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The Vessels of the Assyrian Royal Banquet: An Archaeological and Iconographic Approach

Adonice Baaklini, Margaux Spruyt

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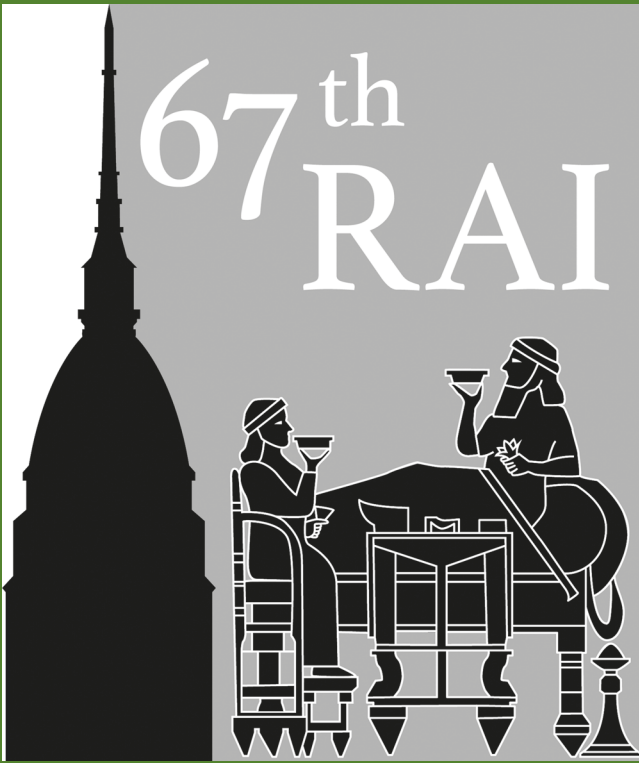
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Eating and Drinking
in the Ancient Near East

Proceedings of the 67th Rencontre Assyriologique
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Edited by Stefano de Martino,
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The Vessels of the Assyrian Royal Banquet

An Archaeological and Iconographic Approach

Adonice-A. Baaklini / Margaux Spruyt***

1. Introduction

Whether to celebrate a military victory, a successful hunt or to honour the gods, the king or his dignitaries, the Assyrians regularly held festive banquets. These were an opportunity to present high quality tableware that displayed the prestige of the banqueters. It is therefore possible, through iconographic sources and archaeological remains, to question the tableware used during banquets. What are these objects? Does their utilisation or the material from which they are made convey a specific symbolism? Do these objects bear witness to a social hierarchy between the different banqueters? These are questions we will attempt to answer through a study based on the examination of objects uncovered during excavations and their iconographic depiction in the Neo-Assyrian period. We will first present the objects whose use during banquets is positively attested, then we will focus on the objects which, although visual attestation is lacking, may have been used. Finally, we will examine the symbolic dimensions of the objects and question the prestige associated with them.

2. What we know ...

The carinated bowls are without a doubt one of the best-known containers used for royal banquets. They are depicted in the famous ‘Banquet Scene’ of Ashurbanipal (BM 124920) in the hands of both the king and the queen (Fig. 1), and we have many archaeological attestations of them, either in ceramic or in precious metal (Fig. 4: 1–9).¹ The ceramic carinated bowls are in very fine ware and mainly attested in palatial context; therefore, they are known among specialists as “Palace

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¹ For the typology of the ceramic specimens, see Anastasio, 2010: 41–42, pl. 107 and Hausleiter, 2010: 291–292, 360–361, pl. 5; for the typology of the metal specimens, see Howes Smith 1986: 48–55, fig. 4. See also, for other examples unearthed after the typology of Howes Smith: Fadhil, 1990, pl. 39; Damerji, 1991; Curtis, 2013.

ware” and “Eggshell ware”.² There are also exceptional glass specimens, like the one unearthed from the tumulus P (8th–7th century BCE) at Gordion.³ Beside the specimens found in the different rooms of the Assyrian palaces, many of them, and especially the metal ones, were unearthed from royal and high-status tombs in Nimrud and Assur.⁴ These kinds of bowls spread all around the Near East, in the provincial capitals, but also among the local autochthones, elites, sub-elites, and even the commoners.⁵ They are characterised by a rounded base, a shallow semi-elliptical body, and a sharp carreen between the body and the everted rim. Several of them are, especially the ones in metal, very well decorated with gadroons and omphalos. Some were engraved with the name of their owner, either a royal figure, like the queen, a governor, or an indigenous vassal.⁶ The iconography of the ‘banquet’ in the Linear Style Neo-Assyrian cylinder-seals gives many examples of royal figures – or maybe sometime high officials – standing up or sitting in front of a banqueting table. Sometimes, these figures hold in one of their hands a little container in front of their faces, which could be a depiction of a carinated bowl (Fig. 2).⁷ Those bowls were most probably used to drink wine⁸ during royal banquets, but also to perform libation during ceremonies, as attested by iconographic sources.⁹ It is worth noting that these bowls were linked to the figure of the king¹⁰ and have a strong symbolic meaning of loyalty to the Assyrian Empire while some of them were probably given by the king to his high-status personnel or vassals.¹¹ In the Achaemenid period for instance, royal banquets were one of the most important occasions for the king to offer these bowls in different materials: gold and other precious metals for the higher status officials,

² Lines, 1954; Rawson, 1954; Oates, 1959.

³ Rodney, 1981: pl. 15. (for a color modern picture, see (<https://www.penn.museum/sites/gordion/articles/artefactual-evidence/glass-at-gordion/>)).

⁴ See, for example, Curtis, 2013: pl. XXXVI: 508; pl. XXXVII (at the exception of number 514); pl. XXXVIII; pl. XXXIX, 501–502, 506. See also Oates / Oates. 2001: pl. 8b.

⁵ Baaklini, 2021: 247.

⁶ For example, the ones inscribed with names of Assyrian queens (Oates / Oates, 2001, pl. 8b); a bowl with the name of the *turtanu* (generalissimo) Shamshi-ilu (Fadhil, 1990: pl. 39); a bowl with the name of an eponymous official, Assur-Taklak (VAR: VA 5134); a bowl with the name a high official of the Assyrian province of Arpad (Hunt, 2015: 190.), and the one inscribed with the name of a probable autochthon ruler (probably vassal of Assyria) from Western Iran (Radner, 1999–2001: 17–19, 23, fig. 1).

⁷ See, for example, Collon, 2001: pl. IX–XII.

⁸ Baaklini, 2016.

⁹ See, for example, the relief BM 124886–7 or the glazed tile ME 90859 (both at the British Museum).

¹⁰ Nylander, 1999.

¹¹ Hunt, 2015: 186; Radner, 1999–2001: 21.

and pottery for the inferior officials.¹² A similar practice may have been implemented in Assyria.

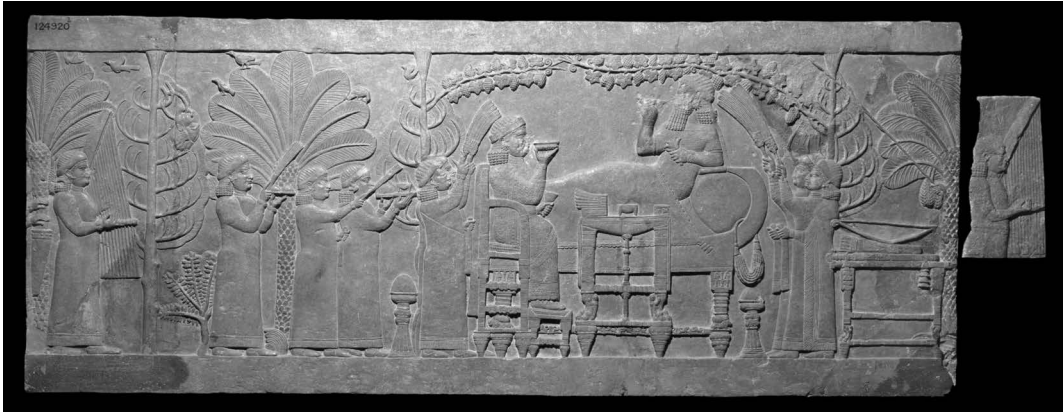


Fig. 1: The ‘Banquet Scene’ of Ashurbanipal, c. 645–635 BCE. North Palace of Ashurbanipal. (Nineveh), room S. Gypsum, 58.42 × 139.7 × 15.24 cm. British Museum, BM 124920.



Fig. 2: Neo-Assyrian cylinder seal (imprint). Brownish Chalcedony, 2.7 × 1.2 cm. PM 776 (www.themorgan.org).

¹² Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 1989: 133–134.

After the carinated bowls, we can cite the tripod bowl (Fig. 4: 10) displayed on the table, between the royal couple, in the ‘Banquet Scene’. That kind of pottery is well attested in the Neo-Assyrian ceramic,¹³ and, as shown by iconographic representations, but also by its shape – especially the tripod base – it was most probably used to display foods.

Some other vessels, used to serve beverages, are depicted in the relief showing the preparation of a royal banquet in Khorsabad,¹⁴ the ancient Dur-Sharrukin (Fig. 3). This relief, from the reign of Sargon II, displays two elements: the zoomorphic rhyta (Fig. 4: 12), and the huge cauldrons (Fig. 4: 13). One specimen of this kind of rhyta, characterised by a cylindrical body sculpted in the form of a lion which can be held by a semi-circular fine handle, was found in pottery from the territory of Neo-Assyrian Empire.¹⁵ But it is highly probable that the pottery specimen was copied from containers in precious metal, like the ones found in the Midas Tomb (mound MM form Gordion).¹⁶ The cauldrons were absent from the archaeological record of the Assyrian heartland, but similar ones were unearthed, again from the tomb of Midas.¹⁷

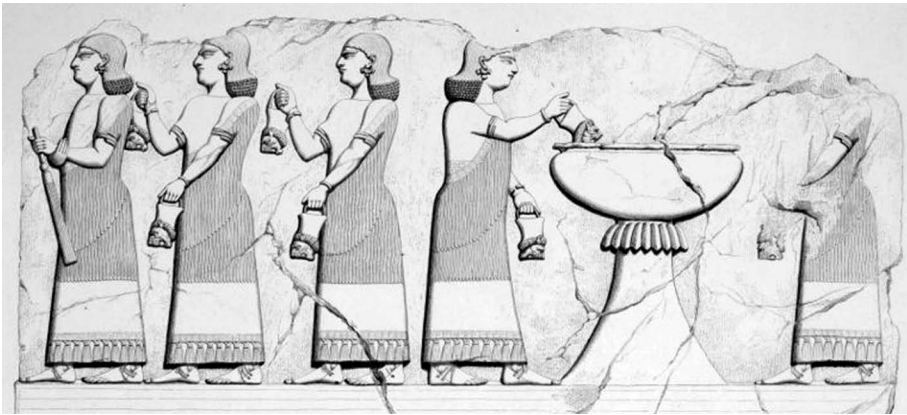


Fig. 3: Relief showing the preparation of a royal banquet from the palace of Sargon II. Khorsabad (Botta / Flandin, 1849: pl. 76).

¹³ They correspond to the category TR_02 in the study of S. Anastasio (Anastasio, 2010: 43–44, pl. 17: 2–4) and SH 2 in the study of A. Hausleiter (Hausleiter, 2010: 293–294, 362, pl. 76).

¹⁴ Botta / Flandin, 1849: vol. 1, pl. 76.

¹⁵ It corresponds to the category RH of S. Anastasio (2010: 55, pl. 14: 7).

¹⁶ Rodney, 1981: pl. 62, C–F.

¹⁷ Rodney, 1981: pl. 46.

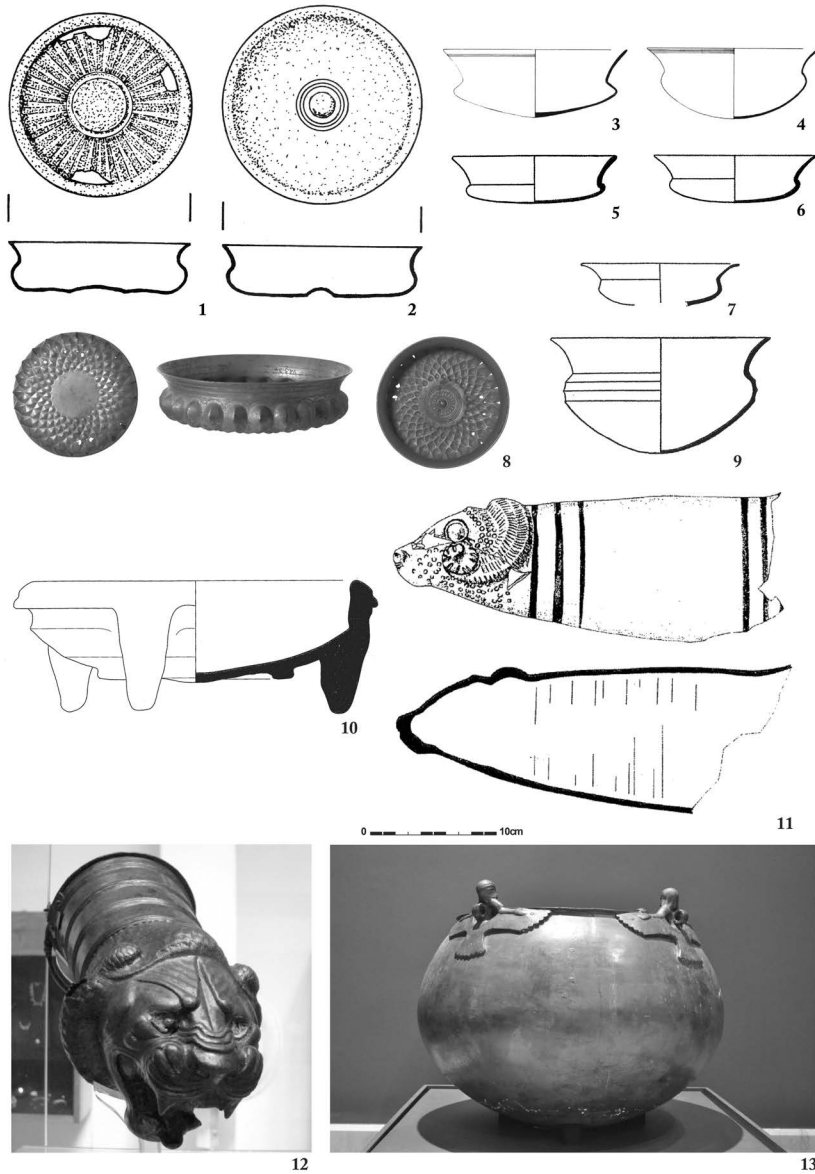


Fig. 4: Assyrian vessels used during royal banquets. 1–2: Bronze bowls from Ashur (Curtis, 2013: pl. 37: 511–512). 3–7, 9: Earthen ware carinated bowls from Nimrud (Hausleiter, 2010: pl. 75; SD 4.1–4). 8: Gold bowl engraved with the name of Assur-Taklak, found in Ashur (<http://www.smb-digital.de>); 10: Earthen ware tripod bowl from Nimrud (Anastasio, 2010: pl. 17: 2). 11: Earthen ware rhyton from Khirbat Katuniyah (Anastasio, 2010: pl. 40: 7). 12: Bronze rhyton from Gordion, Tumulus MM (so called ‘Midas’ tomb) (<http://gunce.marsyas.gen.tr>). 13: Reproduction of Bronze cauldron from Gordion, same provenance as 12 (https://www.penn.museum/collections/object_images.php?irn=410640).

3. ... And what we can guess

Beside the material clearly shown on relief, and also on the cylinder seals, other vessels, found during excavations, could also have been used during the royal banquet.

For instance, “Dimpled ware” – little goblets, mostly decorated with digital imprints put in a row – are, with the carinated bowls, one of the most famous ‘Palace ware’ specimens in Assyria (Fig. 6: 1–5).¹⁸ Also found in palatial context, they share the same very fine fabric as the bowls. And, as it is the case for carinated bowls, “Dimpled ware” can also be produced in metal.¹⁹ Therefore, notably due to their shared characteristics, it is highly probable that the goblets were also used during royal banquets. There may even be some iconographic representations of these goblets, characterised by a very schematic closed form with an ovoid body and a narrow high neck on cylinder seals (Fig. 5).²⁰ As we can see on the cylinder’s depictions, they were used for two categories of banquets-related events: 1) ‘regular’ banquets, where they were put on a table between two sitting banqueters – then, they may have been used to pour wine in bowls or smaller goblets, or, to be used by the two banqueters as a shared ‘bottle’; 2) ceremonies where the king is represented with a bow and a cup in front of a servant with a fan. In such cases, the large goblet on the table may have a symbolic function related to the libation process, or act as an evocation of the future banquet about to take place.

Furthermore, painted ware may have been used in royal banquets, as it is one of the finest and most precious ceramics of Assyria (Fig. 6: 6–7).²¹ Its cultic use is attested by archaeology: a specimen was found in the temple XVI of Tell Tayinat (Fig. 6: 6).²² It is worth noting that, as we have seen for the carinated bowls – which appear on banquet and libation scenes –, cultic and banqueting functions seem to be strongly linked.

Finally, a last form of ceramic is the beaker (Fig. 6: 8–12, 14), well known in Assyria,²³ and in peripheric territories. This ceramic is not considered to be “Palace ware”, but it is very similar to Neo-Babylonian beakers found in Uruk inside

¹⁸ They correspond to the category BT_01 (48–49; pl. 27), BT_02 (48–49, pl. 28) and BT_03 (48–49; pl. 28) of S. Anastasio (2010); BD 1 (308–309, 378–379, pl. 86), BD 2 (379–380, 309–310, pl. 87) and BD 3 (310, 380; pl. 87) of A. Hausleiter (2010); and B1 (49–53, fig. 3.12), B2 (49–53, fig. 3.13) and B3 (49–53, fig. 3.14) of A. Hunt (2015).

¹⁹ Curtis, 2013: pl. XXXIX, 509.

²⁰ For example, see in Collon, 2001: pl. IX, 104–109, 113–117.

²¹ See, for example, Anastasio, 2010: pl. 60, and especially 60, 4, which is very similar to the piece found in a palace of Tell Tayinat/Kunula.

²² Harrison / Osborne, 2012: 136, fig. 7: 9.

²³ They correspond to the BK main type of S. Anastasio (Anastasio, 2010: 58, pl. 47, 3–20).

of high-status tombs.²⁴ They were placed in the hand of the deceased to recall the drinking gesture, which may indicate that beakers were used during banquets in Babylonia in a time not far from the Neo-Assyrian period. Indeed, the Neo-Assyrian empire had a strong influence on the banqueting customs of the area, and the cultural proximity between the Assyrians and the Babylonians let us believe that the Assyrian pottery beakers, that have a similar shape as the Babylonian ones, were also used during banquets, and maybe even royal ones in the Neo-Assyrian period.

Regarding the serving ware, it is highly probable that some kind of bronze buckets and strainers, found in Assyrian royal palaces, were used, similarly to the rhyta we studied in the last paragraph, for serving beverages, especially wine (Fig. 6: 13).²⁵



Fig. 5: Neo-Assyrian cylinder seal (imprint). Chalcedony, 2.3 × 1.1 cm. VA 7976. (Klengel-Brandt, 2014: n° 152 = Moortgat, 1940: n° 665).

4. A hierarchised material

In the Banquet scene relief, it is interesting to note that Ashurbanipal's and his queen's faces but also the king's bowl – probably a carinated bowl if the image of the queen's bowl, which remains untouched, is anything to go by – were hammered out after the fall of Nineveh. While it is easy to understand why the faces of the king and queen were erased due to their position of power, the motives for hammering the royal bowl are more intriguing.

²⁴ Salje, 1996: 446.

²⁵ See the two published examples in Curtis, 2013: pl. XL, 522; pl. XLI, 524.

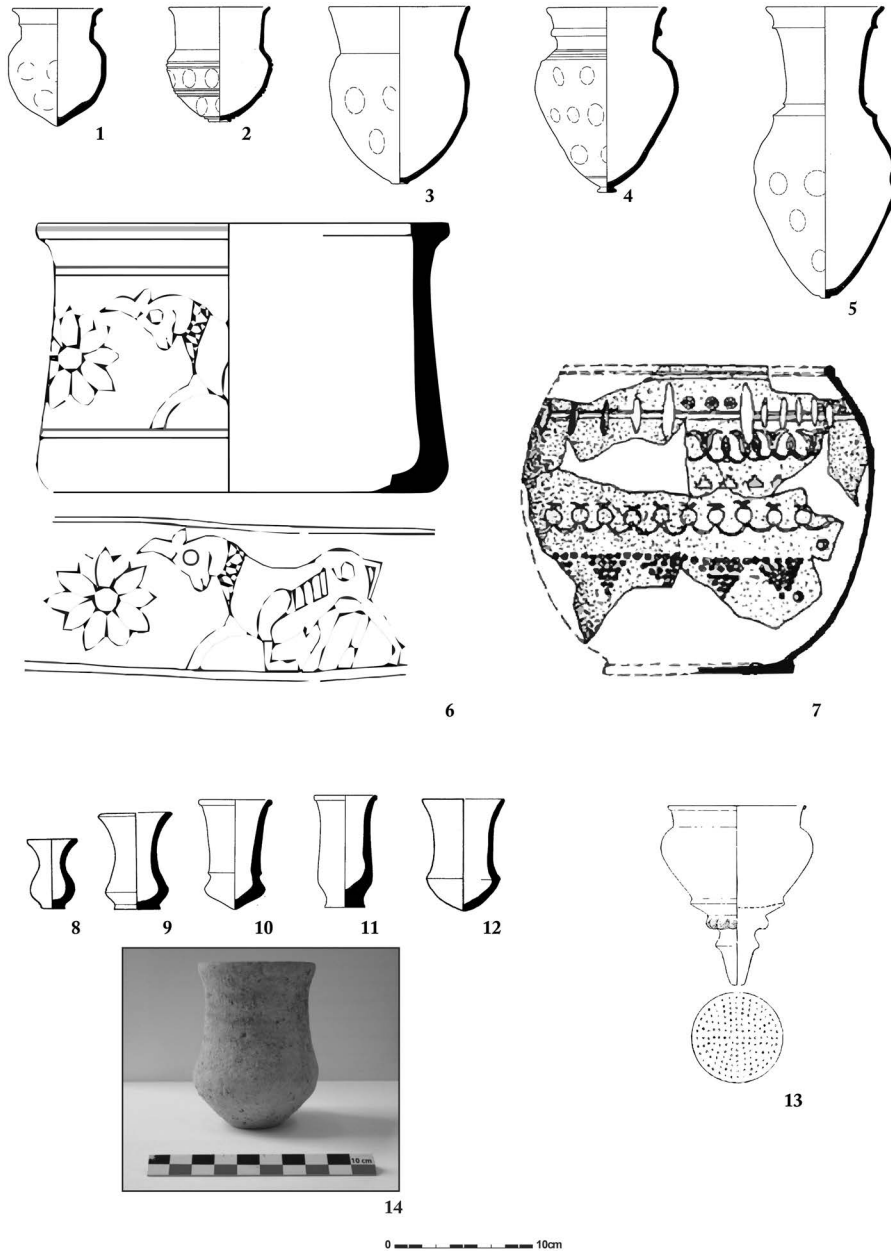


Fig. 6: 1: Assyrian vessels probably used during royal banquets. Dimpled ware (pottery) from Assur, Anastasio, 2010: pl. 27: 11. 2–4: Dimpled ware (pottery) from Nimrud (1–2) and Ashur (4), Anastasio, 2010: pl. 28: 1–3. 5: Dimpled ware (pottery) from Ziyarete Tepe, Anastasio, 2010: pl. 28: 10. 6: Painted pot from Temple XVI of Tell Tatinat/Kunulua. Redrawn from Harrison, Osborne, 2012: fig. 7: 9, p; 136. 7: Painted pot from Ashur. Redrawn from Hausleiter, 2010: pl. 126. 8: Earthen ware beaker from Nimrud, Hausleiter, 2010: pl. 81: BE 4.1. 9: Earthen ware beaker, Hausleiter, 2010: pl. 81: BE 4.3. 10: Earthen

ware beaker from Nimrud, Anastasio, 2010: pl. 27: 6. 11: Earthen ware beaker from Nimrud, Anastasio, 2010: pl. 27: 2. 12: Earthen ware beaker from Nimrud, Hausleiter, 2010: pl. 80: BE 2.3. 13: Bronze strainer from Nimrud, Curtis, 2013: pl. XLI: 524. 14: Earthen ware beaker from Rasm el-Tanjara (Syria), held at the AUB Archaeological Museum. Photo: A.-A. Baaklini.

Numerous carinated bowls were found in archaeological excavations. Produced in ceramic or metal, they are objects which, by the material used, reflect a certain prestige. This is further reinforced by the presence of inscriptions with the names of their owners. Indeed, inscribing the bowls with the name of their owners makes it possible to distinguish these bowls – which have become unique because nominative – from the rest of the objects used at banquets. Thus, a personal and symbolic value seems to be attached to these specific bowls. And if the bowls of the high dignitaries were inscribed with their names, it is possible to think that the king's bowl was also inscribed with his name although the archaeological excavations have not yet revealed any. It is therefore possible to understand the hammering of the king's bowl on the Banquet scene as an act that refers to the practice of *damnatio memoriae* in the ancient Near East, as is the case for the many reliefs where royal insignia are erased.²⁶ The carinated bowls used by the king, and probably bearing an inscription with his name, must have carried a powerful symbolic charge, closely linked to the king's image.²⁷ A hierarchy thus seems to emerge between the bowls, on the one hand, according to the material in which they were produced, and, on the other hand, according to their owners.

Furthermore, it is possible that this individuation of certain containers – whether they belonged to the king or to dignitaries – is in fact at the origin of the hierarchy that can be seen in the iconographic sources. The success of carinated bowls, especially in ceramic, found throughout the Near East²⁸ can be explained by the importance of this form.

Other small containers, such as beakers and “Dimpled ware”, could also have been of some importance, as they are individual containers although they do not seem to have been closely associated with particular individuals.

Finally, it seems clear that the tableware used for the service, shared by all the banqueters, or used to present the food, did not carry any particular symbolic charge and could only be prestigious due to their material and financial value.

A hierarchy thus emerges and seems to be a typical element of the royal banquet, as it is a particular type of banquet, as its main objective is to establish the domination and superiority of the king: the “Patron-role feast” according to

²⁶ May, 2012.

²⁷ Nylander, 1999.

²⁸ Baaklini, 2021: 247–249; Adachi, 1997.

Dietler's typology.²⁹ It would be interesting to know how this material was used in aristocratic banquets, which might have more closely resembled the Greek symposium with its relative "equality" among the guests,³⁰ or relate to the "Empowering feast".³¹ It should be noted that the two functions of the banquet are not contradictory, as the royal banquet also serves to create an identity for the imperial elite. In this context, it is clear that the material used, and particularly the tableware – especially in the case of the carinated bowls given as gifts – plays a major role.

Conclusion

The study presented here focuses mostly on the ware visible in the reliefs; however, it is likely that other types of wares were used at these events. Furthermore, it is also possible to extend the typological spectrum of certain forms, notably the carinated bowls, since many of them, notably the metal specimens from Nimrud and Ashur, have not yet been published.³² And it should be remembered that the banquet was probably not limited to drinking and eating from tableware, but that certain ceremonies could also have been taking place and require specific tableware. For instance, in Athens in the classical period, guests had to make libations by pouring wine from their cups into larger vessels,³³ or played certain games, such as drinking one after the other from a disproportionate cup without spilling any liquid.³⁴ This opens up new possibilities for the identification of new types of tableware, but it also requires further research into the Assyrian banquet and its various stages – which is rather difficult because of the lack of clear references in textual sources.

Abbreviations

PNA = Baker, H. / Parpola, S. / Radner, K. (eds.) 1998–2011: *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire*. Helsinki.

RIMA 2 = Grayson, A. K., 1991: *The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia. Assyrian Periods. Volume 2, Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium B. C., 1114–859 B. C.* Toronto, Buffalo, London.

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²⁹ Dietler, 2001: 82–84.

³⁰ On greek symposium, see, Wecowski, 2014

³¹ Dietler, 2001: 76–80.

³² Curtis, 2013: p. 70.

³³ Wecowski, 2014: 38.

³⁴ Wecowski, 2014: 42–43.

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