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MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS
 BUDAPEST, HEROES' SQUARE
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HIGHLIGHTED WORKS OF ART

2008 SPRING SUMMER AUTUMN WINTER

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS — COLLECTION OF ANTIQUITIES

A SYMPOSIUM IN MACEDONIA

For the Greeks, wine was the gift of the god Dionysus, who had invented it and spread its cult. As his devotees, Macedonians considered the symposium or drinking party an indispensable part of their social and religious life. Eternal bliss in the after-life was imagined as a continuation of symposia on earth. Surviving tomb paintings, literature, and grave deposits of banqueting vessels give us a glimpse of what these symposia were like in ancient Macedonia. The setting was usually the men's quarters of a palace, an urban house, a mansion or its courtyard and gardens, the halls or the grove of a sanctuary. Men used to gather in the evening to eat, drink, and enjoy themselves; bringing wine for the host. The place was already furnished with couches, carved, painted, and adorned with ivory, gold, and glass. Participants washed their hands, wore wreaths, and reclined comfortably on embroidered cushions. Slaves were

there to move the portable tables that held the dishes of the meal. When that was over, snacks and desserts were brought and drinking started. Wine was brought in an oversized vessel called a *krater* from the Greek word 'to mix'. Wine was customarily diluted with water. The symposium began with libations to the gods, above all Dionysos: drops of the holy drink were poured from a bowl on the floor or the earth. The evening continued with easy drinking, storytelling, guitar and flute music, and dancing by young female dancers. The symposium was also a place for fervent discussions on politics, love, life and death, and divine and human nature. The vessels presented here were unearthed in the cemetery at Derveni near Thessaloniki, and date to the second half of the 4th century BC. The six tombs found there were part of the cemetery of Lete, the most important ancient city in the area. The graves had not been looted, and thus preserved their rich offerings, among them the earliest Greek papyrus. Tomb B, where these bronze and silver vessels were found, was the largest and the richest. It contained over one hundred objects, among them dozens of silver and bronze vessels, vases of alabaster, glass, and pottery, iron and bronze weapons, a myrtle wreath of gold, and a gold coin of king Philip II. The tomb hid the remains of a man and a woman whose cremated



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bones were placed in an elaborate bronze vessel: the Derveni krater. The man may have been a veteran of Alexander the Great's eastern campaign. The vessel (approximately 1 m tall) is decorated with reliefs depicting Dionysos, Ariadne, and maenads and satyrs, the god's followers, influenced by the wine consumed. The krater was the central piece of the tomb, forming a single symposium set with the other vessels. The present selection of bronze and silver vases was used for holding, preparing, serving, and drinking wine.

The golden colour of the bronze vessels is due to their special composition, which intentionally imitates gold. It is a high-tin alloy, brightly coloured and resistant to corrosion, but also difficult to hammer. The *amphora* (B 22) is an unusual lidded type. It was perhaps an heirloom. It was made at the end of the 5th century BC and was probably used to hold expensive unmixed wine. The two vertical handles, after which the shape was named in Greek, sprout above cast heads of the god Pan. The *kalathos situla* (B 28), a basket-like bucket, was perhaps intended for mixing wine and water. Its impressive hammered body is equipped with an interior channel designed to hold wine sediment. The *oenochoe* or wine-pouring jug is also an important symposium accessory. This variant (B 33) has a trefoil-lipped mouth and a handle shaped like the stem of the wild thorn. The mask under the handle is again that of the god Pan. The silver vessels in the tomb were expensive tableware: cups, a ladle and a strainer for serving and drinking wine, plates for food and condiments, and phialae for libations. The drinking cups displayed here represent shapes popular



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in Macedonia in the 4th century BC. The *calyx* (B 11), named after the cup of a flower, is embellished with gilded floral motifs on the outside. The inside is adorned with a gilded Gorgon head. The drinker would be faced with the frightening mythological monster the very moment he finished his wine. The two silver *kantharoi* with exquisite rising handles (B 5, B 6) belong to a more common cup type. Bronze and pottery versions were often buried in Macedonian tombs. Two silver utensils completed the drinking set. Wine was transferred to the cups by means of the ladle (B 2), and the strainer (B 4) was used when filling the cups, to filter sediment and retain infused aromatic substances.

The Derveni Tomb B is one of the most significant find groups in northern Greece from the age of Philip II and Alexander the Great. Its grave offerings give important testimony to the life of the ancient Macedonians, who believed that the symposium with all its luxury was what they would also find in the Afterlife.

DR. DESPINA IGNATIADOU



B 4



B 6