

## **The archaeology of Plato's *Symposium***

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Picture the scene: it's early evening in ancient Athens, and the pleasant summer's breeze is blowing gently in through the street door. The warm glow of the lamps lets you pick out rows of men (and just men) reclining effortlessly on couches arranged in a horseshoe around the edge of the room, and they laugh, and drink, and chat. In between snatches of conversation, you pick out the reedy tones of the *aulos*, the double-flute, and you hear the slosh of wine and water, mixed together in a large pot and dished out among the men. You are in the symposium, the all-male drinking party, the venue of Plato's *Symposium*, where Socrates and others have gathered to talk about the big philosophical questions of the day.

The room you are in is the *andron*, the men's room. It's here, in a well furnished space on the edge side of the house that men gather after a banquet for this type of drinking party. With a square plan, a raised floor, and possibly even a mosaic to draw your attention, this finely built space is meant to provide a venue for equally fine conversation —just the sort that takes place in Plato's text. And although Plato's text is quite possibly drawn from his own imagination and imaginary too is the imaginary space in which his characters gather, plenty of *andra* have been attested archaeologically. In this blog post, we'll look at two *andra* that have been excavated relatively recently and we will think about what they can (or cannot) tell us about the *andron* that Plato might have had in mind.

### Olynthos

Let's start about 500km away from Athens, up in a Classical city of Northern Greece. The site of Olynthos on the Chalkidiki peninsula was first excavated by David Robinson between 1928 and 1938 where, uncovering streets of Classical and Late Classical houses, Robinson believed he had found the ancient city abandoned after destruction by King Philip in 348 B.C. Over a decade of the early twentieth century he excavated many of the houses, revealing also the ancient street plan and providing a wealth of information that scholars have used over the subsequent generations to think about domestic space in ancient Greece. Excavation of this site was renewed by the British School at Athens in 2014, with a campaign co-directed by Bettina Tsigarida, Zosia Archibald and Lisa Nevett. This work aimed at building a more holistic picture of Greek households within their urban settings.

Excavation of House B ix 6 by the BSA team has certainly shed important new light on Classical domestic architecture. Fieldwork has revealed that the house was entered through the street door to the south of the building, where the first room that one would encounter on turning left inside is thought to be the *andron* ('room i'). No plaster or mosaic floor has yet been identified for this room, but it is thought that this room would have once been adorned with couches, the space where drinking parties could have taken place. The main residential unit was right at the back of the house ('room f'), and to get from the *andron* to here one

would have to walk through the main courtyard and a *pastas* or corridor. This served to keep the public and private spaces of the house separate —and would have helped to keep the noise down! Next to House B ix 6, the BSA team have partially excavated another house, B ix 4: the presence of a mosaic and pebble floor here indicate the possible presence of another *andron*.

### Ancient Stryme

Further east in Northern Greece and near the area of Molyvoti (East Macedonia / Thrace), another recent excavation has brought to light further examples of the ancient *andron*. Directed by Nathan Arrington and Domna Terzopoulou and in a new project under the auspices of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, excavations were conducted in this area in 2019 and focused on the ‘House of Hermes’. This was a plot located adjacent to another building (the ‘House of the Gorgon’) that had been excavated by the same team between 2013 and 2015.

As at Olynthos, an *andron* was located right at the edge of the property, accessed through a vestibule area and separated by a *pastas* from the rest of the house. There were no couches surviving, but the presence of the vestibule door, the location of the room in the corner of the house and the shape of the room’s walls offset to the rest of the building (presumably to accommodate a set of couches) all served to convince the excavators that they were looking at an *andron*. A drain was also located just outside the main *andron* area, filled with various debris like tiles. This space might not be as fully decorated and elaborate an *andron* as we might expect Socrates and his fellow revellers to sit in; but this archaeological evidence gives us at least a ‘footprint’ of what that space might have once looked like, a sense of scale and a clue about how this room related to the rest of the house.

### The *andron* on stage

What do these two *andra* have in common? They are relatively small spaces, fairly cut off from the rest of the house and accessed through a small vestibule next to the main courtyard. Put simply, it is the space itself and its location in the house that helps us to see these rooms as *andra*. What we don’t have is a sense of the fantastic decoration that would have once dressed these rooms: vibrant wall-paintings, polychromatic mosaics, the cushions strewn elegantly across the couches or the tables set out in front on which the men would have balanced their drinking cups. The sorts of fine red-figure pottery that we often see in museums give some indication of the types of cups that the revellers would have used too —but a lack of finds from that come from the *andra* at Olynthos and Stryme themselves do not permit us to see exactly what would have gone on here and they invite us to fill in the gaps with our imaginations.

The *andron* was a peculiar space of the Greek household. In some ways this was a closed and intimate space; in others, it was built to encourage conversation, to get people thinking beyond the house, the city —to think

of big philosophical conundrums that faced the world or the universe. I look forward to seeing how the 2023 UCL Greek Play team bring those two worlds together —the domestic and the philosophical—, and to seeing how exactly they bring the world of the *andron* and the symposium to the stage.

### Figures

1. A red-figure pot painting of two male revellers taking part in the symposium drinking party, Brygos Painter, Vatican Collection. (Vatican Mus 16582, Mark Landon, CC-BY-SA-4.0, <[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/ec/Vatican\\_Mus\\_16582\\_Brygos\\_Painter\\_kylix\\_symposium.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/ec/Vatican_Mus_16582_Brygos_Painter_kylix_symposium.jpg)> via Wikimedia Commons)



2. Sketch of possible andron reconstruction. Teaching material from University of Massachusetts Boston, ‘From Connolly and Dodge, The Ancient City’.

<[https://www.faculty.umb.edu/gary\\_zabel/Courses/Morals%20and%20Law/M+L/Plato/symposium.htm](https://www.faculty.umb.edu/gary_zabel/Courses/Morals%20and%20Law/M+L/Plato/symposium.htm)>



3. Mosaic in a possible *andron*, house excavated by David Robinson at Olynthus. (Ancient Olynthus Chalkidiki - Greece - 043, Christaras A, CC-BY-SA-2.5, <[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f3/Ancient\\_Olynthus\\_Chalkidiki\\_-\\_Greece\\_-\\_043.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f3/Ancient_Olynthus_Chalkidiki_-_Greece_-_043.jpg)> via Wikimedia Commons)



4. Olynthos, plan of areas excavated. The street plan to the N of the image indicates the houses excavated by David Robinson; the area NE of here shows the location of House Bix 6.

<https://chronique.efa.gr/?kroute=report&id=6026>



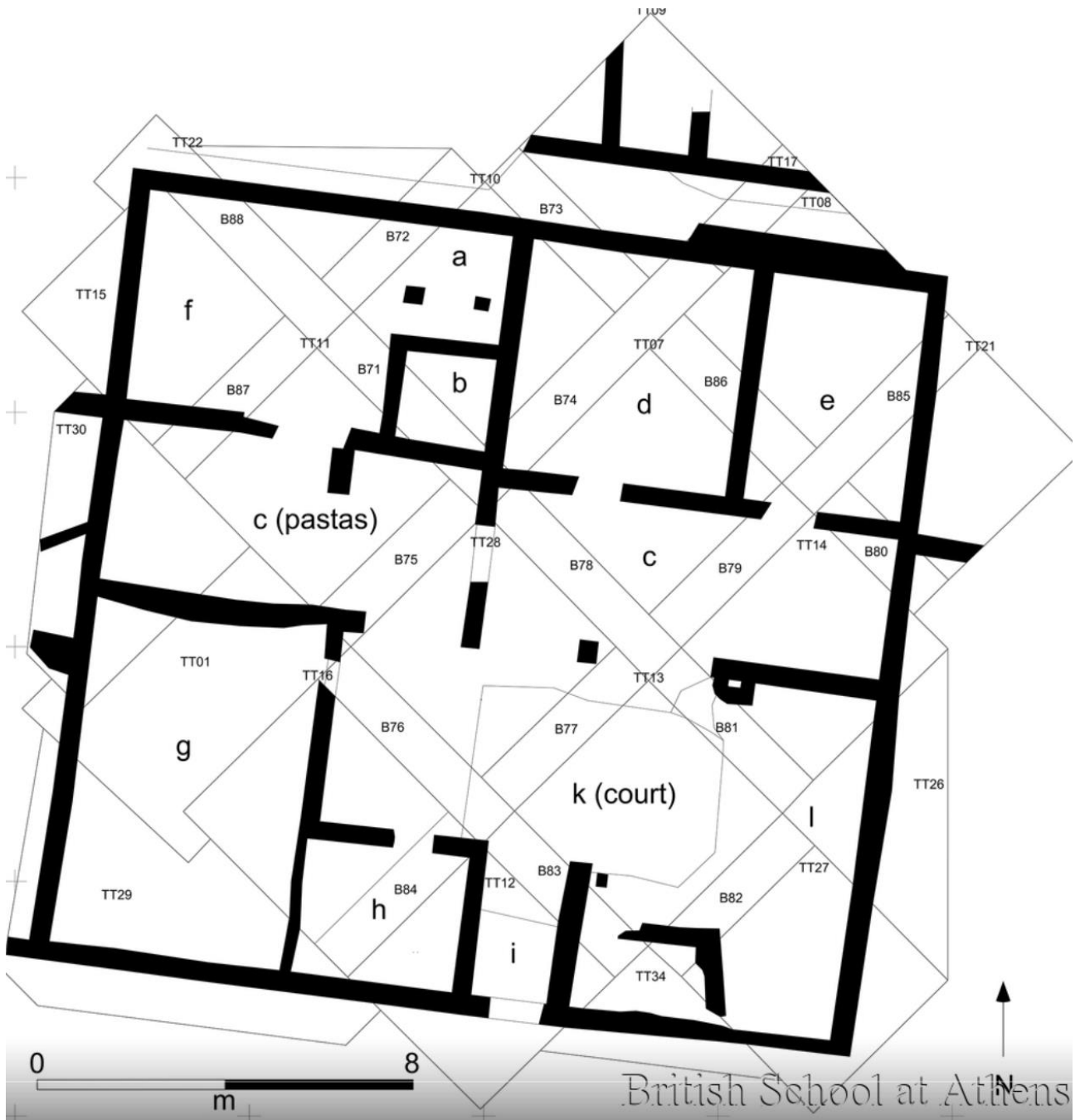
5. Olynthos, photomosaic of House B ix 6 at the end of the 2018 season.

<https://chronique.efa.gr/?kroute=report&id=6628>

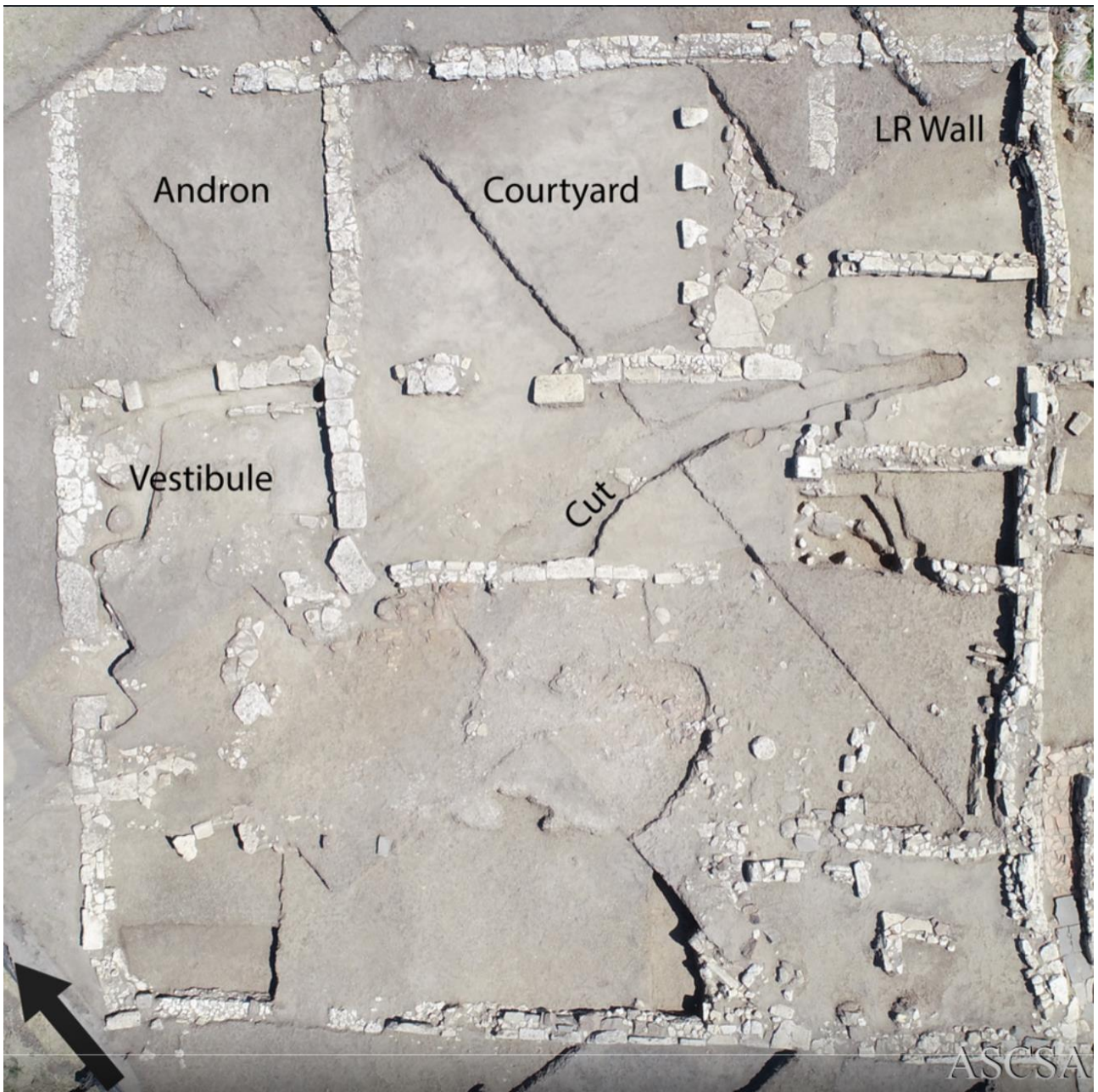


6. Olynthos, sketch plan of House B ix 6 (with labelled rooms), produced at the end of the 2019 season.

<https://chronique.efa.gr/?kroute=report&id=8114>



7. Molyvoti, The House of Hermes at Ancient Stryme. Rooms are labelled according to their probable function. <https://chronique.efa.gr/?kroute=report&id=8120>



8. Molyvoti, Some of the destruction debris from the House of Hermes, dating to the mid-4th century B.C.

<https://chronique.efa.gr/?kroute=report&id=8120>





9. Blackfigure oinochoe, wine-pouring jug. From the British School at Athens collection, MUS.A003.



10. Blackfigure skyphos, wine cup. From the British School at Athens collection, MUS.A004.



### Study questions

1. What sorts of evidence do you think are most useful for telling us what happened at the ancient symposium?
2. Have another look at the floor plans from the houses of Olynthos and Ancient Stryme. Can you trace the routes that people would have walked through these houses? What do you think any of the other rooms were used for?
3. What sorts of images can you see depicted on the mosaics and the painted pots above? What sorts of conversations do you think these images would have sparked, during the drinking party?
4. What are the challenges of bringing a space like the *andron* to life on the stage?

### Further reading

Franks, H. 2018. *The World Underfoot: Mosaics and Metaphor in the Greek Symposium*. New York.

Lynch, K. 2007. 'More Thoughts on the Space of the Symposium,' In R. Westgate, N.R.E Fisher and J. Whitley (eds) *Building Communities: Home, Settlement and Society in the Aegean and Beyond*, London. 243-249.

Morgan, J. 2011. 'Drunken Men and Modern Myths: Re-Viewing the Classical ἀνδρών,' In S.D. Lambert and D.L. Cairns (eds), *Sociable man: Essays on Ancient Greek Social Behaviour in Honour of Nick Fisher*, Swansea. 267-290.

Nevett, L.C, et al. 2017. 'Towards a Multi-Scalar, Multidisciplinary Approach to the Classical Greek City: The Olynthos Project,' *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 112: 155-206.

Topper, K. 2012. *The Imagery of the Athenian Symposium*. New York.

Summaries of the fieldwork undertaken at Olynthos are available online:

<https://chronique.efa.gr/?kroute=report&id=4883>

<https://chronique.efa.gr/?kroute=report&id=5566>

<https://chronique.efa.gr/?kroute=report&id=6026>

<https://chronique.efa.gr/?kroute=report&id=6540>

<https://chronique.efa.gr/?kroute=report&id=6628>

<https://chronique.efa.gr/?kroute=report&id=8114>

And for the fieldwork at Ancient Stryme:

<https://chronique.efa.gr/?kroute=report&id=8120>

The Greek Symposium, with Prof. Michael Scott:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29lcPOS2vTY>