

Marek Wecowski, *The Rise of the Greek Aristocratic Banquet*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014, XXV + 400 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-968401-4, £ 90.00.

The ideas concerning the origin and the nature of the Greek symposion that Marek WĘCOWSKI (hereafter MW) has been developing since his papers in the 2000s¹ have now reached full maturity. The present book is a grand scale monograph which opens the way to a new coherence and clarity for the solution of the questions relating to the origin and the character of the Greek aristocratic drinking party. Its author is concerned with pure historical correctness, but deals also with the problem of the relationship between reality and representation. His position regarding the imaginative credibility of ancient sources on the symposion differs from that adopted by Fiona HOBDEN in her book of 2013², but also the goal of his investigations is different. While she declares herself to have written a book about imagined symposia which appear to be “something of a mirage” (p. 15) and a component of the world of Greek (p. 5), MW by focusing on the analysis of a diversity of the material tries to reconstruct the historical process leading to the rise of the symposion³ and the development of this precise historical phenomenon. Describing the ‘source base’ examined in the book he declares (p. 5):

Archeology comes first in this study, followed by early epigraphic documents, the Homeric epic, and then various types of archaic lyric poetry in conjunction with the concurrent iconography of archaic vase painting. Different types of classical literature then come to the fore, including prose works explicitly set in a sympotic context, especially the *Banquets* of Plato and Xenophon. Finally, several antiquarian works written centuries after the symposion had died out all come to our rescue, including Plutarch’s *Table Talk*, Athenaeus’s *Learned Banqueters*, and the valuable linguistic thesaurus by Pollux.

Despite his having issued warnings to the readers of the dangers of putting together such disparate pieces, he approaches this “disparate and incompatible data” successfully, combining the retrospective method (the backward projection of the essential characteristics of the symposion emerged from the later data) with comparative thinking and evolutionary models (when verifying the results of his investigations). The effects of employing such a procedure are historically meaningful and convincing.

Though MW generally agrees with Oswyn MURRAY’s orientation (influenced by the trends of ‘new cultural history’) and his positions regarding many sympotic issues are not diametrically opposed to those presented by this Oxonian scholar, he strongly reacted against MURRAY’s verdict that the main ‘tracer element’ distinguishing the symposion from other commensal events was the habit of reclining while drinking. Feasting in a reclining position as the main distinctive trait of the symposion has been replaced by MW with the principle of the circulation of sympotic pastimes

¹ See his *Towards a Definition of the Symposion*, in: T. DERDA, J. URBANIK, M. WĘCOWSKI (eds.), *Euergesias charin: Studies Presented to Benedetto Bravo and Ewa Wipszycka by their Disciples*, Warsaw 2002, pp. 337–361, and *Homer and the Origin of the Symposion*, in: F. MONTANARI (ed.), *Omero tremila anni dopo: Atti del congresso di Genova 6–9 luglio 2000*, Roma 2000, pp. 625–637.

² F. HOBDEN, *The Symposion in Ancient Greek Society and Thoughts*, Cambridge 2013. The book could not have been accommodated by MW in his argument, as he pointed out in “A Postscript”, p. X.

³ As he declares on p. 4 of the “Introduction”.

‘to the right’. The rule of distribution of wine, served *epidexia* to the feasters, spread to doing other sympotic things (such as the circular movement of poetry and speeches), imposes – as MW rightly argues – “not only rigorous equality between the diners, but also fundamentally regulates their competition” (p. 123). The idea of an equal contribution and share at the symposion (which does not, however, exclude the momentary hierarchies), repetitive in its nature, as independent of “the hierarchies and stable values of the outside world” (p. 124) creates a semblance of almost divine happiness. I find MW’s approach illuminating, although he seems to underemphasise a bit in this place the importance of the strong polarity between the highly hierarchical and ideologically marked unequal shares of food at feast and the programmatic equality of drinking for our understanding of intellectual paradigms of early Greek society⁴.

It is not easy to find the weak portion of this brilliant book written with extraordinary care. The exactness of described detail, the openness to inspiring others’ ideas⁵, the clearness of argumentation, above all the revealing observations we are presented with on each of its pages, leading the author to give his own answers to numerous complicated questions concerning the symposion, enrapture the reader, at the same time posing a considerable challenge to him or her. It demands an attentive reader because of its informative density, which makes no place for ornamental digressions or giving a brief respite through excursuses, since each – even short – passage serves to add substance to the points just made.

Both main parts of the book (Part I: “Defining the Symposion”, pp. 19–124, Part II: “The Symposion and History”, pp. 127–336), preceded by the instructive “Introduction” (pp. 1–15), and followed by a “Bibliography” (pp. 337–377) and “Indexes” (“Subject Index”, pp. 379–386, “Index of Primary Sources”, pp. 387–400), supplemented by two maps and 23 illustrations, comprehensibly mould the various elements into a whole. The considerations aimed at defining the notion of Greek aristocracy (“as technical designations applied by ‘the more equal’ to themselves”, p. 23), the description of the organisation of the symposion (its time frame, setting, elements of sympotic equipment, participants, ceremonies and entertainment, the principle of competition), as well as the investigations of the sympotic social realities as corresponding to the sympotic ideals, lead the author to the conclusion that the symposion as a type of feast “came into being – in radical and conscious contrast to earlier convivial and commensal customs and institutions” (pp. 80 f.). MW persuasively argues for his hypotheses, so even when he provocatively pronounces the symposion “a potential act of collective *hybris*” (p. 74), one is tempted to side with him and see the symposion as “the peculiar type of banquet” which makes “its participants think of themselves as something close to the carefree Olympians” (p. 74). That this approach might be close to the truth the *Elegy to the Muses* by Solon (13, 10–13, 16–22 W.) also seems to suggest (MW omits mention of it). If we understand lines 9 f. of this poem from a sympotic perspective (“the wealth which the gods give continually attends a man, from the bottom of the cup to its lip”⁶), the *hybris* in the next line and the image of the divine punishment coming after *ate* forms the rich play of allusion in the sympotic environment⁷.

MW’s reassessment (Appendix II, pp. 81–83) of modern scholarship’s exaggerated picture of the symposion as an occasion for open sexual actions should not be ignored. After the close

⁴ This issue has attracted the interest of Gerhard J. BAUDY, *Hierarchie oder die Verteilung des Fleisches. Eine ethologische Studie über die Tischordnung als Wurzel sozialer Organisation, mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der altgriechischen Gesellschaft*, in: B. GLADIGOW, H.G. KIPPENBERG (eds.), *Neue Aufsätze in der Religionswissenschaft*, München 1983, pp. 131–174.

⁵ As an example let us mention MW’s treatment of Benedetto BRAVO’s proposal for the interpretation of archaic Greek society (pp. 23–26).

⁶ As Renaud GAGNÉ in an extremely interesting article, ‘*Spilling the Sea out of its Cup*’: *Solon’s Elegy to the Muses*, QUCC XCI 2009, pp. 23–49, understands it.

⁷ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 27.

analysis of the evidence MW comes to the conclusion that the import of sex on Greek aristocratic banquets was an imaginary construct, with no secure base in fact, remaining in conflict with the idea of moderation and self-control in all convivial pastimes. He tentatively connects symposiasts' satisfaction of sexual desire with the *komos*, the drunken revel of the diners rounding off the symposion. Perhaps wisely so, for some practical arguments "favour a more symbolic and restrained erotic behaviour" (p. 83) in the sympotic setting itself. It should, however, be noted that evidence for sex as the norm of komasts' behaviour is full of ambiguities, which creates problems for considering MW's hypothesis as totally irrefutable. In this context one could pose the question regarding the significance of the wearing by the revellers of the *kynodesme*, the practice known from vase painting of Archaic and Classical times⁸ (not, however, referred to by textual sources from this period). If we consider it a sign of the modesty and decency⁹ or a protector of public morals¹⁰, we must admit that the custom of wearing the 'dog's leash' may point to the komasts' commitment to chastity rather than to displaying and satisfying their sexual arousal. Moreover, MW when speaking of "the rigorous separation between the *komos* and the symposion" which "had the effect of creating a distinct social occasion where the usual restrictions and sympotic norms were no longer valid" (p. 83), seems to have passed over the results of Matthias STEINHART's re-examination of iconographical material representing the komast-dancers, presented in 1992¹¹ and recently recounted by Alexander HERDA¹², underscoring that the komasts were frequently portrayed in the sympotic space, not outside the party, which may weaken a little the idea of 'the rigorous separation' between the symposion and the *komos*. Furthermore the rise of the *komos* itself (was it originally a drunken carousel?¹³) appears, as we would expect, to be an important issue for the scholar venturing the analysis of extant sources devoted to "the symposion as a culture-oriented drinking occasion for Greek élites" (p. 11).

Chapter 2 of Part I ("Towards a Definition of the Symposion", pp. 85–124) concentrates specifically on the basic idea underlying this book, namely on the importance of the *epidexia* practice for the organisation of the symposion and its social implications. That the *epidexia* procedure, which might – as MW argues – derive from the ritual libation, became one of the most important 'tracers' of the symposion is suggested not only by ancient literary material concerning the ideal feasts, but, paradoxically, also by literary evidence focusing on the 'anti-symposion', which MW carefully discusses in conjunction with historical examples of the inversion of the principles of the symposion. The statements presented in this chapter are remarkably important not only because the fundamental conception of the symposion as 'banqueting in a circle' lies at their heart, but also because they significantly contribute to various points which may be thought of as minor or less important by some readers (see e.g. MW's ingeniously viewing the name *skolion*, 'capping song',

⁸ See P. ZANKER, *The Mask of Socrates. The Image of the Intellectual in Antiquity*, tr. A. SHAPIRO, Berkeley 1995, pp. 28 and F.M. HODGES, *The Ideal Prepuce in Ancient Greece and Rome: Male Genital Aesthetics and Their Relation to Lipodermos, Circumcision, Foreskin Restoration, and the Kynodesme*, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* LXXV 2001, p. 383, n. 30. See also R. OSBORNE, *Greek History*, London 2004, pp. 10 f., although the author focuses on the athletes rather than on the komasts.

⁹ ZANKER, *op. cit.* (n. 8), p. 28: "Once again, in the ideology of kalokagathia, aesthetic appearance becomes an exposition of moral worth".

¹⁰ Cf. HODGES, *op. cit.* (n. 8), pp. 381–384.

¹¹ *Zu einem Kolonnenkrater des KY-Malers*, in: E. SIMON (et al.), *Nachrichten aus dem Martin-von-Wagner-Museum*, *Archäologischer Anzeiger* 1992, pp. 509 f.

¹² A. HERDA, *Der Apollon-Delphinios-Kult in Milet und die Neujahrprozession nach Didyma. Ein neuer Kommentar der sog. Molpoi-Satzung*, Mainz am Rhein 2006, p. 140, n. 983.

¹³ See HERDA's summary of STEINHART's hypothesis on this matter (HERDA, *op. cit.* [n. 12], p. 140, n. 983).

from the angle of its expressing the contrast with the norm of sympotic performance, i.e. games organised in ‘rounds’, pp. 94–96).

In Part II of the book MW turns his full attention to a broader picture of the symposion, taking up with renewed vigour the controversies regarding the role of the inscription from the bird *kotyle* (the so called ‘Cup of Nestor’) for the discussion concerning the origin of the symposion and the eastward-pointing signals for the history of Greek ‘drinking together’. MW’s interpretative researches focused on material provided by the archaeological finds, extraordinarily rich in detail, lead him to “the negative conclusion as to the Oriental origins of the symposion” (p. 188) and pointing to the Aegean provenance of it. Although the archaeological confirmation of MW’s hypotheses must be considered the most important result attained here, the attentive reader will also bear in mind insightful analyses of poetic passages presented in this chapter (I was especially impressed by the proposal of understanding the famous fr. 2³W. of Archilochus as an item of a *catena simposiale*, p. 164, n. 131; although the practice of ‘taking up the song’ has already been deeply explored by the scholars, MW is the first – as far as I know – to have noticed the couplet’s close association with this convivial custom, which – by the way – fits itself into the egalitarian ethos of the symposion¹⁴).

In Chapter 4 of Part II MW expounds his thoughts on an awareness of the symposion proper on the part of the poet(s) of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and the implied audience (some of them have already been put forward by him in his earlier works). By discussing the discrepancies between the poetic picture of the ‘heroic banquet’ and the symposion as well as by penetrating diverse poetic registers of the Homeric epic, he opts for the symposion emerging ‘backstage’ in Homer, in sharp contrast with the normative heroic convention of feasting. In its consequences, this is a discussion about the most central problem of the book, since it brings the significant implications for the early history of the symposion. The ‘backstage’ emergence of the symposion in Homer and critical moral reflection on it within both epic poems¹⁵, “points to a relatively recent development of this custom” (p. 247). Since “based on Homer” – as MW demonstrates – “we will never be able to date this moment of its rise”, he turns again to the archaeological material in Chapter 5 (“The Symposion and Archaeology Up to the Early Seventh Century BC”, pp. 249–301). The renewed investigation of data derived from Protogeometric and Geometric funerary contexts (primarily the Pithekoussan, Kymeian, Eretrian burials) as well as evidence from Athens of the Geometric Period and archaeological traces of the symposion in the eighth-century Aegean allows MW to reach the conclusion that the Greek aristocratic banquet “came into being in the first half of the eighth century, at the very latest, and most probably some two generations earlier” (p. 306). At the same time it supplies decisive arguments for MW to announce that all previous proposals concerning the link between the symposion and the Levantine *marzēah* should be ruled out. MW’s answer to the question of the time and the place of the rise of the Greek symposion, fully justified by the results of the analyses of the two sets of sources, the extended framework of poetic references to the symposion in Homer and the body of archaeological material, is a breakthrough. However, for the author of the book no less important is “the question of how and why the Greek aristocratic banquet came into being” at this time (p. 306). This issue is discussed in Chapter 6 (“Conclusions and Implications:

¹⁴ See Ch.A. FARAONE’S remarks, *The Stanzaic Architecture of Early Greek Elegy*, Oxford 2008, p. 92.

¹⁵ Recently the insights obtained by scholars in the area of the significance of eating and drinking in Homer have been expanded by Egbert J. BAKKER in a study *The Meaning of Meat and the Structure of the Odyssey*, Cambridge 2013. Although BAKKER’S central interests are different from that of MW, one can observe a set of similarities in their approaches to the banquets of the suitors in the *Odyssey* (the sign of these similarities is visible in their sentences which are kinds of introductions to the interpretations: MW says, p. 225, “Their [i.e. the suitors’] degenerate etiquette when banqueting is ‘crime’ enough”, BAKKER, p. XI, points out: “an extended feasts criminally perverted and magnified”).

The Symposium, Aristocracy, and the Rise of the *Polis*”, pp. 303–336). The theory of the symposion “as a forum for the natural selection of Greek aristocracy” (as it has been summarised on the dust-cover of the book), developed here in the most thoroughgoing manner, is a very logical conclusion drawn from the analysis of the multifarious material presented in the book. What is of most significance for us about the implication that there were direct historical links between the emergence of the aristocracy, the nascence of the *polis*, and this institution [i.e. the symposion] (p. 308) is not so much its emphasis upon the embedding of these collective convivial phenomena in the systems of public signification, but the fact that the symposion as a typical example of the symbolic appropriation of social energy was of great importance in the process of shaping the political life of the archaic period.

Some reservations about the spelling of author’s surname should be expressed. Its first vowel is a nasal which – according to the Polish spelling rules – is marked by *e* with the hook (i.e. *ę*). The misspelling has been consequently repeated in the notes and *Bibliography*, also in references to works by MW in which the correct spelling was given by the publishers¹⁶. It is difficult to imagine nowadays technical problems with printing ‘difficult’ (from the point of view of British readers) letters¹⁷. So there must be another reason for this decision. Whatever it was, it is doubtfully a wise one.

The book raises many issues that this review does not tackle. As a whole it is a volume of very high quality, offering fascinating insights into the ongoing debate on currently hotly contested topics. As far as the main ‘tracer element’ of the symposion is concerned, by way of conclusion, I would like – leaving aside for a while academic seriousness – to say that just as two basic kinds of Oxonian readers (according to their ‘place and space’ preference), the Bodleian people and the Sackler ones, can be identified, so since the publication of MW’s book there will be the adherents of the principle of reclining and the supporters of the *epidexia* principle. Whose word will be the last on the subject? For now it must remain a great unknown, since this area of studies is far from being closed down and the progress is still in the making.

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¹⁶ It is worth noting in this place that in the recent HOBDEN’s book published by the Cambridge University Press such a deformation has been carefully avoided, see (e.g.) HOBDEN, *op. cit.* (n. 2), p. 7, n. 12.

¹⁷ See the explanations, p. 377 of the book: ZIELINSKI (= Zieliński), ZIOLKOWSKI (= Ziółkowski), Wiśniewska (p. 245, n. 227) or the reference to the Polish *kuśtyk*, the ‘crippled cup’, pp. 43 f. (but again incorrectly ‘the so-called *włodcy*’ (p. 333). Cf. also the correct spelling of Bartoněk and Tecuşan (*passim*)).