



Courtesans & Fishcakes: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens

James Davidson

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The lifestyle of the classical Greeks often seems disappointingly modest when compared to those of other legendary civilizations. Where are the marble floors, the pillared halls, the gilded rooms? Even the Athenians, the richest and most powerful of the Greeks, were said by one contemporary to dress no better than slaves.

Athenians, however, were as skilled at spending as their playwrights were at devising tragedies. Vast estates vanished overnight, squandered not on material luxury but on eating, drinking, and sex--ephemeral pleasures that left no monuments but are recounted in numerous ancient texts.

Much of what they describe seems familiar--the pleasures of wine, the dangers of seduction, a mouthwatering plate of squid--but some stories are more puzzling: savages on the shores of the Persian Gulf who live off bread made of fish-flour; Alexander the Great drinks a toast that kills him; Socrates interrogates a beautiful woman who lives in luxury with no obvious means of support.

James Davidson masterfully unravels these strange anecdotes, casting new light not only on ancient pleasures but on the Ancient World as a whole. Full of intriguing detail and perspicacious insight, *Courtesans and Fishcakes* takes swipes at the old scholarship (Freud, Nietzsche, Foucault) and lays the groundwork for the new, delivering a fascinating and engagingly written study of the hedonism that ruled Athens.

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