

A comparison of the reclining women in Pompei house murals with the Greek Hetaira an analytical study of archeaology and art

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Abstract:

In some Pompeii houses (which date back to 50 BC-79 AD), murals were found showing women with men depicted in a similar way to the way they appear in the Greek symposium (drinking together), which was a kind of gathering that emerged in the sixth century BC and continued until the end of the classical era (around the end of the fourth century BC). This gathering was restricted to men, especially aristocrats, who used it to discuss political and social affairs, and it included reciting poetry and philosophical talks with the availability of entertainment such as drinking, games and singing¹. No woman was allowed to enter the Greek symposium, except selected members of a caste of high-class and expensive prostitutes known as *Hetaira* (companions), who enjoyed high levels of beauty and culture. They were among the favorite subjects of Greek artists throughout the history of the symposium².

On the other hand, the Roman convivium (living together) focused primarily on food consumption, excluding the drinking party. These banquets played a fundamental role in the relations of the elite with their followers, potential supporters, or even their entire community, as well as their interactions with one another. However, although the drinking ritual played a much smaller role in the Roman world than in the symposium, the Greek tradition had a profound influence on Roman art, in which the Romans, like the Greeks, appear to recline while eating and drinking in a joyful atmosphere, with the servants permanently in attendance.

Examples of these Roman banquets come from two sources: funerary sculptures, and fresco panels from the walls of houses, most of which came from Pompeii (and thus date to a time before AD 79). While women were depicted in funerary images sitting on couches with men not drinking, women appeared in Pompeii paintings reclining, drinking and enjoying the luxuries of the gathering like men and in images recalling Greek *Hetaira*, a depiction almost contrary to the rules of Roman society, until almost the end of the era of the Republic (the middle of the first century BC), where a woman who consumed wine and slept like a man was known to be a prostitute. In the early imperial era, women were allowed to drink within certain limits, such as some rituals or treatment of some diseases³.

Research study methodology:

This study follows the descriptive and inductive analytical approach by:

First, Introducing the Greek *Hetaira* socially and artistically;

Secondly, Describing and analyzing the paintings of reclining women by:

A- Describing the house plans in which the relevant murals were found, to analyze the social class in which the paintings belonged and thus try to ascertain the reason for their presence in these houses within specific rooms;

B- Describing and analyzing the paintings concerned to clarify the extent of their similarity or difference to the contents of the Greek symposium as we know it, considering all its components including the presence of the *Hetaira*;

Thirdly, using literary texts to arrive at the equivalent of *Hetaira* in the Roman era, and analyzing texts to reach the extent of its applicability to the women in the Pompeii paintings.

Fourthly, Artistically and literally comparing the Greek *Hetaira* and her Roman counterpart.

Paintings of reclining ladies in the Pompeii houses:

1- Painting in the Triclinium House:



No (1):

A view depicting a convivium seems less perfect when compared to a Greek symposium.



No (2)

The most exciting scene is located on the north wall, directly in front of the entrance (Panel-2-A), where five people are depicted lying on sofas surmounted by green curtains, perhaps an indication that the meeting is being held in the open air. Above the seated people appear Latin sentences that start from the left above the lady: “Facitis vobis suaviter” (Enjoy your time), then above the man in the middle the sentence: “ego canto” (I sing), and then on top of the couple on the right is “Est ita; valeas ”(That's it, health is yours)⁴.

2- Painting in the Casa dei casti amanti (The Lovers House):

This is another group of paintings that depict the convivium, where groups share boards that appear more idealised and representative in their mimicry of Greek art than the more realistic paintings of the Triclinium House. These groups are in pairs within the convivium, where the drink is explicitly represented by the presence of tables with drinking vessels, and cups appear in the hands of the participants.



No (1)



No (2)



no (3)

Comparison between the Greek *Hetaira* and the Roman Concubine, artistically and literally:

This study uses the word *concubine*, whose origin in Arabic is *haziyyah*, meaning a woman who is preferred over others in love (especially by a prince, king or a man of authority).

The Greek and the Roman concubine shared many features:

They were distinguished by culture and the freedom to exist in places otherwise exclusive to men, which are important characteristics not because they constitute a kind of umbilical cord that unites the two elements (Greek and Roman), but also because they separate them from other women in their cultural and geographic area.

In the images, they are distinguished by elegance, exemplary beauty and the flashy flair for which their profession is known, accentuating their attractiveness using jewels, colorful clothes, make-up, hair dyes, wigs, extravagant hairstyles, ribbons for decorating them, clothes that define the body, and reveal parts of it.

While the identification of *Hetaira* is evident in texts and art, the depiction of Roman concubines can be confused with matrons and nobles.

But contrary to the depiction *Hetaira* in the symposium entertaining men, whether by providing sexual services that were sometimes explicitly depicted or by playing music or presenting games, Roman concubines appear differently.

In the Roman banquet as participants equal to men, they are depicted enjoying the service of slaves, no less than then men, with whom they recline side by side on the sofas, with the tables carrying drinking utensils for both. Each woman in this scene holds a glass of wine, and two of them are outright drunk (panel 6, 2), an indication that they fully share the men's pleasure with the wine and even their drunkenness, like the man on the middle couch who is most likely sleeping because of the wine (Panel 1, 4).

What confirms this is the existence of social diversity in Pompeii in the imperial era, which makes us assume that there are women who run their own businesses and have brought their friends and set up their own gatherings in their homes where they shared the pleasure of drinking, even managing the session by behaving as a host or house owner. In addition to the emphasis on the role of woman philosophers and poets, as in the paintings of the Triclinium House, and the connection of these topics with stories of poetry and love in the symposium of the Greek era, which makes it possible to imagine a wealthy woman who is the owner of the house, or a woman who lives freely and imitates the style of independent concubines.

References:

^١ - [Matthew Naglak , Turning the Cup: Thematic Balance in the Greek Symposium , Inquiry: The University of Arkansas Undergraduate Research Journal,Volume 11 ,2010,](#)

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^٣ - Dillon, m, Garland, L (2005), Ancient Rome from The Early Republican to The Assassination of Julius Caesar, Routledge, New York,p353.

- Stefan Ritter,2005, p312. ^٤