



“Great meals of beef and iron and steel”: Late La Tène metal vessels in northern Gaul

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Waldagesheim, Aylesford, Roissy en France— what all these sites have in common is that they've produced "masterpieces" of Celtic art. Yet, however iconic these finds may be, we actually know very little about them; their function and origin remain a mystery.

Metal vessels are a luxury and prestige goods. They are inseparable from the banquet, so dear to Celtic culture, and it is through the lens of banqueting that I approached these objects during my doctoral research. Together with my doctoral advisors, Matthieu Poux of the University of Lyon 2 and Dirk Krauß of the University of Tübingen, I focused on northern Gaul, between the Seine, the Marne and the Rhine, a region described by Caesar as the “furthest from the [Roman] civilization and refinement” (Caesar, BG, I.I.). Thus it was not only a question of better understanding the typology and uses of metal vessels, but also of analyzing the acculturation process through these artefacts during the two centuries preceding the Conquest. Though my thesis was published in 2018 by Mergoïl Editions (Sueur 2018), my research into these artefacts is still ongoing. Moving forward, I am exploring the connections between northern Gaul and its neighbours, especially across the Channel.

The archaeological finds, and the context in which they were discovered, are the primary source of information we must use to avoid any ideological bias when considering Iron Age peoples. Indeed, the presence of imported goods from the Italian peninsula does not, itself, signify the practice of Mediterranean customs. The study includes more than 650 pieces of metal vessels from nearly 150 sites, most of which are burials (Fig. 1). More than a hundred objects were studied (measured, drawn and photographed) directly in museums or archaeological storage areas, in order to obtain as much technical information as possible on the manufacturing processes and typology. In addition to this analysis of the artefacts, I carried out a study of the diffusion of each kind of vessel, using distribution maps to quantify the Mediterranean influence and to identify any regional particularities. My PhD is, in a way, a continuation of the round-table discussion of Lattes in 1990 (Feugère, Rolley 1991), performed with an original approach and a considerable amount of new data from 30 years of preventive archaeology in northern France, Germany and the Benelux countries.

Mediterranean metal vessels imported into northern Gaul during the 2nd and the 1st centuries BC indirectly testify to the evolution of Italic production during this important period. It thus shows the abandonment of a whole formal repertoire (Petrovsky 1993, 29-30). Forms like Aylesford pans, tardo-republican strainers and Kappel-Kelheim jugs disappear in favor of new forms, such as the paterae or the dipper-strainer-sets during the Augustan period (Fig. 2). Manufacturing processes also underwent profound changes. The workshops in northern and central Italy were replaced by those in Campania. These workshops developed more efficient and less costly production, thanks in particular to the use of ternary copper-tin-lead alloys that were cast and turned on a lathe, replacing the binary copper-tin alloys that could only be worked by hammering (Böcking, Gérolde, Petrovsky 2004, 211-220). These major changes are fully in line with the artistic renewal linked to the advent of the Empire.

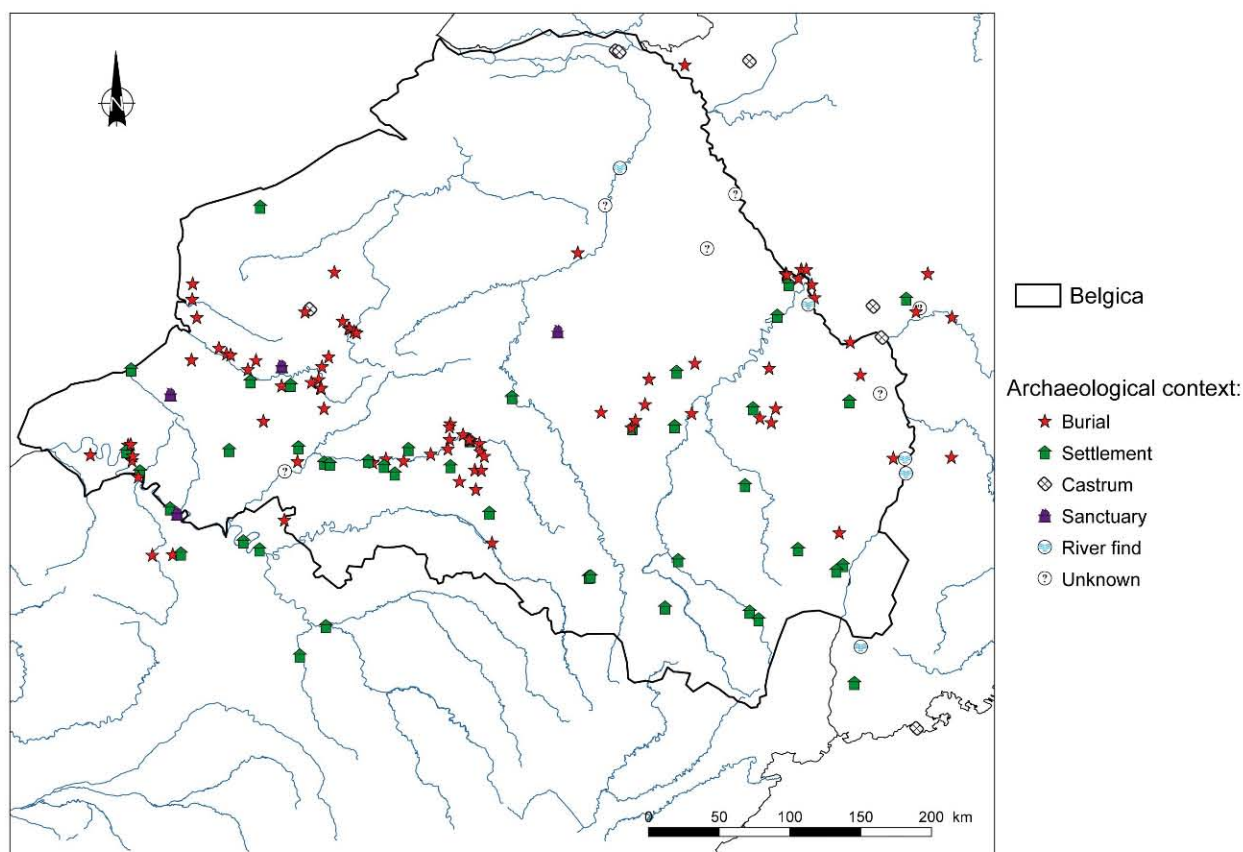


Figure 1. Archaeological sites with metal vessels within Belgica and on its borders (source: author).

Generally speaking, imported metal vessels remained marginal in northern Gaul until the 1st century AD. Local products are far more widespread. Among these, wooden buckets with metal hoops and bimetallic cauldrons largely dominate the corpus. These two forms appeared in Gaul around the middle of the 3rd century BC, in the north-west, between the valleys of the Somme and the Canche. Their development seems intimately linked to the formation of the area Caesar referred to as *Belgium* and can be compared with the appearance of the great sanctuaries of Picardy at the same time. Indeed, buckets and cauldrons occupy an important place in the burials of this region, following a strict organization recreating the image of the hearth. This tradition contrasts with the eastern part of the study area, where buckets and cauldrons only appear at the end of the 2nd century BC. *Belgium* also seems to be less receptive to Mediterranean influence. Imports are far fewer there and they spread later than in some regions, such as the Remi or Treveri territories.

Italic metal vessels are rare in northern Gaul until the Conquest; becoming more abundant in the second half of the first century B.C. This diffusion was mainly due to the legions. Thus, the forts on the Rhine border produce impressive quantities of metal dishes brought from the Apennine peninsula. In the rich tombs of the elite, mixing buckets, cauldrons and Mediterranean imports, are also clearly attributable to influential auxilia of the Roman army. At Goeblange-Nospelt, for example, the strainers and dippers in Graves A and B come from the same workshops as some examples from the Roman fort at Haltern am See and bear the same stamp (Metzler, Gaeng 2009, 268-272). Although better attested after the Conquest, Italic metal vessels remain rare until the 1st century AD outside the military sphere. Furthermore, there is no indication that they

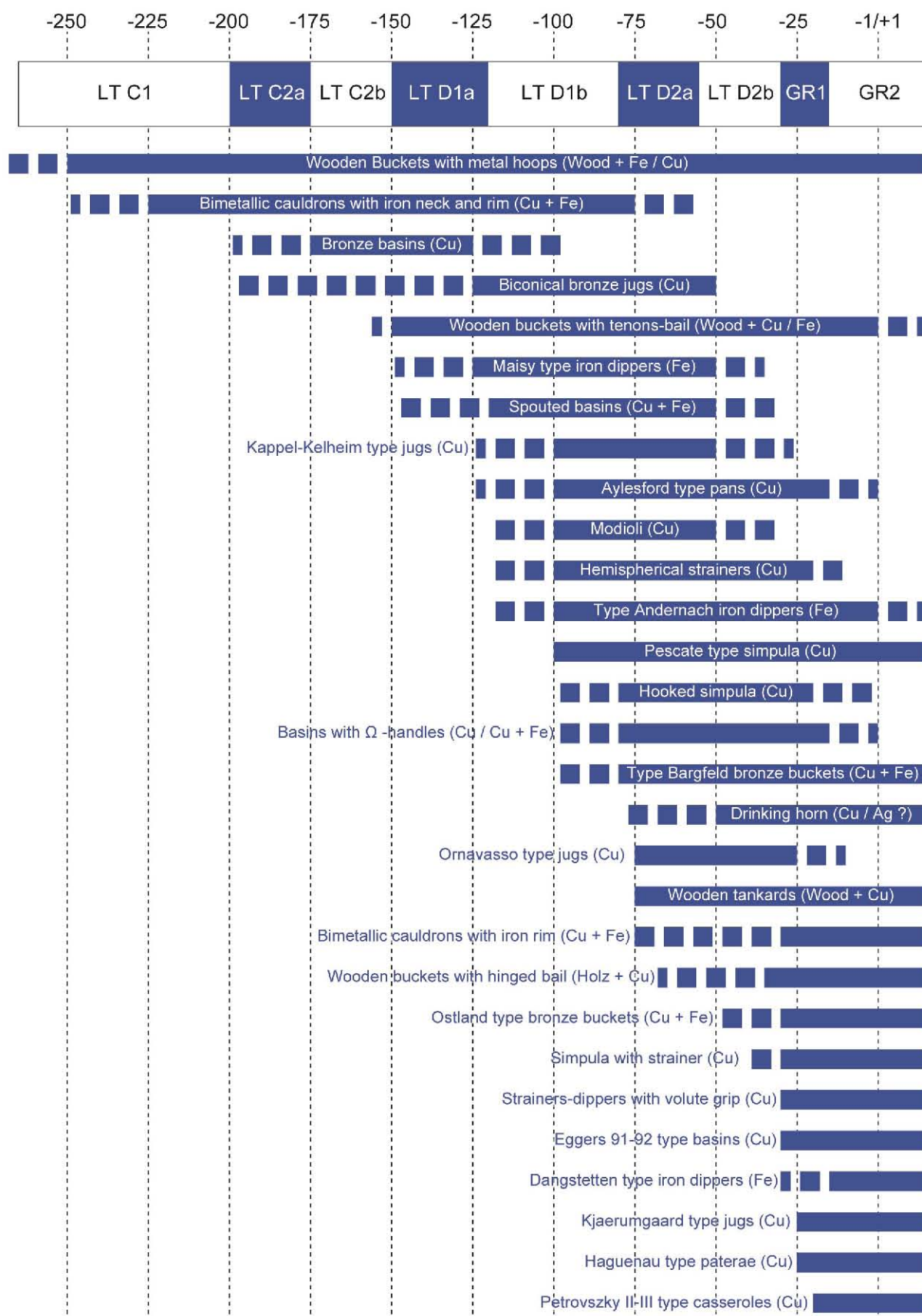


Figure 2. Chrono-typology of the metal vessels of northern Gaul (2nd-1st centuries BC) (source: author).

were used in northern Gaul in accordance with Mediterranean customs before then. Like the buckets and cauldrons of Belgium which were adopted late in the rest of Gaul, it seems that imported metal dishes were valued for their material worth and prestige.

The Romanization of northern Gaul is therefore not reflected in the import and use of imported vessels. Rather, it is detected in the gradual disappearance of metal dishes, imported and local, from the tables of the Gallic elite at the end of the first century BC. With it, sumptuous banquets disappeared, as they were the very expression of the power of the local chiefs, now subject to Rome. The Romanization of mores was thus expressed not by the adoption of Roman-style pomp, but by a standardization of the meal, now reduced to the private sphere. The Mediterranean symposium was not adopted in Gaul before the first century AD, thereby erasing the "great meals of beef, iron and steel".

Dr Quentin Sueur is a researcher at the ArAr laboratory of the Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée (UMR 5138). He specializes in metal small finds, both protohistoric and antique. During his PhD, he explored the contact between northern Gaul and other European regions, such as the Apennine Peninsula or the British Isles.

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