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Review of The Imagery of the Athenian Symposium

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Comments

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TOPPER (K.) **The imagery of the Athenian symposium**. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. xii, 225, illus. £60.00 / \$99.00. 9781107011021

Revising old assumptions is a significant component of any scholarly work, but rarely does a book (let alone a first book) tear down such deeply-accepted ideas as Kathryn Topper's provocative new study. She offers a fascinating new perspective on depictions of symposia in Athenian vase painting of the late Archaic and Classical periods. Not all readers will agree with her arguments, and there are a few flaws and (especially) lacunae in the book. Overall, however, this is a highly important work that may even reshape studies of symposia and sympotic art for years to come.

The core of Topper's hypothesis is that traditional approaches to images of symposia have wrongly assumed that the pictures reflect contemporary practices. This assumption has led to frequent confusion and controversy when the images depict figures, costumes, or practices that are incongruous with our understanding of the organization of Archaic and Classical symposia. Topper takes a step back and suggests that there may be little or no relationship between images and contemporary practices; instead, the pictures which display 'problematic' features likely represent symposia of the imagined far-off past. These images thus do not tell the real history of the symposium, but rather reflect Athenian concepts of its origins. They affirm the antiquity of the institution and claim it as the heritage of all citizens.

Topper supports her thesis by devoting chapters to various issues in turn. In the earliest sections (previously published as an article in the *American Journal of Archaeology*), she shows how depictions of symposia in caves or rocky settings and using cushions on the ground rather than couches were often associated with the past, especially the age of heroes. This idea is developed further in the chapter on foreigners, where she deals with figures who are shown wearing foreign dress, such as the 'eastern' hat known as the *kidaris* (aka the 'Phrygian cap'). Rather than reading these characters as sixth- or fifth-century Athenians in costume, she argues that by making reference to the Greeks' more 'primitive' neighbors, who are similar to Greeks in the practice of holding banquets, they show Athenian concepts of commensalism prior to the codification of the symposium. The appearance of noble, rather than servile cupbearers – non-mythical Ganymedes – and of women of high status can likewise be seen as 'memories' of a time before the rules for symposia were put in place. To this reader, Topper's demolition of the traditional identification of women depicted at symposia as *hetairai* is her most satisfying contribution. She closes by considering whether any vases can be categorically stated to depict contemporary symposia. The answer is, at best, a qualified 'maybe.'

The book is relatively brief – despite copious footnotes, one gets the sense that discussions of controversies are sometimes elided, with one scholar or another's work criticized or praised but little explanation for why Topper takes the position that she does. This seems particularly the case with regard to the reception of Athenian vases by non-Greek audiences, and especially whether Athenians were actually the intended audience, a point which could have a significant impact on her case. Only a few pages in the introduction and in the chapter on depictions of foreigners mention foreign consumers

(one pertinent work missing from the bibliography is K. Lynch, 'Erotic Images on Attic Pottery: Markets and Meanings,' *Athenian Painters and Potters II*, eds. J. Oakley and O. Palagia, Oxford, 2009, pp. 159-165). The present location of vases is typically all that is noted, but findspots do matter, and even if it is true that these are not known for many of her vases, the opportunity existed to analyze whether there was a connection between the vases' imagery and their geographic distribution when that information was preserved. Regrettably absent is a concordance that lists the full corpus of vases used as evidence. Finally, the figures are uniformly high-resolution grayscales, but they are small and sometimes uncropped (showing the entire vase rather than just the relevant scene), which means they can be unintelligible.

Apart from the specific points made by the author about the depiction of various unusual features by Athenian artists, the major contribution of this book is simply to ask, 'What would we discover if we set aside our assumptions about how these images work?' For this alone, Topper deserves great praise. The close observation and cogent argumentation which characterizes the volume only add to the value of the work.