterized by its participants' "willingness to establish conventions fundamentally opposed to those within the *polis* as a whole" (Oswyn Murray "Symptotic History" in Oswyn Murray (ed.), *Symptotica. A Symposium on the Symposion*, Oxford 1990, 7) the *symposion* is usually depicted as a locus where the oligarchic ethos of the Greek aristocracy could be explicitly expressed. The *symposion* thus becomes central in the process of shaping aristocratic identity during the late-archaic and classical period. In this paper I argue that this view, which relies primarily on the extant descriptions of classical Athenian symposia (Xenophon, Plato) and vase-painting representations is only partially correct in the sense that it ignores a parallel phenomenon, i.e. the public *symposia* organized by the Athenian state in the *prytaneion* and the *tholos*. Leisure activities, like the Greek *symposion*, are in this paper considered cultural formations whose study can contribute to our understanding of the power relations, ideology, gender and class distinctions of a given society. By looking closely at the content of surviving *scolia* (drinking songs) and by re-assessing the significance of iconography that reflects state and aristocratic attitudes I propose that both aristocratic and state-sponsored symposia were institutionalized leisure activities that expressed, through militant visual and oral discourses, substantially conflicting ideologies.

Dining in the *prytaneion* and the *tholos* in classical Athens was a prerogative awarded to the fifty presiding *prytaneis* and the officials called *aeisitoi* (*tholos*) and to a few individuals in return to their distinguished public service (*prytaneion*). P. Schmitt-Pantel (*La cité au banquet. Histoire des repas publics dans les cités grecques*, Rome 1992, 176-77) has suggested that the *sitesis* in the *prytaneion* reflects the assimilation of archaic aristocratic values of reciprocity in the apparatus of the democratic city. However scholars take little notice of one important source, the *scolia*, that can help recreate the atmosphere of Athenian, private and public, symposia. A number of these songs echo well-known themes of the official democratic ideology such as the resistance to the Peisistratids (*PMG* 907), the story of the tyrannicides (*PMG* 893-896, 915), the principle of *isonomia* (*PMG* 896), the well-being of the city (*PMG* 885). Others come closer to the spirit of the archaic elegiacs of Theognis, incorporating motifs of noble birth (*PMG* 890) social conflict (*PMG* 884, 889, 892, 905, 908), eroticism (*PMG* 900, 904) drinking and revelry (*PMG* 902, 906). A similar dichotomy is also detectable in the iconography of the Athenian symposium: drinking vessels comprise both scenes of *komos* and revelry but in addition, a remarkable array of sober representations of official iconography depicting e.g. scenes of the life and deeds of Theseus or the patron-goddess Athena.

How can these differences be explained? Democratic Athens was a place where "middling" and "elitist" ideologies were in a constant state of discursive conflict (Ian Morris, *Archaeology as Cultural History*, Malden MA & Oxford 2000, 186ff). Private and public forms of commensality, such as symposia, religious festivals and public dinners are manifestations of the ongoing power struggle within the democratic *polis*, a process that I call the "Politics of Opposition". State-sponsored meals, by promoting

songs and official iconography that emphasize key democratic issues (equality before the law, prosperity of the city as an entity) effectively assimilate any oppositional aristocratic motifs into the dominant political discourse. The private aristocratic *symposion* on the other hand revolves around unhindered revelry and personal achievement, thus becoming a locus where much of the counter-hegemonic elitist discourse is aired.