The trouble with Luxury

Displays of ostentatious wealth were just as controversial in ancient Greece as they are today. **Michael Scott**, presenter of two new BBC documentaries on historical luxury, explains how the Greeks sought to alleviate the problem

This scene from a Minoan fresco painting on a chariot in Greece, c1700 BC, holding elaborate funerals was one of the many ways in which the Greeks broadcast their great wealth

IN 405 BC, the ancient Greek comic playwright, Aristophanes, wrote about an individual living in Athens called Alcibiades. "The city," Aristophanes said, "longs for him, hates him, but wants to have him."

Alcibiades, it seems, was a complex and polarising figure. People loved his charismatic charm. They were suspicious of his ambition. They resented his luxurious ways. Plutarch, the later biographer, speaks of the way in which Alcibiades were long purple robes that trailed around on the floor (a sure sign of luxury in a culture where cleaning and replacing clothes was not as easy as it is today). He also had his warship converted so that his bed when at sea could be more comfortable, spent much of his time in drunken partying, and, worst of all, subverted the traditional masculine Athenian warrior image by having a cupid painted on the front of his (golden) shield.

Alcibiades would be feted by the Athenians, accused of sacrilegious crimes, sent as co-commander for one of their most important military expeditions, recalled to stand trial, welcomed back into the bosom of Athens having spent time advising its enemies, and finally be expelled again, eventually to be murdered somewhere in Phrygia (in modern-day Turkey).

The story of Alcibiades is the story of the Athenian democracy's constant battle with itself over how to harness the ability and power of talented individuals within a democratic system in which everyone was equal. But it is also the story of the Athenians love-hate relationship with luxury.

Gifts to the gods

That relationship has a long history. In the late seventh and sixth centuries BC, aristocratic families had competed with one another for power in Athens, often through ever increasingly luxurious expenditure on gifts to the gods and their own funerals. Meanwhile, the poorer classes had increasingly fallen into debt bondage. Such dichotomies had caused civic strife, patched up by law-givers such as Solon, who in particular targeted luxurious expenditure – often down to specific details. He was said to have regulated the length of reed mat that could be used in funerals.

Yet the social divides as made manifest through luxurious expenditure continued. The city finally erupted into a complex series of civil wars (in Greek *stasis*) that eventually, miraculously, some say accidentally, led to the development of democracy.

A fourth-century BC plaque depicting two Scythians sharing a drink

Managing luxury within a democracy was, as Alcibiades proved, a difficult business. But it is a fascinating comparative case-study for those interested in our own tangled relationship with luxury today.

On the one hand, the Athenians strove to ensure that luxury served their community and benefited them all. The royally varied from architectural wonders like the Parthenon, built by the city for the city, to systems in which individuals' wealth was harnessed to provide public services. These included putting on plays, or covering the costs of maintaining a warship, for which wealthy benefactors could be awarded a controlled degree of honour and thanks.

But luxury was also used to unite the Athenians in their most central of religious activities: sacrifice. Meat was a rare commodity in the ancient diet, and the best place to get it was at the big public festivals where large numbers of animals would be sacrificed and their meat distributed to the people.

On the other hand, luxury continued even in democratic Athens to be a way in which people distinguished themselves from one another. Whether it was ornate funerary monuments (periodically clamped down on by the democracy), a love of particularly expensive types of fish (eating which, it was said, was sure to mean that you were not only a luxury-lover, but intent on tyrannical take-over), or a certain luxurious effeminacy like that displayed by Alcibiades, luxury continued to cause problems for the Athenians.

On a wider lens, the Greeks were also well used to employing luxury as a means of identifying what made them different from foreign cultures, as well as from each other. The Persians, their mortal enemy following the Persian invasions of the early fifth century BC, were characterised by a luxurious effeminacy that, in turn, contributed to an inverse sense of Greek identity as one that specifically eschewed luxury.

Within Greece too, luxury could be used as a dividing line. The Spartans were, well, spartan. Their luxuries were a noble death, not buildings, sculptures or fine food. In contrast, the Greeks living over in Italy and Sicily were renowned for their *dolce vita* lifestyle.

Yet such hard and fast definitions and divisions were also constantly up for debate. By the end of the fifth century, historians such as Herodotus had complicated the picture of the luxurious foreigner, and Thucydides had questioned Athens' own public building programme by comparing it to a whore covering herself in jewellery.

As Greek society evolved, so too did the language of luxury, creating a whole series of terms from effeminate luxury ("truphe"), to sophisticated luxury ("habrosune"), to flash-cash luxury ("poluteles"). But within this increasingly complex luxury network also came lessons about how best to manage it. Sparta, by 371 BC, had been brought to its knees in part because of its constant attempts to banish luxury entirely rather than manage it. The resulting strains blew its society apart.

> Alcibiades had his warship converted so that his bed would be more comfortable at sea

The Athenians, on the other hand, by charting a course that attempted to harness and manage luxury, survived intact for longer.

But of course neither of them would be able to stand up to a very different kind of luxury user: the Macedonians, who came to dominate Greece during the reigns of Philip II and Alexander the Great, and whose monarchical rules set the tone for the dynasties of the Hellenistic period to come.

As the current exhibition at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford – featuring Macedonian artefacts from Vergina and Pella – demonstrates, the Macedonian elites, like monarchical rulers throughout history, surrounded themselves with exotic and expensive luxuries. And they pushed the boundaries of artistic creativity as a means of demonstrating the power of their rule.

Our world today exhibits many of the same tendencies as the ancients with regard to luxury. We love and hate it, it unites us and divides us, we attempt to manage it, demonstrate our power with it, and deny it. Sometimes luxury simply runs out of our control.

But if the ancient world teaches us anything, it is that the uneven course of managing luxury is better than trying to deny its existence, a message particularly appropriate when China has just banned luxurious advertising in an effort to paper over the increasing wealth gap in their society. As Aristophanes also said about Alcibiades: "On no account rear a lion in the city, but if one is reared, then humour his ways." H

Dr Michael Scott is the Mosaic and Mary Tinley research fellow at Darwin College, Cambridge. www.michaelscott.com/#!bronzeclassicist

What did rich Greeks spend their money on?

- The writer Archestratus, who wrote about the merits of different types of fish, thoroughly recommended the conger-eel and bear fish as the most luxurious to be had. But Aristophanes warned that if anyone buys the head of a bear, "some foot-loose up at sprats, then they are clearly out for tyrannical power."
- The ancient writer Polybius said that the place to get the best olives in the ancient world was from around the Black Sea, which also provided the best honey, wax and preserved fish.
- Diogenes Laertius commented on the luxurious ways of the people of Acragas in Sicily (modern-day Agrigento) by saying: "They have a life so full of delight as if they expected to die tomorrow, but their houses as if they built as if they believed they would live forever."
- In Sparta, the historian Xenophon commented how, in order to put people off luxury, coinage was made so big that it was impractical to carry around. As he put it: "Why should money-making be a prescription in a state where the pleasure of possession are more than the pleasure of its enjoyment?"
- Pliny, in his Laws, underlines how non-Greeks like Scythians, Thracians and Persians are said to relish a whole series of luxuries, specifically rejected by the Spartans. The most extreme Spartan is the one who, if they like to get drunk on undiluted wine, letting it run down over their clothes, and even regarding this as a noble practice.

Michael Scott pictured in front of the Parthenon, a sublime gift from the people of Athens to themselves

JOURNEYS

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BBC FOUR

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