

WHEN TO SAY WHEN: WINE AND DRUNKENNESS IN ROMAN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Not surprisingly, different people offered different opinions on the use of alcohol and the acceptability of drunkenness in Roman society. What certain people said on the subject – and the context they said it in – reveals inherent biases in the authors and the effect of those biases on social structure.

The differences of opinion revolve around major shifts in Roman society, such as transition from paganism to Christianity and the influx of new cultures that comes with territorial expansion.

In a culture that made wine a central feature of everyday life, there was a constant desire to maintain order and balance. The distinction between the inebriated man and the habitual drunk was an important one. There were limits set on the quantity and quality of wine consumed based on status and gender.

Wine's symbolism was particularly important to Roman elegists. To Tibullus, the freeing quality of drunkenness was used to celebrate the earth's fertility and uphold traditional Roman values, rooted deep in the history of Italy, in festivals such as the Parilia. Horace wrote that poems written by water-drinkers couldn't possibly last, while Propertius boasted that *laeserunt nullos pocula nostra deos*.

Harmful and offensive were just what early Christian writers considered drunkenness to be to their god, as Prudentius, in his description of sobriety's violent triumph over extravagance, and Tertullian, in his insistence on purification, made clear. Tertullian, though, rushed to the defense of Jesus when the latter was branded a *potator*.

Cicero was virulently opposed to drunkenness when it was Antony's, more understanding of a young man's experimentation when defending Caelius and revealed his true feelings in philosophical works.

Tacitus, in a moment of xenophobia, described Germans' fondness for beer then quickly pointed that if allowed to indulge as much as they wanted, Germans would be easily conquered. The message was clear: This little-understood foreign land is full of people with different customs from Romans. These people are therefore undisciplined and vulgar.

This inequality was not limited to treatment of other cultures, but also guests of lower social status at *convivia*, who were routinely served vintages of lower quality than higher-ranking guests. Women and slaves were only allowed lesser quality drinks and could be justifiably punished – even killed – for overstepping

their bounds by getting too drunk. This is in stark contrast to Propertius' urging Cynthia to drink more so that she'd get in the mood.

The bias need not be overt. Suetonius revealed his about Augustus by what he left out of his biography of a ruler he liked. The historian related that Augustus *vini quoque natura parcissimus erat*, while Pliny the Younger reported *Divus Augustus Setinum praetulit cunctis*, and John H. D'Arms determined this predilection must have been an acquired taste from childhood. Suetonius went into enough detail about emperors' drinking habits to share that Tiberius was nicknamed *Biberius Caldus Mero* in youth, but completely glossed over Augustus' relationship with wine.