

The ancient Greeks of the 5th Century B.C. were much more given to inviting and being invited out to dinner than we are today. Perhaps the natural sociability of the Greeks accounts for this, or perhaps it was the lack of anything approaching the modern restaurant. Even people who were not, by our standards, close friends, swapped invitations and it was not rare for a friend, whom you had invited, to invite to your dinner, without your knowledge, a friend of his own. Crashing such parties seems to have been viewed rather tolerantly.

In Periclean times, Athenians were not heavy eaters, as befitted their climate and modest means. The staple of the diet was barley, served in cakes or in a broth. To this foundation was added the inevitable olives, with such vegetables as beans, cabbage and lupines. Any meat dishes would usually be sparse servings of sea food; fish, fresh or salt, eel, octopus and squid. Beef, lamb, hare, and goat would be a rare treat, usually only devoured after a sacrifice. Figs, nuts, and honey cakes constituted dessert.

The festivities began with the arrival of the guests about sunset, whereupon they removed their shoes and had their feet washed by an attendant. Since the guests did not sit, but reclined on dining couches, the washing of the feet seems to have been a good idea. Perfumes and garlands, sometimes in profusion, also helped to sweeten the air of the banqueting room. The evening was divided into two parts: first, the meal itself, ideally served by handsome youths off small, three-legged tables set before the dining couches; thereafter began the serious part of the night, the symposium.

By election or by a draw of names, the guests selected a symposiarch, a master of the drinking, whose duty it was to choose the proportion of water to be added to the wine, and to direct the course of activity. If politics or philosophy was going to be discussed seriously, the wine would be made purposefully weak, otherwise . . . Three water to one wine was the usual ratio, making a rather insipid punch by our standards.

Not always would the guests set their minds to lofty topics such as the nature of love, but would often descend to more banal levels. Singing and lyre playing by turns was popular, as was the posing of riddles and paradoxes. Here the guests provided their own entertainment. A messy game, played by throwing the dregs in the bottom of the wine cup at a target of different kinds, called cottabos, was much in favour.

The more passive forms of entertainment had a slightly Roman air about them. Jugglers, acrobats, musicians and magicians were occasionally hired to amuse. Since no respectable women ever appeared at these parties, an element of the erotic was often added by bringing in beautiful girls-for-hire. Some of

these were flute-players, others were merely devotees of the goddess Aphrodite, the expensive hetairai. Ancient Athens upheld firmly the double standard, granting all to the gander and nothing to the goose.

Drunkness in these times was very badly viewed when displayed in public. In some states magistrates found drunk in public were liable to the death penalty, and, of course, no decent woman was expected to become inebriated, even within the home's privacy. Nevertheless, many vase paintings exist showing young men relieving their sour stomachs into a bowl while pretty damsels hold their tortured heads with sympathy. In Plato's famous Symposium, Socrates shows himself to be superior in every way by drinking the whole night through till dawn, then leaving to go about his normal business and not retiring until the evening. The symposium honoured the god of wine, Dionysus, and he must have been well pleased by his constant worship in this pleasing form.