

# THE CITY THAT DANCED TO DESTRUCTION

by Herbert Siegel



The Bettman Archive

Greeks at table—"The true Sybarite was a nouveau riche middleman with a warehouse."

**N**EARLY 2,500 YEARS AGO, in a warm and fertile plain located on the arch of the boot of Italy, the richest and most luxurious Greek city of the time abruptly met its end. Ancient authors claim that it actually danced to its destruction. This city was the infamous Sybaris, whose inhabitants were universally known for their opulence, wealth, and sensuality and whose name today remains a byword for extravagant and luxurious living. But who were these "beautiful people"? How did they acquire their great riches, and what were in fact the pleasures and self-indulgences for which they were famous?

Our sources, especially Athenaeus in his *Deipnosophistae*, relate many tales, often exaggerated, that give us some idea of how the Sybarites acquired their reputation. For example, the typical Sybarite rises in the evening. He has

spent his day sleeping in a silver bed on a sponge mattress strewn with rose petals. His blankets and pillows are scented and perfumed. His day's sleep has been undisturbed by the crowing of cocks or by noisy laborers or craftsmen, for all these are banned by law from the city. When he arises, his portable silver chamber pot is brought to him. He is then bathed in his tub by servants who wear leg-irons to ensure their slow and careful movement in order not to scald their master by spilling the hot water they carry. After his bath, he enters a steam room—the first sauna in history—where a servant brings him a golden goblet of wine drawn from a pipe directly connected to the vats of the master's country estate. After his sauna, he is carefully depilated, and his skin is polished. His servants then dress him in a lavish yellow-and-red toga, which is bound

by an elegant sash. His wife, equally fastidious, has mascara, powder, and rouge applied while her servants adjust her hairpiece (invented in Sybaris and not in Paris). She delights in a pair of fashionable high-heel cork shoes, which her husband has presented to her.

Sybarite and wife are preparing themselves for a party to which they have invited friends. The invitations went out a year in advance to give them and their guests time to ready themselves. One of their guests arrives early, accompanied by a hundred of his own servants. His Milesian coat, which is rumored to cost 120 talents—about \$250,000—is taken from him as he enters. He has just come from his country estate and tells his host how fatigued he is from having spent the last few hours watching his slaves at work. His host complains that he is tired just hearing about these laborers, and besides, his own day's sleep was disturbed by an ignorant slave who had strewn dried and crumpled rose petals, rather than fresh ones, on his bed.

Other guests soon arrive. They are all anxiously awaiting dinner, for their host's chef has twice before been publicly awarded wreaths of gold for his cooking, and his recipes granted copyrights under Sybaritic law. One guest who boasts of never having seen the daylight for 20 years listens to a friend who has just returned from a trip to Sparta. The traveler has had a revelation. Now he understands why the Spartans are so fearless in war. After one has sampled their dinner, one sees why they are so willing to die in battle.

The feast begins, and all the reclining guests are crowned with golden tiaras that they will later take home as sou-

venirs. Their wine cups are filled, and then an endless line of waiters files to the table, bringing ringdoves, partridges, hares, young goats, ducks, and pigeons on gold and silver platters. The wine cups are refilled, and the first battery of flute girls and naked dancers acting the roles of nereids and nymphs enters the hall to entertain. The tiaras are now exchanged for wreaths made of fresh flowers, and other girls carry in golden jars of perfume with which guests are doused.

Suddenly the blast of a trumpet announces the arrival of the chef d'oeuvre, an enormous pig that is split open, revealing thrushes, ducks, and warblers roasted inside, with mashed peas poured over eggs, oysters, and scallops. Larger wine cups are now filled; more perfume is brought in; and troupes of clowns, ithyphallic dancers, female jugglers, tumblers, fire-eaters, dwarfs, monkeys, and freaks enter. The music grows louder as boar and baked fish are also carried in.

To the accompaniment of a chorus of 100 singing slaves, huge six-pint bowls of precious Thasian wine are drunk by each guest. At this point, dessert is served. Dinner comes to an end. Now the slaves of the guests collect almost all the dinnerware, cups and plates on which their masters have supped, for these are gifts from the host. The banqueters themselves arise, and many, despite the quantity of wine they have drunk, are quite sober. They are apprehensive for the safety of their newly acquired additional wealth. They return home thinking of all the new houses, lands, and slaves they will buy. Those who are not so sober go off to enjoy other pleasures.

**A**SIDE FROM ATTENDING one another's parties, how did the Sybarites acquire their wealth? How did this notoriously indolent society of gourmands and sensualists support itself?

Sybaris was founded in 720 B.C. by a group of Achaeans and Troezenians in a plain that enjoyed an advantageous geographic position. The city, located on the Gulf of Taranto, was the starting point for the shipment of goods overland from the Ionian Sea to the Tyrrhenian Sea by the shortest distance. Ships sailing from Asia Minor or from Athens or Corinth with goods destined for the wealthy cities of Magna Graecia or of the Etruscans, on the western coast of Italy, would land at Sybaris rather than make the longer and more dangerous trip around Sicily or through the Strait of Messina. Thus Sybaris became an entrepôt for goods

shipped from the East to the West. The rich countryside and easy terms of citizenship as well as the lure of money easily acquired drew literally thousands of immigrants to its shore. Eventually, the population reached nearly 500,000 inhabitants, an incredible number for any ancient city. Yet most of these people were slaves. Many citizens owned hundreds of slaves, and one was in fact reputed to possess as many as 3,000.

The true Sybarite was a nouveau riche middleman with an enormous warehouse. There is no record of a Sybarite ever having become an artist, a sculptor, a writer, or a philosopher; and no lawyer or medical doctor was ever trained in Sybaris. All artists and professionals were imported. Thus these Sybarites were not only physically indolent and slothful but also intellectually lazy. The fact is that they had others do everything for them. Nevertheless, the Sybarites were clever businessmen, and after having won only once in 200 years at the sacred Olympic games, they organized and set up their own games in competition with those at Olympia, offering cash prizes instead of laurel wreaths. The games at Sybaris attracted large crowds, and thus the Sybarites introduced into Western civilization the concept of the professional athlete.

Throughout their history, the Sybarites tried the patience of the gods. When the city was founded, it was accompanied by an act of impiety. The Achaeans expelled their cofounders and brother Greeks, the Troezenians. This was followed by the sacrilegious institution of the Sybarite games. The Sybarites, however, felt protected, for they had once received an oracle telling them they would live forever in abundance were they never to hold a man in greater reverence than a god. Some say that this oracle provoked them to greater luxury, for the Sybarites saw nothing wrong in a life of total sensual abandon; the envy and jealousy of the gods could never descend upon them so long as they honored the gods more than men. Nevertheless, the destruction of their city was signaled in this very simple way.

A man who was whipping his slave continued to do so although the slave had taken sanctuary in a temple; but when the slave fled to the tomb of his master's father, the master stopped beating him. This was thought to be in violation of the warning of the oracle—the master had shown more honor to the memory of his father than to the gods.

Sybaris soon fell. A group of citizens

under the leadership of a man named Telys overthrew the oligarchic regime. The oligarchs fled to the nearby city of Croton and were granted asylum. But the Sybarites demanded the return of their citizens. The Crotoniates, under the advice of the famous philosopher Pythagoras, refused this request and sent 30 ambassadors to Sybaris to inform its people of their decision. These ambassadors, protected by sacred law, were nonetheless seized and beheaded. The temple of Hera, in Sybaris, gushed a river of blood. War was unavoidable.

The enemy troops were marshaled and arrayed against each other on a great plain. The Sybarite cavalry was preparing to attack when something bizarre occurred. Crotoniate intelligence forces had acquired military information of a sort that has not found and probably never will find its parallel in the history of warfare. It was a well-known fact that the Sybarites had for their amusement trained their horses to dance to music. The Crotoniates found out through a deserter what those tunes were. Thus as the Sybarite cavalry charged, instead of a force of enemy horsemen, they found facing them the Crotoniate wind ensemble playing a version of the Sybarite "Lipizzan waltz." The obedient horses, rearing on their hind legs, danced upon and over the Sybarite foot soldiers, who were thrown into confusion and panic. As a result, the Crotoniates took the day and laid siege to Sybaris, which soon fell. All who were captured were killed, and the city was burned and looted. Then it was razed to the ground, and the Crotoniates diverted the nearby river Crathis, inundating and obliterating Sybaris. It appears as if the Crotoniates were intent on washing away the sins of this city.

Thus in 510 B.C., Sybaris, the legendary city, fell. What was left was the memory and the reputation. Here in a settlement between two rivers, on a plain aglow with wheat and filled with wildlife, the jeunesse dorée after reveling all night was so keyed up there was no sleep. They trooped off to the grottoes of the nymphs by the nearby river Lusias to cool their ardor. Overlord to no less than 25 other cities in southern Italy, Sybaris became synonymous with wealth, indolence, hyperbole, impiety, and hubris. But ultimately, the totally luxurious life, insouciant and fantastic, is forever only a dream. ●

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# STALKING THE WILD ARISTOCRACY

by James Traub

**W**HEN THE POSSIBILITY of spending a weekend at an English castle first suggested itself, I walked around New York with a bundle of images from *My Fair Lady* and Dickens's novels thronging to mind. How well we all know the English aristocracy: a race of doddering great-uncles pickled in Victorian spirits. Perpetually declining, they hold down the crumbling fortress of Good Manners with the scanty armor of kid gloves and dinner jackets and elongated vowels. They're elaborately meticulous in a world where everything has gone slapdash. They're paralyzed by propriety and devitalized by decency. I braced myself for a visit to The Wax Museum: I was careful to pack my suitcase neatly so that the butler wouldn't be offended when he hung up my things.

It didn't take long to purge the film from my eyes. I arrived at Rotherfield Park, a neo-Gothic castle 50 miles southwest of London, late one Saturday afternoon. Five hours after my arrival, my host, fifty-six-year-old Sir James Walter Scott, and I, sitting on a couch before the television set in the midst of the family, had fallen into a drunken stupor. At least mine was drunken; Sir James's may have been fatigue abetted by wine: two double Scotches with the kids at the White Horse Inn, followed by three or four infusions from a bottle of white wine with which Sir James probably waters the plants and rinses the walls of the castle, followed by red wine with dinner, capped off by about six inches of port. By 10:30 we were both shipping water. But Sir James proved a dauntless host. When we awoke, his first words were, "What else may I get you? Some more port, perhaps? Some brandy?"

Not very stiff upper lip, what? But it



Sir James and castle—"Weathered mufti."

gets worse: The Scotts had no butler to unpack my bags or to snort at my bad manners. Nor had they a valet, nor a livery boy, nor a scullery maid, nor any of the exotic species of domestics featured on imported British television series. Able-bodied young Charles, home for the Easter holidays, toted my bags upstairs. And I had obviously packed the wrong archetypes. Sir James, for example, cooperated so far as to wear tweeds, but his mufti had clearly weathered a great many campaigns, being sorely rumped at the ankles and sadly limp at the shoulders. He had worn them to the steeplechase Saturday afternoon; he had worn them to Easter services the next morning; and

unless they've been retired to some Tweed Hall of Fame, he's probably wearing them right now. Sir James himself—known to his sons as "The Colonel," in mock deference to his distinguished military career with The Empire That Was—is short and wiry, with a boar-bristle moustache and a swollen, flaming red nose. What with his irrepressible good cheer, his eager, high-stepping walk, his habit of speaking in rapid barks, and that snaffling nose, Sir James resembles nothing more than one of his retrievers. Happy the man whose wish and care a few hundred paternal acres bound...

If the Scotts, to my great delight, failed to fill the mythological bill, their stately home more than made up for the lapse. Rotherfield Park is situated at the brow of a hill, from which it suddenly rises like an island in a sea of tranquil pastureland. Built in 1821, by which time the neoclassical taste for balance had given way to a passion for striking effects, the castle is endowed with all the Gothic eccentricity demanded by the "picturesque" sensibility: Two flint-stone towers, one square and one round, sit at the back of the castle like a pair of chess pieces waiting to be deployed; a cupola crowns the western edge, as if a Russian Orthodox church were packed away inside; and behind it, as if to prove the point, comes a row of cloisters. The fortifications, of course, have seen neither grapeshot nor cannonry; nor have the stones of the cloisters echoed to a monk's plaintive *ave*. But then, what's the difference between house and castle, save the sense of history? Even artificial history.

The estate rolls off gently in every direction, dotted with beech and chestnut and oak. Horses nose indolently at the rich pastureland. Behind