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# Commensality and Ceremonial Meals in the Neo-Assyrian Period

Stefania Ermidoro



**Edizioni**  
Ca' Foscari



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**Antichistica**  
Studi orientali

Collana diretta da  
Lucio Milano

8 | 3



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## Abstract

The purpose of this book is to investigate banquets and shared meals in the Neo-Assyrian period, providing the first complete and integrative research on this topic. While presenting a study on Neo-Assyrian commensality, investigated through an analysis of every textual and archaeological evidence available today, the research also aims to tackle the topic with a new approach, characterized by a tight connection between anthropology and history. The work opens with an overview of nutritional anthropology and presents the main theories developed by its major exponents. Then, Sumerian and Akkadian literary texts which describe feasts and shared meals are discussed. The third chapter investigates meals offered by the Neo-Assyrian king; then, the gods' table is treated. Chapter five deals with the *Protocol for the royal banquet*, a document that fixed the rules for a ritualized meal of the Assyrian king with his sons and magnates. In the sixth chapter, more concrete aspects of feeding in Assyria are discussed. A few essential annexes complete the research: a Lexicon, whose purpose is to investigate the most important key words that occur in the sources considered, and two charts. The research is characterized by two main focal points. Firstly, there is the Neo-Assyrian practice of banquets, i.e. their concrete side, more directly connected with the actual consumption of food; secondly, the ideological and theoretical aspects of commensality are analysed. Feasting has revealed itself as a flexible activity, which could be adapted to a variety of settings and circumstances in order to fulfil multiple requirements. Being a meaningful instrument to transacting empowerment, Neo-Assyrian banquets were therefore an extraordinary vehicle of self-representation and of cultural exchange at the same time.





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This book is dedicated to my father.

Venice, October 2015

# Commensality and Ceremonial Meals in the Neo-Assyrian Period

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## Commensality and Ceremonial Meals in the Neo-Assyrian Period

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### 0 Introduction

Banqueting is a multilevel, expressive, meaningful communications medium. It is never just a matter of ingesting foodstuffs that have been obtained from the surrounding environment: on the contrary, it is a very complicated social fact. It is an experience which goes beyond the nutritive consumption, and its efficacy is due to the fact that it constitutes a social and a mnemonic tool at the same time – since while the body incorporates the food, at the same time the mind creates memories which link the event to the message it conveys.

Despite admonishments and reprimands of philosophers and wise men who, ever since ancient times, have urged their contemporaries to «eat to live, and not live to eat»,<sup>1</sup> human beings have always done their best to enjoy food as much as possible. Above all, they have devoted themselves to the research of the most agreeable possible way to share such food with their families, friends and companions. Ancient Mesopotamia is no exception: textual and iconographic sources of every typology show us a world full of celebrations, eating, drinking and feasting. Eating was, in the ancient Mesopotamian conception, synonymous of civilization itself, and the two basics of nutrition (i.e., the basics of civilization) were bread and water: the verb ‘to eat’ was originally written with a logogram which brought together a human mouth and a loaf of bread, and ‘to drink’ was similarly written with ‘mouth’ and ‘water’. Moreover, the two words signifying the predicate ‘to eat’ and the noun ‘bread’ shared the same verbal root ‘*kl*’. Edibles were products of the fields, of breeding and sometimes also of trading, and in each of these cases they always presumed some kind of transformation and handling: they were not just collected and consumed as they were found, and that was what made humans different from animals.

Eating alone was regarded with suspicion in Ancient Mesopotamia: the best way to enjoy food and drink was in a group, it did not matter how big – but, surely, eating was not an action to perform in solitude, as this

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<sup>1</sup> «*Esse oportet ut vivas, non vivere ut edas*», wrote Cicero in his *Rhetoricorum Ad C. Herennium*, IV 7. Plutarch attributed an almost identical sentence to Socrates: «τοὺς μὲν φαύλους ζῆν τοῦ ἐσθίειν καὶ πίνειν ἕνεκα, τοὺς δ’ ἀγαθοὺς ἐσθίειν καὶ πίνειν ἕνεκα τοῦ ζῆν», in *Quomodo adolescens poetas audire debeat*, I, 4.

would have caused scorn and displeasure.<sup>2</sup> Guests and friends are, to mention two expressions used up to the first millennium, «those who give salt» and «those who give bread»:<sup>3</sup> contributing to the communal meal was one of the highest symbols of brotherhood. The bigger the shared repast was, the more numerous became, then, the economic, social and cultural implications that it singled out. To mention only a few of the features discussed in the course of this work, the economic aspect regarded the feasibility and affordability of the edible items set upon the table; social factors were the creation of boundaries and/or divisions among diners and the possible political use of such events; the cult provided a crucial framework for banquets which justified the legitimacy of the élite; finally, culture influenced banquets in deciding what was fit for the table, and in giving instructions for each moment that composed the event.

The consumption of repasts was often inscribed within a ritualized frame, which usually coincided with a religious one: ever since the first detailed sources dating back to the third millennium, in fact, it seems that for a Mesopotamian man, to worship a god without offering him or her lavish quantities of food and drink was apparently inconceivable. Very often, this divine meal was combined with a bigger festive event, and the inauguration of a building, the celebration of a military victory, the stipulation of a contract or a treaty, the taking of an oath or the declaration of a verdict were all occurrences (among many others) which might have taken the concrete shape of a meal. This, moreover, might have been shared with friends, subordinates, comrades-in-arms, business partners, allies, and officials, who ate together with – or under the protection of – the gods, confirming thereby their bonds, both within the human group and between that group itself and its divine protectors.

In Ancient Mesopotamia, cooking and eating were, thus, perfectly integrated within the daily cult as well as in big festivals. Nevertheless, even though it was fundamental for the practical performance of religious services, it seems that food never found its way inside the divine pantheon. Some of the gods were said to be cooks or butchers, in the attempt to mirror in the celestial hierarchy the same social structure that was active inside human palaces: these deities were however minor ones, and sometimes even created *ad hoc*, as for the case of the butcher god whose name was simply 'Divine cook' (<sup>d</sup>Muhaldim)<sup>4</sup> and for the other chef who was

2 An Old Babylonian letter from Nippur written in a scholastic environment, the so-called *Letter from Lugal-nesaĝe to a king radiant as the moon*, reads (lines 16-17): gu<sub>5</sub>-li dub<sub>3</sub>-sa zu-a kal-la-ĝu<sub>10</sub> | lu<sub>2</sub> dili gu<sub>7</sub>-u<sub>3</sub>-gin<sub>7</sub>, igi tur mu-un-gid<sub>2</sub>-i-eš, «My friends, companions, acquaintances and esteemed colleagues look on me with scorn, as at a man who eats alone». See Ali 1964, pp. 85-91.

3 EN.MUN.MEŠ and EN.NINDA.MEŠ: see for example the texts SAA 4, 139 and 142.

4 See the lexical list AN = *Anum* I, 329.

called literally ‘What would my lord like to eat?’ (Minâ-îkul-bêli)<sup>5</sup>. Aside from these ‘ephemeral’ supernal entities, some other major gods were explicitly correlated with single ingredients, such as cereals (Ašnan), cattle (Lahar), beer (Siraš) and brewing (Ninkasi). One god, however, played a unique role as Enlil’s «lord of the banquet table»:<sup>6</sup> it was Šulpa’ê, who was defined with this epithet in a Sumerian religious hymn, but who appeared in the same role centuries later, in a hemerological text dated back to the first millennium BCE, in which he supervises food taboos applied to fish and leek.<sup>7</sup>

Even outside a purely religious context, Mesopotamian feasts were characterized by a strong ritualized nature, that was at the basis of every big social event and that influenced therefore banquets, too. Ritualization is a product of culture and society, its rules are fixed by a long-lasting tradition deriving from experience and by word of mouth of dozens of generations. Writing even just a small part of the larger history of Mesopotamian cuisine means reflecting also about the economic, social, religious, and cultural processes that were part of the wider, evenemential and more traditionally «historical» frame.

Using a metaphor that has been introduced convincingly by anthropologists in the Sixties, the analysis of the eating act may be considered similar to a grammatical analysis. A meal is as complex as a sentence or paragraph: it is constituted by smaller individual elements, words, that are the essential ingredients which have on their own a peculiar provenance and that carry one or more tastes. These basic elements can be taken singularly, of course, but they are enhanced, and give much more sense, when they are mixed in a potentially unlimited number of ways – and each time, they acquire a whole new meaning. In fact, setting up a meal is never just an answer to a physical necessity, but it serves very specific and different purposes of communication. Food conveys meanings, in much the same way as a text, and in the same manner it might thus be read and understood, once the language it speaks is known. Furthermore, the metaphor of a grammar analysis is also useful to recall the sense of rules, of a grid

5 The Sumerian name was: umun-mu-ta-àm-kú, see AN = *Anum* III, 363.

6 en <sup>gi</sup>sbanšur-ra <sup>de</sup>en-lil-lá-me-en: see the *Hymn to Šulpa’ê*, l. 51. This text has been published by Falkenstein 1963.

7 The text is the so-called ‘Offering Bread Hemerology’, according to which in the seventh day of Tašritu: KU<sub>6</sub> GA.RAŠ.SAR [NU] KÚ GÍR.TAB *i-za-qa-su* | *ik-kib* <sup>d</sup>ŠUL.PA.È EN <sup>gi</sup>sKIRI<sub>6</sub>, «he should not eat [neither] fish or leek or a scorpion will sting him; it is taboo to Šulpa’ê, lord of the orchard». See Livingstone 2013, p. 137, ll. 55-56. It is noteworthy to mention that this is the only hemerological text that records three gods explicitly as supervisors of food taboos, and they all appear in this particular passage for the seventh day of the month Tašritu. Beside Šulpa’ê, eating root or leek is said to cause *qūqānu*-disease and to be a «taboo to Ennugi, the canal inspector of Anu» (ll. 57-58), while eating something unknown (the tablet is broken at this point) is described as a «taboo to Šamaš, the judge, lord of the basalt stone» (ll. 59-60).

in which each element must find its place: in order for the whole system to work properly, each constituent must follow some accepted and renowned paradigms. Thus, the relationships among words, sentences or paragraphs are rigorous and dynamic at the same time.

There are various factors that make the 'decoding' of Mesopotamian eating habits a complex task: very often, texts (although extremely numerous and belonging to different typologies) shed light only on a few aspects, and particularly on the practical actions that must be performed on the occasion of big events and ceremonial meals enjoyed by the elite. They tend to omit, instead, data referring to feelings, personal likes or dislikes, cultural tendencies. Historians, however, have tried to reconstruct how Mesopotamian taste might have been: even though this question might appear naive, given the long history of this area, which crossed thousands of years and experienced (just as for every other cultural expression) the rising and disappearing of 'fashions' also in its cuisine, it is possible, however, to detect a few permanent features.

Near Eastern men used to combine flavours in a way that appears quite unusual to us today, mixing for example garlic and sugar, and not paying attention to the categories of 'salty' and 'sweet', since most of their dishes apparently did not use either salt, or sugary substances. They loved strong-tasting and spicy food (but not peppery, a taste that apparently was not even known), and made a large use of seasoning. They enjoyed quite a wide variety of edibles, and were able to take advantage of every natural element, to obtain ingredients for which they developed specific recipes. Mesopotamian men liked the taste of grilled, toasted, burned, but also fermented and sour foodstuffs, and learnt how to conserve them for a long time, by the use of some additives. The overall perception that we gain by reading written sources and observing images dating back to every period of Mesopotamian history, is that of a high-quality, specialized, unique and complex culinary art.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, by reading the ancient texts, it is clear that there was a great consciousness of the different effects that different ingredients could cause on the body. Scholars, diviners, exorcists and physicians were aware that edible items directly worked on the physique of those who ingested them, and that these reactions could vary on the bases of a quantity of variables which needed to be taken into consideration, in order to evaluate the good or the harm that each foodstuff may have caused. The symbolic and the practical aspects of feeding were, therefore, always in the mind of the Mesopotamian man, and they must still be taken into consideration today by everyone who studies the topic of food and cuisine.

The purpose of the present study is to investigate banquets and shared

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8 For an introductory but comprehensive discussion on the topic, see Bottéro 1980.



meals in the course of the first millennium, and more specifically during the Neo-Assyrian period.<sup>9</sup>

This topic is not completely unknown to the historians of the ancient Near East: on the contrary, particularly in recent years and thanks mostly to the personality and the pioneering work of Jean Bottéro, studies on ancient food that included also the area of the Fertile Crescent have been increasing. The French scholar, in fact, was the first to step out of the traditional research published until the early Nineties, which focused more on purely nutritional aspects such as the counting of the amount of calories ingested by each man or the frequency, modality and quantity of allotments that gave life to the ration system in ancient Mesopotamia. He highlighted, instead, the sociological and ontological meanings and consequences of nourishment, and contributed thus to the emergence of a new awareness among Near Eastern historians, who began to consider food and drink not only as items, but as cultural symbols, too.

Today, many articles and books have been written on this subject, thanks to the incredible amount of still unpublished written sources, which keep casting light on new aspects of those ancient societies. And yet, strikingly these publications focus almost exclusively on the third millennium, and for later times on the king's meal in Mari – even when the titles present a general character and the authors aim, apparently, at proposing an overall view on this topic, the examples provided come almost always from Sumerian, Early Dynastic or Ur III times.<sup>10</sup> They have mostly underestimated the Neo-Assyrian written sources, which are instead numerous and variegated and allow, therefore, a complete historical reconstruction that has still not been given until now.<sup>11</sup>

While supplying an in-depth historical study on banqueting in Assyria, investigated through an analysis of every kind of textual and archaeological evidence available today, my research also has the ambition of presenting the topic with a new approach, unusual in comparison to similar studies published in recent years. It is characterized, in fact, by a close connection between anthropology and history, that 'dialogue' with one another throughout all the pages of the work. This does not imply that previous studies on food in ancient Mesopotamia ignored the recent anthropological

<sup>9</sup> Every chronological reference (years, centuries and millennia) mentioned in this research will always refer to dates intended as before common era, BCE.

<sup>10</sup> To mention only few examples (but many will be listed throughout the present work), see: Brunke 2011; Joannès 1996; Limet 1987; Michalowski 1994; Pollock 2012; Schmandt-Besserat 2001. Also the two main monographic works on banquets in Mesopotamian art deal only marginally with Neo-Assyrian instances: see Dentzer 1982; Selz 1983. Lion, Michel 2003a, although being complete and providing a discussion for all the main periods of ancient Mesopotamia, is composed, however, of quite short papers.

<sup>11</sup> A few exceptions should be listed here, among recent studies which appeared in collective works: Joannès 2008; Marti 2011; Masetti-Rouault 2002; Villard 2013; Winter 2013.

works on this subject. However, they often followed the major schools of thought with more or less awareness, without providing the reader with insight on the reasons for the preferences originally expressed, nor the starting premises that had been followed.

Nutritional anthropology is today a mature discipline, which counts a wide bibliography and a rather heated debate, and is characterized by an interdisciplinary, diachronic methodology. In the course of its birth and development, many strong personalities have left their mark on the discussion about the approach to keep when it comes to historical issues, and influenced, therefore, studies on ancient history, too. The limit of nutritional anthropology has been, however, to replace the study on antiquity (that would imply the use of archaeological and philological sources) with research conducted in the field, among those so-called 'primitive societies' with whom scholars can establish a direct contact.

On the other hand, scholars who deal specifically with the history of food (a discipline that counts among its main representatives Massimo Montanari)<sup>12</sup> have fixed their chronological limits quite drastically, directing their attention mostly to the Medieval and modern/contemporary ages, going back in time only up until the Classical Greek and Roman period.<sup>13</sup>

In order to bring these two worlds into contact, the one of food anthropology and the other of the history of the ancient Near East, the opening pages of this work are dedicated to an anthropological introduction, which provides a compendium of all the main theories on food that have been discussed in the course of recent years. Afterwards, the more strictly historical treatise investigates the various aspects of banquets and communal meals held in Assyria in the first millennium, but also in these chapters there are often references to anthropological theories, which serve at the same time as terms for comparisons and cause for reflection.

In the coming pages, a lot of room is given to the original sources and their interpretation. Writing the history of any society, and particularly of such a multi-faceted, long-living and heterogeneous society as the Near Eastern one, these sources cannot and must not be left out of consideration. Scholars of ancient Mesopotamia are fortunate to have at their disposal texts drafted in almost every epoch covering basically each aspect of human life: these texts are an irreplaceable, precious tool that casts a direct light on the ideology and understanding of a society. For this reason they deserve particular attention, but at the same time also great awareness and caution not to let our modern understandings overwhelm them.

<sup>12</sup> See, among his most recent publications that present an encyclopaedic character, Montanari, Flandrin 1997; Montanari, Sabban 2004; Montanari 2004.

<sup>13</sup> See, as an exception, the work published by Goody 2008 who extended the examples proposed for his research on food and medical recipes also to Mesopotamian sources.

Looking for an Akkadian expression that summarizes in just a few words all the major features that characterize the whole research, we may quote one of the royal inscriptions of the king Šalmaneser III: *nap-tan hu-du-tú áš-kun*, «I put on a joyful banquet».<sup>14</sup> Firstly, because the origin of this short text suggests that, given the nature of the sources at our disposal, which were conceived, written and kept for the purposes of the central administration and the social elite, the main discussion deals with the royal and high-society repast. Furthermore, each of the three words that appears here carries a particular significance, that goes beyond their first and most immediate level of comprehension.

*Naptanu*, one of the Akkadian terms for ‘meal, banquet’, not only refers to the main subject under study, but it also recalls the long discussion running through the publications over the past forty years that speculated about the ultimate meaning of this lexeme, and the different sense conveyed by the apparently synonymous *naptanu*, *qerītu*, *tākultu* and a few other terms, as well.

*Ḫudūtu*, the term for ‘joy, happiness’, obviously suggests the mood which accompanied the banqueters during the whole repast, but it also immediately evokes the most renowned literary compositions such as the *Enūma eliš*, which provided the mythological justifications for the particular event described in Šalmaneser’s inscription.

Finally, the verb *aškun* opens questions on who was in charge of setting up these banquets, and which were the goals sought after with such an event. When, as in the case of this quotation, the king personally bothered to organize it, we must infer that a feast was more than just an amusing moment, instead it implied a more profound connotation.

The research is characterized by two main focal points. Firstly, there is the practice of banquets, i.e. their concrete side, more directly connected with the actual consumption of food (that includes the analysis of the various practical components of a festive repast, the methodologies followed for its carrying out, the prescribed or banned actions to perform, and so on). Secondly the ideological and theoretical aspects are analyzed (with the explanation of various anthropological frameworks, and the cultural and social motivations fundamental to determining the dynamics of such a strictly regulated act).

The work opens with a historical overview of the discipline of nutritional anthropology and of the theories developed by its main exponents in the course of time: these are presented in chronological order but at the same time critically, highlighting their weakest and strongest points, in order to identify the most useful suggestions for the subsequent discussion. The purpose of this chapter is not to provide an exhaustive history of a science

14 See Grayson 1996, Šalmaneser III A.0.102.14, lines 70-71.

that was born between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries and that since then has seen a remarkable increase in interest and debating. My goal is, instead, to compare the interpretations suggested by various anthropologists with regards to eating in a human society, and the cultural dynamics that intervened in the different phases leading to the preparation, carrying out, and closing phases of banquets, in particular.

Anthropological studies on dietary laws and taboos have also been considered, since eating is not only made of 'including', but also of 'excluding' possible edible items; this clear-cut choice can be determined by many factors and is justified in each society according to different cultural motivations. Finally, in view of the fact that feeding in an ancient society was often a religiously connoted act, and since rituals played a significant role in determining the place, timing and procedures for the performance of festive meals in Mesopotamia, a short account is provided for the main theories developed on this matter. In this introductory part, the definitions of 'banquet' and 'ritual' that I have adopted for my research are stated clearly, and are therefore useful for the comprehension of the following sections of the work.

In the second chapter, which is also preparatory and essential to the later historical study, the main Sumerian and Akkadian literary texts which include descriptions of feasts and shared meals are discussed. They are presented after the anthropological chapter and before the ones specifically related to banquets in Neo-Assyrian time, since in the Mesopotamian perspective these texts represented at the same time a model to follow, the ultimate explanation of the gestures observed on the occasions of feasts celebrated by men, but they mirrored also, in a somehow opposite movement, human banquets. They may thus be considered as likely descriptions of the spirit and the manners that animated commensality at the time of their drafting.

Ever since their discovery and decipherment, these literary texts have been published year after year, often in individual studies which have focused more on their interpretation, their various levels of reading, or their definitions and classification into genres. Such strictly philological analyses, although fundamental, have sometimes caused an erroneous overlooking of the overall frame in which these sources should be integrated, for example their relations with actual religious or social events and the rich cultural heritage that they convey. In this work, a holistic approach has been used instead, and all the main literary texts of every epoch and genre have been examined, looking for every instance in which a shared repast appeared. The results are presented in the form of four motifs which emerge from the texts and are clearly identifiable, and which provide interesting insight into the Mesopotamian understanding of the role of banquets within society.

With the third chapter, the discussion gets into the heart of the matter and investigates, firstly, meals offered by the Neo-Assyrian king in his

residence. Rulers were aware of the importance and implications of such an apparently simple act of sharing food with chosen members of their families, entourage or also with strangers. Sitting at the same table was considered such an important moment that it became a synonym for 'being loyal, being a friend' and thereby it was considered worthy of being fixed for eternity in royal inscriptions and on reliefs that decorated the kings' palaces. This section follows a centrifugal movement, from the inner rooms of the Assyrian court, where the sovereign shared his meals with his closest officials and companions and discussed with them affairs related to domestic politics, to the soldiers and comrades-in-arms who spent months on the road together with their military leader, in difficult and precarious conditions where however, the king always kept on playing the role of food-provider and tried to propose the same etiquette that was observed in the homeland, insomuch as was possible. Then, crossing national borders, meals consumed in the presence of foreigners are considered: these held a specific character, and were used very often to 'seal' oaths and contracts, and to exhibit friendly or hostile intentions toward alien lands. All the occurrences discussed concealed different meanings and implications, which depended on the typology of the situation experienced: I will point out, therefore, affinities and variances among them, in order to suggest an interpretation for each.

After the king's table, the gods' table is treated: in the event of a banquet shared with the supernatural entities, in fact, different manners and rules were observed. Gods might choose to be the exclusive beneficiaries of all the foodstuffs presented in their shrines in the form of offerings, or else they could invite, in their turn, human beings to sit at their mess. Sources describing offerings and handling of edible items in a consecrated context are countless, and for this reason some strict delimitations have been used in this work, in order to avoid any possible confusion and dispersion. Only texts that explicitly mention the communal eating of dishes are analyzed here, and not all the ones that list ingredients used on the occasion of offerings. This group is admittedly not extremely numerous, but still presents many interesting features. Firstly, being quite small, it allows a good comprehension of the typical components of a banquet eaten in a temple; it casts light on the relationship between administrative and religious personnel and authorities, since these two worlds must cooperate to ensure the perfect outcome of the event. Furthermore, these sources present us with the long-standing question of the difference and the coexistence of the two so-called 'secular' and 'religious' spheres – two concepts that, although quite widespread and fixed in modern days, were however not so clearly recognizable in ancient times (if such a distinction existed, at all).

The fifth chapter specifically deals with one singular text, the 'Protocol for the royal banquet': this is a prescriptive kind of document that fixed the rules for a ritualized repast carried out by the Assyrian king together with

his sons and magnates. Such protocol shows up as an apparently dry list of instructions, reporting the exact sequence of gestures to be performed by servants and attendees, to ensure the success of the event causing the minimum possible inconvenience to the high-status invitees. An attentive reading of it, however, reveals close connections with the other genres of written sources discussed in this work, and it lets the affinities among them emerge. This text has been analyzed as a *libretto* or play script, following the suggestions deriving from the so-called anthropology of performance, that investigates the close relation existing between gestures and nonverbal communication typical of ritual and theatrical performance. These theories turned out to be very appropriate and useful also for the Mesopotamian world, and for the royal banqueting protocol in particular.

In the sixth and last chapter, the more concrete aspect of feeding in Assyria is discussed: at first, various typologies of food available to kings and to their noble guests are listed. Such enumeration is not however, a pure sequence of edible items: for each category, the ideological and symbolical aspect that it conveyed is highlighted – and in particular, its relationship to the personality and the ideology of the king as the provider of food and manager of every human resource. The king's diet is discussed not only in positive, but also 'in negative', i.e. providing an excursus on the prohibited food and on specific regulations that we can detect from hemerological and menological texts, letters and reports sent to the ruler by his most learned scholars. The most well-known source for a Neo-Assyrian feast, the so-called Banquet Stele, is also analyzed with a new approach, not focusing on the identification of single ingredients, but trying to detect the social, demographic and political aspects hidden behind the long detailed account. Finally, two more sections take into consideration some very practical aspects of banqueting in the first millennium: the classes of specialized workmen and servants who served in the royal kitchens, and the Assyrian iconographic evidence, which supplies a great amount of information about these events and shows a remarkable series of points of connections with the written sources.

A few essential annexes complete the research: firstly, a Lexicon, whose purpose is to investigate the most important key words that occur in the sources considered – that is, a list of those basic elements that constitute the peculiar grammar that encodes the practice of Neo-Assyrian banquets. This section has been arranged in an unusual way, when compared with the most traditional Lexicons included in philological studies: lexemes are not, in fact, alphabetically systematized, but they appear instead grouped according to their semantic fields. Then there are the two charts mentioned and discussed in the third and in the fourth chapters.

# Commensality and Ceremonial Meals in the Neo-Assyrian Period

Stefania Ermidoro

## 1 ‘Good to Eat’

### Introduction to the Issue of Feeding

**Summary** 1.1 ‘Good to eat’: Food as a Code. – 1.2 Nutritional Anthropology: a Historical Overview. – 1.3 Dietary Laws and Food Taboos. – 1.4 The Importance of Commensality. – 1.5 Rituals and Ritualization.

#### 1.1 ‘Good to eat’: Food as a Code

The importance of feeding comes first of all from its primary function of answering a constant and binding need for the survival of the human race. The need to find food has influenced the life of men since their appearance on earth. For thousands of years, humankind survived thanks to the edible materials from the areas surrounding its living places. This link between locality and food, typical of the first communities of hunters-gatherers, underwent quite a change when men learned how to domesticate plants and animals, transforming their food systems and creating new species.

It has been legitimately said that «domestication was, after tool-making and the mastery of fire, almost certainly the single most important technological achievement of our species».<sup>1</sup> The surplus of food from the work in the fields and the meat of animals bred in the grazing lands allowed a differentiation in society, too. Men were free from the basic hunting and gathering activities, and other specialized work thus became possible (we can see the arising of artisans, warriors, chiefs, government officials, etc.).<sup>2</sup> From this historical moment onward, the choice between edible/non-edible became wider and in a sense also more complicated: men could somehow ‘create’ their own food, and there were multiple reasons that pushed them toward one or another sort of plant or animal.

For food is not inherently ‘good’ or ‘bad’: man learns how to recognize it as such through his own experience, or because someone taught him. The need for food derives from the biological constitution of men, but the answer to this need represents a social answer. As the Italian scholar Montanari stated,

1 Mintz 2003, p. 21. On the sociological importance of food consumption see also Sassatelli 2004.

2 See Civitello 2008, pp. 9-10.

the organ that controls taste is not the tongue, but the brain: a culturally determined organ, through which it is possible to learn and transmit valuation standards, which are variable in space and time.<sup>3</sup> Many elements converge in each one of the systems of feeding elaborated by different human groups: the various edibles at man's disposal, the structures and techniques of production and distribution processes, the practice of preparation for consumption, the behavioural procedures observed during the various phases, the cultural and psychological meanings which directly or indirectly pertain to feeding.<sup>4</sup> Food requires hunting, gathering, growing, storage, distribution, preparation, display, serving, and disposal: all social activities.

Therefore we can see that 'eating' is not just an action: it conveys many implied, profound meanings that are more or less conscious and dependent on the single person who actually eats. To express it through the words of contemporary nutritional anthropology, «for us humans, then, eating is never a 'purely biological' activity (whatever 'purely biological' means). The foods eaten have histories associated with the past of those who eat them; the techniques employed to find, process, prepare, serve, and consume the foods are all culturally variable, with histories of their own. Nor is the food ever simply eaten; its consumption is always conditioned by meaning. These meanings are symbolic, and communicated symbolically; they also have histories. These are some of the ways we humans make so much more complicated this supposedly simple 'animal' activity».<sup>5</sup>

The body represents the physical means through which man interacts with the world, and «no doubt, food is, anthropologically speaking (though very much in the abstract), the first need; but ever since man has ceased living off wild berries, this need has been highly structured. Substances, techniques of preparation, habits, all become a part of a system of differences in signification; and as soon as this happens, we have communication by way of food».<sup>6</sup> Foodstuffs are fundamental in transmitting a sense of identity, in the practical sense that every human is constructed, both biologically and psychologically, by the food he decides to incorporate.<sup>7</sup> It has also been suggested that foods help to create and strengthen the

3 Montanari 2004, p. 73. Similarly, see Civitello 2008, p. xvi: «There is no food that is consumed by everyone on earth. Taste is determined by culture, anatomy, and genetics. Almost everything we eat, and when, is culturally determined, so taste is taught». According to Toussaint-Samat, «taste is thus a matter of physical sensation, but it also involves consciousness, analysis, and is thus an intellectual act», see Toussaint-Samat 2009, p. 485.

4 For a synthetic explanation of the system of feeding and of the complex interrelation between biological and cultural aspects, see Seppili 1994.

5 Mintz 1996, pp. 7-8.

6 Barthes 2008, p. 30.

7 Fischler 1988, p. 275.



sense of identity of a whole community since even the simplest, everyday meal involves a strong connection with the fields where it was cultivated, that is to say the «ancestral land». Therefore, edibles give people a sense of inherited community and of belonging to an established land.<sup>8</sup>

Food consumption, then, constitutes at the same time both a form of self-identification and of communication. At a basic biological level, nutrient selection is governed mainly by the five senses. Besides taste and smell – that are the most immediately involved in eating – it involves also sight (colour, which allows us to recognize the different components, but also other visual characteristics as well: a food can be mouth-watering just by its appearance), touch (texture in particular is fundamental for the appreciation of a dish) and sound (for example the ‘crunchiness’). The most immediate result of this fact is a first classification of ingredients as edible and non-edible, which, in addition, presents more gradation depending on likes/dislikes and on the possible favourite combinations.<sup>9</sup>

Beyond this first biological aspect, culture intervenes to teach individuals which food to accept or reject, which ones are the best to present in different occasions, how to cook and combine them, according to the cuisines elaborated during centuries of history. Linguistics can also intervene in the nutritional field that we are considering, since in anthropology it studies the ways in which social life is shaped, exploring among other things how people perceive and categorize the world they live in. The accuracy of the taxonomy and linguistic categorization of plants and animals reflect the proximity to nature and the comprehension of the environment that each cultural group has reached during its history. Linguistics comes into play also because, as a vehicle of many cultural and implied messages, in several occasions food itself has been considered as, or associated to, a code.

Such an interpretation can evolve in different directions. The first one, the more theoretical, follows Lévi-Strauss’s analyses: the Belgian-born anthropologist was convinced that each society could be completely understood «in terms of a theory of communication»,<sup>10</sup> that is to say that human culture is the product of messages embodied in human practices. The cuisine of a society is therefore an unconscious language in which its own structure is figured – its communication, more or less explicit, is not important: it is considered sufficient that the information can circulate and be preserved.

Another interpretation is the one promoted by Mary Douglas, who explicitly stated that food is a code in the pages of a well-known article whose

8 Jones 2007, pp. 225-226.

9 For an example of a multidisciplinary study on the complexity of interrelations between body and culture in the choice of food, see e.g. Macbeth 2006.

10 Lévi-Strauss 1963a, p. 83.

title (and intent) was significantly «Deciphering a meal». In her words, «if food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed».<sup>11</sup> Food categories, therefore, encode social events, and anthropologists can (and should) decipher them in order to find the message they hide. She analysed various food categories according to their position within a series, finding their place inside a more complex background.

The structural anthropologist Edmund Leach affirmed that language forms a 'conceptual grid' which man imposes on the world in order to make sense of it: «this world is a representation of our language categories, not vice versa».<sup>12</sup> The classification of the environment into classes of potential food (more or less 'edible', more or less 'nourishing') is, according to him, a matter of language, and he explains the food taboos as a matter of 'labelling'. He criticizes the binary discrimination of Levi-Strauss's theory, emphasizing the importance of all the gradations of sense between sacred/not-sacred, we/they, close/far, etc.

In recent years, Appadurai noted that «with the elaboration of cuisine and its socioeconomic context, the capacity of food to bear social messages is increased».<sup>13</sup> He intended the semiotic system of food in a very concrete sense, stating that food can encode gastro-political messages which have direct consequences in the everyday social and political lives of those who are part of the system. The actors can either manipulate the food itself (its quantity or its quality), or the context in which it is consumed (attendance, duration and modality of consumption), and the different messages conveyed within this system are directly understood by the attendees.

In each of these considerations proposed by various scholars, what is implicit is that food is a code that conveys one or more messages, and that senders and addressees of these messages must share a common culture that allows the involved parties to decode them. Communication between social groups with different cultural roots through the medium of food could reveal itself as a failure. Montanari pushed the argument even further, by identifying a proper grammar of food, in which the products are the lexicon, the way to process them represents the morphology, the meal with its ordering the syntax, and the manners in which they are displayed, served and consumed constitute the rhetoric.<sup>14</sup>

Food has also been analyzed as a symbol which marks gender divisions, denoting the differences between female and male roles in all the phases

11 Douglas 1997, p. 36.

12 Leach 1964, p. 34.

13 Appadurai 1981, p. 494.

14 Montanari 2004.

included in the system.<sup>15</sup> The different contribution given by people of both sexes during the providing, processing, serving and consuming of different ingredients could be seen as a mirror of the positions they hold inside the society. Still today, in our contemporary perspective, the idea of the everyday meal seems connected with the work of women, and yet in western societies men seem to have an almost exclusive access to the *haute cuisine*, the 'high' level of cooking.<sup>16</sup>

All these theories prove that food can become (and actually became, in the course of history) a vehicle to express satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the *status quo*, used not only in a social but also in a political context. That is why rules and practice of commensality are so important.

Foodstuffs have been defined as «embodied material culture».<sup>17</sup> Considering the different phases through which it goes before consumption, we can say that, as a matter of fact, food is culture when it is chosen and produced: indeed, this activity depends on the human knowledge of nature, the environment and the possibility to modify and profit from it. Food is culture when it is prepared: the transformation of the natural goods is determined by rules and techniques deriving from social traditions, and from the different utensils manufactured in each community. Food is culture when it is consumed: in this particular moment, man expresses selections that depend on preferences and behaviour belonging to specific human groups. The quality and specificity of foodstuffs have been intended, consequently, as a direct expression of social membership, a concept that finds two different expressions: the way of eating can derive from the belonging to a determined social affiliation, but at the same time it can also reveal it.<sup>18</sup>

Feeding can become a tool to draw boundaries between 'us' and 'them' and define notions of 'here' and 'there': because of its connections with both the ecological environment and the social and cultural background, it has been identified in many cases as a strong marker of specific cultural identities.<sup>19</sup> But food can also travel, thanks to people who bring their knowledge (and the various raw materials) with them, and this journey started long before the modern globalized world.<sup>20</sup> In fact, foodstuffs have always followed travellers, explorers, colonizers, migrants – in steady contact with new

15 See, as one of the first examples of these sociological and gender studies, Fortes, Fortes 1936; for modern discussions on this topic, see Lupton 1996, pp. 104-111, and Counihan, Kaplan 1998. See, furthermore, the recent bibliography mentioned in Joyce 2010, pp. 229-230 and Twiss 2012, p. 373.

16 Goody 1992, p. 193.

17 See, for example, Dietler 2001, p. 73.

18 Montanari 2004, p. 99.

19 Döring, Heide, Mühleisen 2003.

20 For a history of the so-called «globalization of food», see Kiple 2007.

people, influenced by, but also influencing the ingredients and the different dishes encountered along their path. From such a perspective, food can thus be considered, in this two-way process, a medium of transculturation.<sup>21</sup>

Beyond all these symbolic, semantic and cultural dimensions, one must still stress the physicality of food, and the role of the economic factors in the process of construction of the human diet. As nutritional anthropology has demonstrated, the study of feeding must be cross-disciplinary, to include all the different aspects linked to the edibles and to their consumption:<sup>22</sup> «anthropologists, like economists, must keep in mind that people choose foods, not energy or other nutrients, in their dietary selections».<sup>23</sup> For food is not just a group of products that can be used for nutritional studies, but also, as mentioned above, a system of communication: for this reason, information about food must be gathered by direct and indirect observations in the economy, techniques, literature, and cultural material of each society. Those who approach the study of food should never forget that, using Barthes' words, «when he buys an item of food, consumes it, or serves it, a man does not manipulate a simple object in a purely transitive fashion; this item of food sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes an information; it signifies. That is to say it is not just an indicator of a set of more or less conscious motivations, but that it is a real sign, perhaps the functional unit of a system of communication».<sup>24</sup>

We may ask ourselves how can we pretend to know the taste of people that lived in a time chronologically so far away from us. As Montanari noted, the issue refers to two different concepts of taste. The first considers it as flavour, an individual sensation of tongue and palate: this experience is subjective, receding, and incommunicable – from this point of view, the historical experience of food is irreparably lost. But if, as is maintained here, taste is also knowledge, sensorial estimation of what is good and what is bad, of what is pleasing and what is not; and if this evaluation comes from the brain rather than from the tongue, taste is, then, a collective and communicable reality.<sup>25</sup> As such, modern scholars can try to trace the processes

21 The term 'transculturation', first introduced by the Cuban anthropologist F. Ortiz, can be defined (following Malinowski) as «a process in which something is always given in return for what one receives, a system of give and take [...] an exchange between two cultures, both of them active, both contributing their share, and both co-operating to bring about a new reality». See Malinowski 1947.

22 For a synthetic introduction and history of nutritional anthropology, see Messer 1984 and Mintz, Du Bois 2002, whose aim is explicitly to update Messer's first survey on the topic. More recently, see Dufour, Goodman, Peltó 2012 (as an exemplar articulate publication for this branch of study) and Twiss 2012.

23 Messer 1984, p. 213.

24 Barthes 2008, p. 29.

25 Montanari 2004, pp. 73-74.

that brought it to its formation, starting from the original products (known through textual and visual representations), through the mechanism that contributed to their establishment, until their consumption.

## 1.2 Nutritional Anthropology: a Historical Overview

The anthropology of food, also called nutritional anthropology, aims at investigating the processes and dynamics connected to the production, preparation and consumption of food in the different cultures, and centres its attention in particular on the socio-cultural meanings that they imply. The first anthropologists who dealt with the issue of food in human life focused their interests mostly on the religious aspects of consumption: totemism, sacrifice and taboo were the first topics to attract the attention of these scholars. Since they all concern foodstuffs in some ways, between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries feeding became part of a greater study whose aim was to investigate ancient people and their religion.

An example of this approach is given by the work of James Frazer, and especially by the contents of his most famous publication, *The Golden Bough*.<sup>26</sup>

The scholar produced there a huge amount of evidence to provide the most complete possible view on the religion of the 'savages'; in doing this, he dealt also with food, mainly in a context of taboos or sacrifices, and mainly in accordance with two postulates. The first one, called the 'principle of similarity' according to which similar produces similar, justified actions such as cannibalism and explained those dietary prohibitions that assumed the avoiding of the flesh of animals or foes considered cowardly, or that were loaded with other unwanted physical or moral features. The second one, the 'principle of contiguity', which affirmed that things that have been in contact once continue to act on one another even at a distance, explained instead food taboos and the behaviour of the savage when coming to the matter of the sacrificial meal and the sharing of food with the gods, or also the eating of the gods themselves.<sup>27</sup> The impression that the reader gets while running through this massive work is that, according to the author, savages were guided mostly by feelings of fear and superstition, which led them to carry out magic and sorcery. Their decisions about food were, thus, not of a political, social or somehow practical kind, and often were not even understood by the savages themselves, but were instead wrapped up in religion and irrationality.

In the same period, the important work of William Robertson Smith

<sup>26</sup> Frazer 1890.

<sup>27</sup> For a description of Frazer's two principles see Scarduelli 2007, in particular the Introduction, at pp. 10-12.

was also published, in which not only religion but also social factors connected to it played an important role. In his *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, while trying to reconstruct the common cultic practices of the people of the Near East, he wrote: «when we find that in ancient religions all the ordinary functions of worship are summed up in the sacrificial meal, and that the ordinary intercourse between gods and men has no other form, we are to remember that the act of eating and drinking together is the solemn and stated expression of the fact that all those who share the meal are brethren, and that all the duties of friendship and brotherhood are implicitly acknowledged in their common act».<sup>28</sup> According to Robertson Smith, rituals constituted, therefore, the very foundation of primitive religions, and the sacrifice represented the highest moment of communication and solidarity between men and gods. The participation in sacrifices and the distribution of sacred meat contributed deeply to the strengthening of the sense of belonging to the same social group, thanks to their being public actions during which individuals had to conform with socially-established behaviours.

These social consequences of religion, together with the importance of commensality within a religious background, were even more stressed in the work of Émile Durkheim: from his point of view, religion was the component of humankind which gave the strongest sense of collective consciousness. In rituals like sacrifices and common meals, diners felt that through incorporation they were sharing not just the flesh of the sacred animal, but also all those principles of social solidarity and integration implied by the specific religious situation that they were living. These principles, together with the behavioural rules and the values that belonged to them, were understood by the actors and participants of the sacred rites, but they were neither produced nor wanted by them – rather, they were accepted and inherited from their predecessors.<sup>29</sup>

With the first anthropologists and sociologists who worked on the field, in contact with the populations that they were studying, the point of view concerning the role of food in human society changed, leaving the solely religious and symbolic fields and finding its place within a wider net of cultural, political and economic processes. The main representatives of the two different aspects of the functionalist theories underlined the role that food held inside the societies under exam. Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, considered to be the founder of structural functionalism (though he always rejected this definition) underlined the social role of food in his search for the rules that granted stability in human societies, particularly between the

28 Robertson Smith 1894, see in particular «Lecture VII: First-Fruits, Tithes, and Sacrificial Meals», p. 265.

29 Durkheim 1912.

peoples of Bengal. In those cultures, «by far the most important social activity is the getting of food» and it is over food that «the social sentiments are most frequently called into action».<sup>30</sup> These social sentiments could make the conduct of individuals suitable to the collective needs, and in particular could contribute to maintaining social cohesion: they were caused by the strength of tradition and society, and found their greatest expression in rituals during which food prohibitions and rules were introduced.

Bronisław Malinowski, whose functionalism argued that social practices could be explained by their capability to satisfy the biological needs of individuals (rather than of society as a whole, as affirmed by Radcliffe-Brown), emphasized more the phases of quest for and production of food than its symbolic aspects. He did not underestimate, however, the «general emotional tension» and the religious connections always present in the «primitive society» when it came to the matter of food.<sup>31</sup>

The first who cared about food in daily life, and is considered for this reason to be the pioneer of nutritional anthropology, was one of Malinowski's students: Audrey Richards.<sup>32</sup> She analysed the social and psychological dimensions of food, its production, preparation and consumption, and the ways in which these phases are connected to interpersonal relationships and structures of social groups, in particular to kinship. Richards underlined not only the symbolic value of nourishment, but also the importance of studying the rules prescribed for sharing and eating, employing an interdisciplinary approach – she cooperated, in effect, with botanists, biochemists and nutritionists in order to get a comprehensive knowledge of the nutritional values of edibles.<sup>33</sup> In her work, it is possible to find quite a revolutionary approach to feeding, since she paid attention to geographic and ecological differences between tribes, seasonal changes, economic and religious influences on food exchanges and consumption. She also underlined the risk of one-sidedness in reporting the information collected during the anthropological campaigns, due to the distance between the observer and the people studied. To sum up, from her integrated and very modern point of view, the «secondary values associated with different foodstuffs were sentiments rooted so deeply in the economic, political and religious life of a people as to require a detailed anthropological study for their investigation».<sup>34</sup>

30 Radcliffe Brown 1922, p. 277.

31 See Malinowski 1935 and 2004 (in particular pages 24-26).

32 The first scholar that used this definition was Malinowski himself, in the introduction he wrote for her book published in 1932.

33 Richards 1932, 1939.

34 See the introduction to her second work, published in 1939: quotation at p. viii.

Functionalist explanations prevailed among social and anthropological theories during the first half of the twentieth century. However, from the Sixties onward, studies about food have been dominated by three scholars, representatives of three different and in some ways opposite views.

Claude Lévi-Strauss is one of the most important members of the structuralist school, according to which culture can be analysed semiotically, by means of structures modelled on language. He thought that the relationship between culture and language was not just an analogy: society could truly be interpreted in terms of a theory of communication. For this reason, following the lesson of the Russian linguist Jakobson, who first introduced the concept of markedness,<sup>35</sup> he presented a first theory of cooking by analyzing it according to its constituents (defined 'gustemes') and on the base of binary oppositions such as endogenous/exogenous, central/peripheral, and marked/not marked, in order to find (to provide a concrete example) the differences between French and English cuisine.<sup>36</sup>

From 1965 on, following this path but moving his interest from 'gustemes' to the techniques of food preparation, and calling back to mind the consonantal and vocalic triangles used in linguistics, he proposed the well-known 'culinary triangle'.<sup>37</sup> In doing this, the raw condition was intended as the unmarked element, while the cooked and the rotten were highly marked as, respectively, cultural and natural transformations of the raw. He saw, then, a double opposition between processed/not-processed on one side and nature/culture on the other. Later on, he superimposed a second scheme to the first one that he called the 'triangle of the recipes', in order to complete the map by adding the aspects linked to consumption. With this development, and with the introduction of even more culinary operations, the initial simple triangle became more and more an attempt to include all the most important 'oppositions' and constants belonging to the cuisine of a society.<sup>38</sup> He ended his presentation stating that «la cuisine d'une société est un langage dans lequel elle traduit inconsciemment sa structure, à moins que, sans le savoir davantage, elle ne se résigne à y dévoiler ses contradictions».<sup>39</sup>

35 According to the theory of markedness, every single constituent of any linguistic system is built on an opposition of two logical contradictories: the presence of an attribute (markedness) in contraposition to its absence (unmarkedness).

36 Lévi-Strauss 1958, pp. 98-99.

37 The culinary triangle firstly appeared in an article (Lévi-Strauss 1965), but was later re-presented and re-discussed in Lévi-Strauss 1968.

38 The limits of Lévi-Strauss' approach (that remains, however, fundamental for any study on food and nutrition) have been stressed, among others, by Lehrer 1972 and by Goody 1992, pp. 17-29.

39 Lévi-Strauss 1968, p. 411.



Marvin Harris introduced the concept of cultural materialism into the anthropological field, which in his words «is based on the simple premise that human social life is a response to the practical problems of earthly existence».<sup>40</sup> His theory is grounded on the assumption that biopsychological, environmental, demographic, technological, and political-economic factors exert a fundamental influence on foodstuffs produced and consumed within any human population. Materialists accept the fact that some aspects of feeding might be arbitrary and symbolic, but reject what Harris calls ‘the idealist approach’, according to which ritual aspects of culture have shaped major food complexes.<sup>41</sup> He gave a reading of human history and cultural evolution as a continuous struggle for survival, in which animals have been seen alternatively as allies or competitors, depending on whether they were more useful alive, as a labour force, or dead, as a source of nutrients.<sup>42</sup> When the dietary potential in a given age was higher than any other variable, then the destiny of that animal species was marked. Finally, «reproductive pressure, intensification and environmental depletion would appear to provide the key for understanding the evolution of family organization, property relations, political economy and religious beliefs, including dietary preferences and taboos».<sup>43</sup>

Mary Douglas embodied, instead, the so-called ‘cultural approach’: she considered food as a code, the messages it encodes being «different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries [...]. Food categories therefore encode social events».<sup>44</sup> Quoting Lévi-Strauss’s theories, she used again linguistic metaphors, finding the meaning of meals in a system of repeated analogies – for her, each repast consists mainly in a structured social event with elements in common with all the other meals. This fact did not bring her, however, to the conclusion that such events are made of pure repetitions: each meal, in fact, in her perspective, reacts to different elements in a special, singular way and constitutes therefore a unique occasion. In her numerous publications, Douglas appears aware of the biological role of food in human life, but she is more interested in its underlying social function. She showed her care about ‘practical’ factors in a study published together with an economist, but also in that case she stated clearly that «as far as keeping a person alive is concerned, food and drink are needed for physical services; but as far as social life is concerned, they are needed for

40 Harris 1979, p. xv.

41 Harris 1987; see also Harris 1985.

42 See for example Harris 1977.

43 Harris 1977, p. 9.

44 Douglas 1997.

mustering solidarity, attracting support, requiting kindnesses»,<sup>45</sup> since in the last resort «eating is always social».<sup>46</sup>

More recent theories stem chiefly from the symbolism interpreted and spread by Mary Douglas, but modern scholars show particular care in balancing the concrete biological, economic and political elements with the more theoretical, social and cultural factors.

Jack Goody, for example, underlined how, in the various approaches presented by former scholars, there was a significant lack of attention to the time dimension, and he stressed, instead, the fact that «the different forms of consumption in hierarchical societies are not simply transformations of a timeless cultural pattern that continues unaffected by a changing social system».<sup>47</sup> He analyzed the productive processes concerning food, declaring that an integrated analysis of cooking should always be related also to the study of distribution of power and of authority within the economic sphere of the same society, and namely with the system of classes and its political ramification. Social hierarchies, in fact, are often expressed and maintained through control over and access to food; complex societies generally develop a *haute cuisine*, that involves a system of display, performances and expensive, exotic ingredients which are missing in the everyday, familiar 'low' cuisine (where usually foods come from the fields or the environment immediately surrounding the kitchen in which they are processed).

Finally, Arjun Appadurai focused on the semiotic value of food, underlining two aspects in particular: the first is its being perishable - the daily pressure to cook food, combined with the pressure to produce or acquire it, makes it an «everyday social discourse». The second aspect was its capacity to mobilize strong emotions. According to the scholar, it is fundamental to look «at consumption (as demand that makes it possible) as a focus not only for sending social messages (as Douglas has proposed), but for *receiving* them as well. Demand thus conceals two *different* relationships between consumption and production: 1. on the one hand, demand is determined by social and economic forces; 2. on the other, it can manipulate, within limits, these social and economic forces».<sup>48</sup> He explained his operative method through a series of questions that should be posed when studying nourishment, among which were: «What do particular actions involving food (and particular foods) «say»? To whom? In what context? With what immediate social consequences? To what structural end?».<sup>49</sup>

45 Douglas, Isherwood 1996, p. xxi.

46 Douglas, Isherwood 1996, p. 50.

47 Goody 1992, p. 35.

48 Appadurai 1986, p. 31.

49 Appadurai 1981, p. 495.

Finally, we must ask ourselves how the above mentioned theories relate to the modern scholarly research on the ancient world. The anthropological approaches outlined here, with all the methodological issues they raised with regard to the study of present human societies as well as those who lived in the past, had inevitably consequences also on the fields of history and archaeology.<sup>50</sup>

If in the Seventies and Eighties, in the era of the so-called 'New' or 'Processual Archaeology', the main focus was placed on topics related to diet, biology and subsistence, starting from the Nineties onward the sociological and cultural aspects of food became more and more explored. Following the publications by Goody, Appadurai and Mintz (among others), the attention of archaeologists thus turned to considering food as a marker of social identity, ethnicity and culture contacts. Nowadays the archaeology of food is an advanced branch of research, characterized by theoretical diversity: biological/ecological aspects of food are thus interrelated to semiotic/social themes, and archaeologists often refer to anthropological theories in their publications.

Some phases related to food processing are particularly investigated, mostly because they are the most detectable in the field: for this reason, feasts play a major role in current research, because of the abundant traces they left in written and artistic records as well as in the material culture.<sup>51</sup> Historians and archaeologists are particularly interested in the connection between feasts and ritual activities, and therefore analyze their ideological role and their link with religion and sacred buildings. Finally, archaeological research underlines the role of banquets for the development of political hierarchies and the reinforcement of social cohesion: scholars have thus fully recognized the important role of food and food-related activities in the reconstruction of ancient cultures.

50 For an exhaustive discussion on the interrelation between archaeology and anthropology, see Twiss 2012: the author includes also an abundant bibliography of all the most recent publications.

51 See for example the various papers included in Dietler, Hayden 2001a.

### 1.3 Dietary Laws and Food Taboos

Man is an omnivorous being. As such, he is subject to what has been called 'the omnivore's paradox': that is, the tension between the adaptability to a multitude of different foodstuffs and the dependence on variety.<sup>52</sup> Thanks to the former, mankind possesses a kind of independence from the environment that surrounds it, and is free to adjust itself and/or the place it chooses for living, consequently creating a suitable diet. Because of the latter however, and unlike other specialized eaters, men cannot derive all the necessary nutrients from just one kind of food: they must constantly look for different sources of organic compounds (proteins, carbohydrates, vitamins, etc.).

The deep mental associations usually linked with foods, their specific ability to attract or repel people (just by mentioning it, the same foodstuff can be mouth-watering, or else it might cause reactions of total disgust), represent convincing evidence of the unique role of memory in human feeding, and of the importance of culture in the way men conceive the world.<sup>53</sup> As a result, individual types of food eaten only or primarily by a specific ethnic or social group can become a symbol and a metonymy for denoting the group itself: these food associations (e.g. the potato for the Irish people, pasta for Italians, frogs for the French cuisine, and so forth) can be polysemic. They can, in effect, be declared as a marker of national pride, or used to demean and deride.<sup>54</sup> A few edibles can also assume, in reference to their specific characteristics (cost, provenience, appearance, effects, etc.), particular symbolic meanings and end up representing luxury, exoticism, wealth or roughness, poorness, strangeness, etc. Along this process, some stereotypes can be built up that are difficult (if not impossible) to ignore, but that are mostly specific for the different social groups: the same food item can thus be accepted, requested, sought after, rejected, or expelled.

From a scientific point of view, three reasons that justify the avoidance of certain foodstuffs can be identified. The first is distaste, the undesirable sensory properties of a substance (taste, smell, sight), that is the only cause present in humans since their birth; secondly, the idea of the consequences, in case someone had already experienced bad effects of eating a particular food; finally, the cultural reasons, the conceptual *aura* that surrounds each substance, connected mainly to its nature or origin. These last two concepts emerge in a human being during his first years

52 For an explanation of this concept, see Fischler 1988, and the ample bibliography mentioned there.

53 On the fundamental relationship between memories, culture and brain and its consequences on food habits see Sutton 2001 and Schiefenhövel 2006.

54 See Mintz 2003.

of life; cultural rejection exists independently from any sensory qualities, and yet foods avoided on its bases are often thought to be bad tasting and harmful, too.<sup>55</sup>

In his attempt to organize the edible part of the surrounding environment, man does not discern sharply between 'fit' or 'unfit' for human consumption: as Leach first pointed out, there are at least three different level of gradation. Above all are the proper edibles, part of the normal diet; then there are foodstuffs that are theoretically edible, but prohibited or allowed only in some special situations (the conscious taboos); thirdly, the edible substances that are, however, not recognised as food at all (the unconscious taboos).<sup>56</sup> Even within the first category, there is no food that is considered appropriate for everyone, at all times, in every situation: each occasion requires appropriate ingredients, quantities, processes and display. Regarding the second and the third groups, each human community develops some specific food taboos, that can be temporary (connected with some specific times of the year), unconditional, limited to some social classes, or to some places and occasions, and so on. Some of these regulations and taboos are common to different groups even if they never came into direct contact; others are completely different and distinguish religious beliefs, cultural provenience, ethnic characteristics, and so forth. Culture, then, provides rules not only for which food is to be eaten, but also who is allowed to eat it. Moreover, when observed over a long period of time, taboos and dietary laws can become flexible, always in accordance with their social and conceptual essence - and so they can be introduced or dismissed depending on many different factors.

Food is a liminal and potentially dangerous substance: it crosses the borders between the outside and the inside, and it comes into contact with the body, which is the physical means through which men interact with the world. Each nutrient has an effect on the body: through incorporation, individuals absorb its properties and at the same time accept and trust the culinary system and categorization that are specific of the social group in which they live. Unknown food is suspicious because it could belong to the second or the third category mentioned before. The taboo does not have to be necessarily related to a harmful food - on the contrary: to be prohibited, a nutrient must have been integrated in the 'edible but not good' group, since there is no need to ban explicitly what is a 'non-food'. Regulations have, then, a crucial role in the construction of self- and social identity:<sup>57</sup> this argument is underlined in particular by scholars who deal

55 See Rozin et al. 2006.

56 Leach 1964, p. 31.

57 See for example Baumgarten 1998. On the connections between food and subjectivity see also Lupton 1996.

with the issue of dietary laws and their transmission in a written form (in particular concerning Hebrew taboos and their codification in the books of the Bible). The story of the transmission of these prohibitions and rules could be read as the story of an attempt to arrange pre-existent culinary habits inside a general, meaningful system.<sup>58</sup>

Meat has always been subjected to many more dietary laws than vegetables: the reason for this must probably be traced back to its origin – that is, from the relationship men had established with those animals that produced the meat.<sup>59</sup> Some of them are considered too ‘human’ to be eaten: domestic pets, or animals considered as such, are completely avoided (and the social influence also in this case is strong, since cats, dogs, horses, pigs, etc. might all be labelled as pets). Eating an animal usually means killing it, and this procedure is at the same time violent and tricky, because of its symbolism – and the implications are even more complicated when the action is carried out within a religious frame.<sup>60</sup> On the other hand, a few animals are instead conceived as ‘too far’ from men to be considered edible. Either they live in environments considered too dirty or too polluted to be accepted as food, or they are not usual in the world known by the possible consumers (and in this case they are completely rejected as unknown and therefore potentially dangerous, or sometimes seen as exotic, dubious food).<sup>61</sup>

Anthropologists always dealt with dietary rules using different approaches and providing various explanations. Lévi-Strauss and his followers, together with linguistic anthropologists like Leach, regarded food taboos as a sort of feedback effect originating from semantic categorization. The French scholar stressed how taboos often prohibit the consumption of animals which do not fit precisely into the binary category system through which society organizes natural phenomena: quoting what is maybe his most famous statement on this subject, «natural species are chosen not because they are ‘good to eat’ but because they are ‘good to think’». <sup>62</sup> According to Leach’s point of view, prohibitions and rules date back to childhood: in the first years of its life, a child learns how to organize the environment through discriminating grids provided by language – it sees the world as being composed of a large number of separate things, each labelled with a name. ‘Taboo’ is thus everything that does not find a place

58 See for example Soler 1979.

59 For a historical and anthropological study of the rituals connected with meat in the classical Greek and Roman world, see Grottanelli 1997.

60 The main, pioneering anthropological works on this topic concern the ancient Greek society: see Burkert 1972 and Detienne, Vernant 1979.

61 See the many, interesting examples provided by Simoons 1994.

62 Lévi-Strauss 1963b, p. 89.

inside this organization, everything that is a 'non-thing' among given and determined names.<sup>63</sup>

The question of classification has been developed in particular by Douglas, who firstly in *Purity and Danger*<sup>64</sup> and later, in the above-mentioned *Deciphering a Meal*, provided a rational pattern focusing in particular (but not only) on the Hebrew dietary laws expressed in the biblical Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Her starting points were two: the first was that rational human behaviour universally involves classification, which in its turn is inherent to organisation; the second presupposition was that everyone universally finds dirt offensive, but the concept of 'dirty' strictly depends on the classification in use. When coming to the matter of biblical taboos in particular, animals would be classified according to degrees of holiness, which depend, in turn, on their behaviour within the three natural spheres of land, air, and water. At the bottom of the scale are the abominable animals, not to be touched or eaten; then there are those that are fit for the table, but not for the altar - none that are appropriate for the altar are considered not edible and vice versa, none that are not edible can be offered as a sacrifice. According to Douglas, the biblical classification is a very rigid one: it assigns animals to one of the three spheres, and rejects all those creatures which are somehow anomalous, «whether in living between two spheres, or having defining features of members of another sphere, or lacking defining features. Any living being which falls outside this classification is not to be touched or eaten».<sup>65</sup>

Harris explicitly and strongly criticized Douglas's theory as speculative and unverifiable, proposing instead ecological and economical reasons for justifying food taboos. The choice of the foodstuffs would, then, derive from the cost/benefit relations within an economic system, and from the needs connected to their production and maintenance. An animal is considered taboo when it is too valuable alive to be slaughtered for feeding,<sup>66</sup> and to be sure that this prohibition is respected, men subdue such an idea to the «voice of God». By subjecting it to the religious field, the taboo will certainly be observed by the community - without this expedient, in time it could be reversed or abandoned.<sup>67</sup> Considering again the food laws in the Leviticus, he stated that «Levite priests were trying to rationalize and

63 Leach 1964.

64 Douglas 1966.

65 Douglas 1997, p. 48.

66 This theory finds some confirmation in texts produced in ancient societies and in particular in the ones based on agriculture, in which food taboos regarded beef, above all. For example, in his *De Natura Deorum*, (II, 158-160) Cicero explicitly affirms that the ox is considered too useful an animal in the fields to be harmed or, worse, eaten by men.

67 Harris 1987.

codify dietary laws, most of which had a basis in pre-existing popular belief and practice», by assigning taxonomic principles to preferences and avoidances due, in effect, to non-religious conditions (for example, the pig could be perceived as a competitor with humans for food, and it needed a habitat not common in Israel at the time the Leviticus was written).<sup>68</sup>

Appadurai read dietary regulations as an effort to distinguish social roles and cultural differentiations. In his view, the fact that all humankind has the biological need to eat, and that each member of the same society shares the same set of selected food items, can be considered a potential cause of homogenization inside a heterogeneous group of individuals. The elaborate rules that surround food are, then, «culturally organized efforts to compensate for this biophysical propensity of food to homogenize the human beings who transact through it». Societies thus elaborated regulations which control contact with food, in order to stress social and class differentiations.<sup>69</sup>

The variables potentially subjected to laws and taboos are extremely numerous, and pertain to each of the phases concerning foodstuffs, from the moment of their selection to the moment of their incorporation. During the production phase, the place of origin of the future food is important, as well as its condition at the moment in which it was chosen (animal dead due to natural causes or vegetables that have been in contact with polluting elements are just two examples of food usually avoided). During the ensuing preparation, the manner in which the animal is killed is normally strictly regulated both for religious and/or health reasons. The cooking moment is also a delicate one, with norms for the ingredients that cannot be used, combinations that should be avoided (the most famous is the biblical ban to cooking or eating meat and milk together), and also the place, time, and persons in charge of cooking (their gender, physical conditions, etc.) are subject to a severe control. Finally, the rules that affect the proper eating phase are probably the largest, and the most evident: they concern place and time; the social and physical conditions; the rank of those who both serve and eat; the order of the courses and the distribution of the portions; the appropriate behaviour that each diner should maintain; the disposition of the guests within the eating room and the actions that can or must be performed before, during and after the meal; the sharing of the leftovers and of contextual gifts.

These abovelisted are only examples of the wide variety of elements possibly subject to regulations that should be noticed during an analysis of a meal; the last data that must be kept in mind concern the possible temporary or permanent nature of taboos and laws, and the fact that not always are they explicitly recorded in a written form. Very often, in fact,

68 Harris 2008.

69 Appadurai 1981, p. 507.



they must be read between the lines, according to the habits of the social group that represent the case studied.<sup>70</sup>

## 1.4 The Importance of Commensality

Commensality is typical (even if not exclusive) of the human species: as Plutarch wrote, «we invite one another not barely to eat and drink, but to eat and drink together».<sup>71</sup> All the gestures made in such a public context exceed the pure functional dimension and assume a communicative value, conveying various messages according to the situation, the time, and the attendees. Beyond the familiar daily meal, in which bonds and relationships between members of the same family unit are strengthened, two different levels of shared repasts can be identified. In the first, food is used in a ritual context and as a magical-religious symbol: that is to say, every kind of meal which (as a whole or in some of its constituents) exceeds the basic nutritive function assumes a meaning of medium between men and the supernatural world. The second level includes instead extra-familiar repasts which aim to communicate social integration: these are the ‘non-daily’ meals, which represent a place for encounter and for socio-cultural relations between people that normally consume their meals in different contexts. On the occasion of these events, social actors must recognize and adapt themselves and their behaviour to each situation by assuming the suitable attitude, using the correct utensils, pronouncing the right words and processing/accepting the proper food.<sup>72</sup>

Eating together usually expresses agreement or belonging to the same social group, but not always: the table represents in a direct way the relationships between diners. The place they occupy, the manners they exhibit, and the discussions they have might witness both integration and affiliation, or marginalization and hatred. Different tables mean different identities, but even dishes presented at a common table can be internally differentiated. In studying the dynamics of a common meal, it is therefore important to remember that «in establishing precisely who eats what with whom, commensality is one of the most powerful ways of defining and differentiating social groups».<sup>73</sup> In addition, the ontological meaning

70 See the introductory observations for the ancient classical societies presented by Camassa 2000.

71 Plutarch, *Quaestiones Convivales* II, 10.

72 For an example of a study on the relations between culture and practice of feeding, see Montanari 1997. See also Joyce 2010, with a special focus on the interplay between social and cultural aspects that intervenes on the occasion of feasts.

73 Feeley-Harnik 1994, p. 11.

of communal meals must be stressed: people sitting at the same table receive the same nutrients, and nutrients are what keeps them alive - by partaking of the same foods then, in a way they experience also the same life, and the shared meal becomes, thus, a kind of shared life.<sup>74</sup> This fact is even more evident when the main course is constituted by meat: through the physical allocation of its different cuts, in fact, the body of an animal indicates, in its being only one, the communion of the eaters. However, at the same time, it shows also their internal hierarchy, since the servings might follow a rigidly established order or, on the contrary, they might be portioned out equally.

Moreover, on the occasion of a repast, food is destroyed through incorporation: it is physically and permanently removed from the world, and (unlike other gifts that might be exchanged during these events) it cannot be reinvested for future benefits. Diners agree in consuming the surplus accumulated through their own or someone else's work, starting in this way a new productive cycle that will eventually end up with another feast in a future time.<sup>75</sup> There is, though, a way to use food for a more long-lasting purpose, namely the exchange of foodstuffs in the form of gifts: that is the so-called «redistributive feast», which binds individuals belonging to different social classes by creating a net of reciprocal indebtedness.<sup>76</sup>

A few peculiar common meals are considered somehow special, because of the number of diners, the quality or quantity or variety of food, or because of the rules to which they are subjected. Such meals are called banquets, or feasts: they have been defined in various ways, depending on the peculiar character that the scholars wanted to underline, but they are always characterized by the sharing of edibles and beverages.<sup>77</sup> Banquets are also explicitly different from everyday repasts and from the exchanges of foods that do not include a common consumption: they are usually characterized by a ritual or ritualized component, that makes them unusual or unique.

The boundary between a 'meal' and a 'feast' is, thus, in a way, arbitrary, and even though it can allude to a number of things, it is usually associated to frequency and scale: it seems that 'meal' could be referred to an intimate, daily situation, whereas a feast takes place on special occasions,

74 See, *in primis*, Bottéro p. 1994. The ontological importance of the common meal is expressed also by the etymology of the Latin word for banquet, *convivium*, from the verb *cum vivere* «to live together».

75 See Dietler 2001, p. 74.

76 One of the most well-known redistributive feasts is the *potlatch* of the North-West Coast Indians: all the implications of this exchange-system have been identified first by Mauss 1990 (see also the foreword, written by M. Douglas); for a recent study see Perodie 2001.

77 For an example of this wide range of definitions, see the papers included in Dietler, Hayden 2001a.

with unusual people.<sup>78</sup> Those who take part in this kind of 'special meals' must know the behavioural rules that preside over the situation, which might be more or less explicit and usually concern each participant according to age, sex, rank, and so on. These regulations are often not written, but they are instead conveyed orally from one generation to the next.

Following the metaphor of the code used by modern scholars, banquets can be considered polysemic in various aspects, since each of their components can transmit different messages to different, simultaneous audiences. They can have multiple witnesses at the same time: to mention some of them, gods and other spiritual beings, ancestors, and humans of different social classes. The actual diners can be aware of all or of part of the implications connected to their participation in the event, but an external observer would have to analyze every aspect of it, in order to understand its regulations, execution, and goals.<sup>79</sup> Because of the multiple levels of the participants, during the performance different feelings are in motion at the same time in various directions: from top to bottom, compliance and social predominance; from bottom to top, tribute and submission; horizontally, sense of belonging to the same group (even though this affiliation might be only temporary).

Normally, common meals are chiefly considered as an instrument to bring people together for various purposes, but the power of these events lies also in their capacity to exclude or reject someone. This marginalization can materialize explicitly through the lack of an invitation, or else with the emphasis on class differentiation (distribution of different dishes, use of tableware of various quality, order in the delivery of foodstuffs), or also, physically, through the setting of the unwanted guests in the marginal areas of the celebration. Banquets can, thus, also divide people, not only bring them together.

In highly structured societies, where differences between classes are strongly marked, these occasions are commonly used by a king (or another supreme authority) to reaffirm his power over the common people. He may assume the role of the personification of the only one who can provide food even during hard times – often redistributing the very foodstuffs that those same people had surrendered as more or less spontaneous tributes. It is not just a social or political game, but it constitutes one fundamental element for the survival and the efficiency of the central state, since it has the necessity to constantly assure for itself a degree of consent among its population. Moreover, for a careful study of what Michael Dietler called 'commensal politics', «it's not enough simply to demonstrate that states used feasting as a part of their political strategies. It is crucial to ask

78 Jones 2007, p. 149.

79 Appadurai 1981, p. 508.

*what* kinds of feasting were being utilized and *how* they functioned politically in order to really advance understanding of political practices and processes». <sup>80</sup> Finally, it is important to remember that when a communal repast is integrated within a religious frame, people take great care in showing to themselves, to other participants and sometimes also to strangers their commitment and adherence to basic religious values. <sup>81</sup>

Two different perspectives can be traced in the modern studies about feasts. The first underlines the cultural and ritualized aspects of such events (following the theoretical path begun by Douglas), the other instead focuses more on the economic aspect of the collecting and consumption of surpluses (according to the ecological-materialist view proposed by Harris) – but these two perspectives do not necessarily exclude each other. <sup>82</sup> To this already complicated question, the political aspects and purposes should be added too, since they are a fundamental component of banquets carried out in every human society. Bringing all these issues together, Dietler observes that a feast represents a ritual performance which allows a strategic conversion of economic and symbolic capitals in order to obtain a huge variety of political results.

It is undeniable that a banquet brings many practical benefits to a community: work mobilization, cooperation between different social groups, creation of alliances, investment of the surplus produced by the population and normally consumed almost exclusively by the élite, control of resources and work thanks to the creation of a net of reciprocal obligations, and so on. <sup>83</sup> But feasts are also strongly political moments, fundamental theatres for staging and discussing political relations. They need a previous accurate planning, the setting in motion of many technical abilities and accounting practices, and a careful control over the ongoing circumstances, which are usually linked to a central authority who has the power to make sure that everything goes according to the proper rules, and who at the end of the banquet supervises the distribution of leftovers (the obligation of the attendees to contribute to the communal meal has in fact, as compensation, the right to take part in the final sharing). <sup>84</sup>

For the purpose of this study, the terms ‘feast’ and ‘banquet’ have been used as synonyms employed to denote a public activity during which food and beverages are consumed in a strongly ritualized context. They do not necessarily require special kinds of foodstuffs and dishes, even though

<sup>80</sup> See Dietler 2003, p. 275.

<sup>81</sup> See Bell 1997, and in particular «Feasting, Fasting, and Festivals», pp. 120-128.

<sup>82</sup> See Dietler, Hayden 2001b, esp. pp. 3-7.

<sup>83</sup> See Hayden 2001.

<sup>84</sup> Dore 2006.

they are very often characterized by huge quantities and a great variety; they are, however, clearly perceived as special occasions, because of the overall context. They do not need a great number of guests and diners either, but all the attendees are aware of the justification and purpose of their participation and share the knowledge of appropriate conduct for that particular occasion.<sup>85</sup> In many cases, banquets are distinguished also by the presence of servants that attend to both service and entertainment (for example music).

Shared repasts are also investigated in the coming pages: they are considered as occasions in which two or more people eat together any kind of food and drink, often (but not necessarily) within a ritualized context. Differently from feasts, they are usually smaller in terms of participants, quantity and quality of edibles consumed, and do not include any particular entertainment. They have, therefore, different audiences and different purposes from banquets, but they are not without a social, cultural and political meaning.

Finally, the word *symposion* is used only rarely, and in a different sense from what is usually intended by scholars who study the ancient Greek society. They use it, in fact, to indicate a time after the meal (*deipnon*), when communal drinking took place: it constituted an institutional moment, the expression of the aristocratic way of life, and it could serve as a kind of instrument of the social control exercised by the élite in the archaic *polis*. It was characterized by the solely male participation, the obligatory mixing of wine with water, the use of specialized pottery and tools, the presence of many different moments for entertainment and amusements, a strong sexual component, and from a late date (maybe the eighth century onwards) by the typical reclining position on couches.<sup>86</sup> For the purpose of the present study, the meaning of the term *symposion* has been narrowed to describe a moment in which men get together to consume heady beverages (especially beer, but also wine), possibly using special vessels. They hold political and sociological importance, but without being so tightly bound to a social class, and also the presence of amusement does not have those strong civic implications, typical instead of the Greek *symposia*. Finally, the position of the participants for the events analyzed in this research is almost exclusively seated, and the presence of a table is not binding.

<sup>85</sup> Commensality, a display of heightened ritualization and the expression of social motivations are the three constitutive elements of a banquet identified by Fox 2012. She proposes, as a working standard, the following definition: «feasting constitutes commensality between two or more people, in a form displaying heightened ritualisation and/or expressing social motivations that go beyond the nutritive benefits of the consumption occurring» (p. 4).

<sup>86</sup> For a summary of the main characteristics of Greek *symposia*, see Murray 1994, and the abundant bibliography mentioned there. Cfr. also Lissarrague, Schmitt Pantel 1993, esp. p. 228 fn. 19: «Il termine *sympòsion* è impropriamente tradotto con ‘banchetto’».

## 1.5 Rituals and Ritualization

While describing some special communal meals and banquets, the term 'ritual' has often been used. This is a really widespread concept, present in almost all the studies about religious, public and political actions especially in connection to empires and royalty – but it has been defined in many different ways, sometimes giving a sensation of vagueness and uncertainty.<sup>87</sup> This is not the place for an exhaustive, vast exposition about the meaning of this word or the history of its use and definitions within anthropological studies,<sup>88</sup> but nevertheless it is important to explain the sense with which the terms 'ritual' and 'ritualized' are used in the next pages, in order to avoid generalization or oversimplifications.

In 1967, Victor Turner defined the term as «formal behaviour for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers. The symbol is the smallest unit of ritual, which still retains the specific properties of ritual behaviour; it is the ultimate unit of specific structure in a ritual context».<sup>89</sup> This concept is, then, closely related to a religious, or rather mystical context, and its main characteristics are formality and distance from everyday normality; moreover, rituals are constituted and defined through smaller units, namely the symbols.

Ten years later, Goody provocatively challenged the use of the word 'ritual' and of the widespread dichotomy religious/secular or ritual/non-ritual. He stated that 'routinisation' and repetition lie at the basis of social life itself, and that proposing a definition of rituals based only on these characteristics makes it difficult to draw the line between them and everyday actions, so that it could even end up with a category that includes almost every activity that is somehow standardised. He also went against the idea that rituals constitute the key to see inside the depths of human culture and behaviour. On the contrary: he was «tempted to argue that they conceivably provide less of a clue, for the reasons I have stated, their formality, the element of culture lag, the component of public demonstration, their role as masks of the 'true' self. Communication that takes place in a 'conventional' ritual is often much less 'meaningful' than currently supposed».<sup>90</sup>

One of the most accepted and quoted definitions is Stanley Tambiah's. He provided a list of features usually associated with the actions labelled

87 See, e.g., the observation made by Cannadine 1987 on the different approaches used by historians and anthropologist. For an example of questions about rituals raised by scholars of the ancient Near East, see the different points of view and the discussion in Porter 2005.

88 For a schematic but complete presentation of the history of the studies about rituals, see Harth, Schenk 2004.

89 Turner 1967, p. 19.

90 Goody 1977.

as 'ritual': «patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts, often expressed in multiple media, whose content and arrangement are characterized in varying degree by formality (conventionality), stereotypy (rigidity), condensation (fusion), and redundancy (repetition)».<sup>91</sup> Such a description gives details of the form more than of the contents; it lingers over the methodology of the performance more than over its essence – avoiding, in this way, all the issues connected with the conjectural religious aspect of rituals, and the possible mystical and metaphysical value. It is a working definition, which can be applied to various situations and which requires for each practical application some concrete clarification, but which, precisely because of its nature, remains valid within a wide range of possible, different realities.

Roy Rappaport used a very similar approach, when he wrote that the term 'ritual' denotes «the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers». In this main definition, he voluntarily avoided any reference to its specific features – that he detected in «performance, formality, invariance, inclusion of both acts and utterances, encoding by other than the performers».<sup>92</sup>

In more recent years, Sax continued in this direction, stating that 'ritual' exists as an analytic category and not as a natural one: for this reason, it is not possible to define it according to essentialist categories or terms. He also proposed a list of characteristics shared by the class of activities defined as 'ritual', following Tambiah's footsteps but also adding that they are actions «often regarded as ineffective or nonrational» by external observers.<sup>93</sup> Coming back to this topic 30 years later, Goody referred in particular to this last aspect: he said, in fact, that by ritual he meant «a category of standardized behaviour (custom) in which the relationship between the means and end is not 'intrinsic', i.e. is either irrational or non-rational».<sup>94</sup>

Against such a practical definition, Bell refused to 'materialize' rituals assigning them some specific features: she proposed to remove them from the isolated, paradigmatic position in which they had been traditionally placed and to focus instead the attention on their role within the context of social activity. For this reason, she preferred to shift the terms of the discussion on 'ritualization': to describe it, «viewed as a practice, ritualization involves the very drawing, in and through the activity itself, of a privileged distinction between ways of acting, specifically between those acts being performed and those being contrasted, mimed, or implicated somehow. [...]

91 Tambiah 1979, p. 119.

92 Rappaport 1999, p. 24.

93 Sax 2010, p. 7.

94 Goody 2010, pp. 37-38.

At a more complex level, ritualization is a way of acting that specifically establishes a privileged contrast, differentiating itself as more important or powerful». <sup>95</sup> According to Bell, men are naturally provided with a 'ritual sense' that has three main qualities: it is a disposition that depends both on culture and on each individual situation; it constitutes a flexible complex of schemes and strategies; and it transmits a sense of what is acceptable and what is not during those occasions that are commonly called 'rituals'. This process ends up with «the circular production of a ritualized body which in turn produces ritualized practices», <sup>96</sup> and as a social process it can promote social solidarity, in particular in those relatively homogeneous groups which share common symbols. <sup>97</sup> Bell underlined, finally, the fact that ritualized actions, with their emphasis on sensory experience (visual images, sounds, tactile, olfactory and gustative stimulations, etc.), work primarily on the body, recreating in this way a condition that can be likened to a theatre performance. In both cases, ritualization entails a highly multisensorial experience, during which the audience is not asked to do, but to feel something, and moreover, it is often a condensed situation that manages to give a sense of totality and presents an example of how to organize and give sense to the world. <sup>98</sup>

Modern theories confirm the crucial role played by collective rituals for promoting social cohesion, calling into question the category of 'ritual' as a monolithic entity and deconstructing it into discrete components. <sup>99</sup> One of the most studied materializations of rituals, the one that has drawn the attention of most of the anthropologists and has raised probably the greatest amount of discussion, is sacrifice. This constitutes an exchange between human and super-human beings, who come into contact for a short time – a time that is marked as delicate and powerful. Sacrifice conveys ethical values, and as an exchange between gods and men it is characterized by two significant features: it is non-equitable (the merit of the donor does not, or better cannot, match the merit and the generosity of the beneficiary),

95 Bell 1992, p. 90.

96 Bell 1992, p. 93.

97 For a comment and a critique of Bell's theories, see Quack 2010.

98 See Bell 1997, pp. 159-164. More recently, see the various and detailed essays included in Alexander, Giesen, Mast 2006.

99 Whitehouse, Lanman 2014 discuss the relationship between ritual, social cohesion and kinship providing the most updated theories for each of these topics.



and it requires a special condition of purity.<sup>100</sup> Such a form of *do ut des*, in fact, for its own nature implies bloodshed that is, in turn, surrounded by apotropaic gestures.

Detienne and Vernant first suggested that, in ancient Greek society, the moment of the killing was somehow hidden, disguised, or even denied, to avoid negative consequences on the cultural performers and worshippers.<sup>101</sup> Recently, Grottanelli has suggested a similar taboo for the Akkadian culture too, where the expression 'to present (an animal) for the sacrifice' was often formulated by using the verb which generally meant 'to go, to bring near'.<sup>102</sup> This ritualized act has a strong influence upon nourishment (in particular meat-consumption) in every society, and therefore it must be taken into consideration in every study that investigates the history and value of food consumption. As such this is also discussed in the course of the present work. One concrete benefit produced by offering is, in fact, the immediate availability of those foodstuffs that, though officially given to the god(s) are instead distributed for human consumption. Sacrifice should never be extrapolated from its social context: as Valeri has suggested, it must, instead, be analyzed by using an «inclusive strategy», i.e. as a single expression of a whole series of phenomena which show affinities and that are related to one another, as a «ritualized taking of some life (or the destruction/removal from the sphere of a purely human use of precious objects that stand as a sign of life) to bring about some benefits».<sup>103</sup>

Putting together all the cues from the authors quoted above, in the following pages the term 'ritual' refers to situations that have the following attributes: firstly, standardized sequences of acts, carried out in conjunction with standardized sequences of words. They are official, formal events that occur within a strict set of standards and that require the adherence to a strict etiquette: for these reasons, they are usually rigid and repetitive. This does not imply, however, that also well-established rites cannot change: as discussed and demonstrated in the works mentioned above, they are historical and cultural phenomena, and as such they depend on the men who perform them. Modifications within the social groups often result in a modification of their rituals, too, but this delicate operation must always take place according to the same set of standards within which rites

**100** For a synthetic but exhaustive discussion on sacrifice, see Grottanelli 1999, esp. p. 22. On the relationship between cuisine and sacrifices in the religions of the Mediterranean area see also, more recently, the papers included in Georgoudi, Koch Piettre, Schmidt 2005 - in particular the ones by Marx, van Straten, Bruit-Zaidman, Rüpke and Scheid, which present a specific focus on the connection between sacrifice and commensality.

**101** Burkert 1972; Detienne, Vernant 1979.

**102** Grottanelli 1999, pp. 32-33.

**103** See Valeri 1994, esp. p. 104.

are usually performed, in order to be accepted by all the members of the community. Finally, being performed necessarily by fallible human beings, rituals can also be subjected to mistakes and failures, against which every feasible countermeasure is taken, but always remain possible.<sup>104</sup>

Rituals use a multisensorial language to reach different audiences, and have a strong social impact on the human group that performs or attends them. They do not necessarily represent special actions: they can also be normal, everyday acts which, because of the frame within which they are carried out, are nevertheless explicitly marked as relevant and unique. Differently from some of the former definitions quoted, religious and symbolic components are left aside on purpose, as well as the references to an irrational or non-rational constituent. The reason for this choice is the wish to avoid applying modern concepts to ancient practices. To assert that a ritual is irrational means to judge it in line with our standards – but the fact that we cannot find a meaning for every word or every act does not imply that this meaning was not present at the origin, when the ritual itself was performed, or that it was not understood by those who were there to attend the performance.

The last remark concerns the separation between the action itself and the written sources that describe it and help us with its reconstruction: to avoid confusion, in the first case the term ‘ritual’ has been kept, while for the sources the expression ‘ritual texts’ has always been used. It is important to keep in mind that, though the two are of course connected and essential to one another, they do not necessarily coincide in every detail.<sup>105</sup>

104 See, for example, the revealing instances collected by Hüsken 2007.

105 On the complex relationship between ceremonial acts, the words that accompany them and the written records of their performances, see Goody 2000 (esp. pp. 47-58).

# Commensality and Ceremonial Meals in the Neo-Assyrian Period

Stefania Ermidoro

## 2 The Mesopotamian Banquet Themes and Literary Motifs

**Summary** 2.1 Literature and Food: The History of a Successful Pair. – 2.2 The Constitutive Elements of a ‘Literary Banquet’. – 2.3 The Feeding of the Gods and the Divine Offerings. – 2.4 Travelling Gods. – 2.5 The Gods’ Assembly and the Decision-Making Council. – 2.6 Celebration of a Success or of an Enterprise.

### 2.1 Literature and Food: The History of a Successful Pair

In this chapter, some specific literary terms will be used: in order to avoid incomprehension I will first provide a definition for each of them according to the main acceptance included in the major handbooks of literature and rhetoric.

The two terms ‘*topos*’ and ‘*motif*’ will be used as synonyms (as happens in the main literature), to indicate recurrent concepts or formulas present in the texts analyzed: they share events, devices and references which occur frequently and are, moreover, easily noticeable.<sup>1</sup> The two terms do not necessarily imply the use of exactly the same sequence of words, nor the repetition, within a literary work, of identical sets of phrases or images: these could be present, but are not essential for the definition of *topos* as it will be adopted in the present work. ‘*Motif*’ has been in fact defined as «dwelling places of arguments»,<sup>2</sup> «a reservoir of ideas from which fitting ideas can be selected»,<sup>3</sup> «ideational elements that recur from time to time throughout a literary or other artistic work».<sup>4</sup> More extensively, it can be considered «a situation, incident, idea, image or character-type that is found in many different literary works, folktales, or myths; or any element of a work that is elaborated into a more general theme».<sup>5</sup>

This last term, ‘*theme*’, will also appear in the following pages, in re-

1 See Abrahams, Galt 2009, p. 205 (s.v. ‘*motif and theme*’).

2 Gunderson 2009, p. 296.

3 Lausberg 1998, p. 171.

4 Turco 1999, p. 53.

5 Baldick 1991, p. 142.

gard to more general concepts that are explicitly conveyed through the written sources, or detectable through a literary analysis of the texts: the theme does not, then, apply to the style, but to the ideas that lie behind words. It may be explicitly declared at the beginning or throughout a written source, but more often it emerges indirectly through the recurrence of various motifs.<sup>6</sup>

According to Ferrara,<sup>7</sup> the first modern scholar who used the term *topos* in the context of ancient Mesopotamian texts (in this specific case, Sumerian ones) was Benno Landsberger, in 1949.<sup>8</sup> In current publications, the word is very often present and many *topoi* have been identified in the corpus of both Sumerian and Akkadian literary works, to mention only the most renowned of them: the deluge, the travel of a god or a hero to the Netherworld, and the destruction of an impious city.

Applying modern literary terms to ancient texts is a controversial, difficult task:<sup>9</sup> our modern categories (e.g. hymnal, epic, heroic, wisdom literature) would have no meaning for the ancient scholars, who had their own perception of 'genre', and consequently also a peculiar system of classification that followed criteria related to performance, or practical circumstances for the execution, or other categories we can no longer understand. And yet, ever since the discovery and deciphering of the first mythological texts, many different schools of interpretation arose and caught on among Assyriologists, in an attempt to find their deepest meanings, or to classify them according to different categories.<sup>10</sup> Being conscious of these issues, the best solution for this work seemed to be the utilisation for each text the same definitions and classifications used by the original publisher of the cuneiform source – thus it will always be possible to go back to the first editions to find the motivations for one choice or another.

All the major literary texts of the Mesopotamian culture have been consulted in this analysis. The Sumerian ones were identified thanks to the

6 Baldick 1991, p. 225. See also Turco 1999, p. 53: «*Theme* is the thread of *idea* that underlies the story. All narrative elements support the theme, which must be distinguished from the subject. The subject of a narrative can be expressed in a *word* or *phrase*, but the theme is always expressible only in a *complete sentence*» (italics in the original).

7 Ferrara 1995.

8 Landsberger 1949, esp. p. 281: «Wenn in sumerischen literarischen Texten die Segnungen der Flut von Euphrat und Tigris geschildert werden, so begegnet uns ausnahmslos der feste literarische τόπος, dass auf den Feldern *šegunû* gedeihe».

9 See for example the observations made by Reiner 1985 and 1993 (esp. pp. 293-300). For a study of the different Mesopotamian «genres», see Vanstiphout 1986 and 1999.

10 For a synthetic but complete analysis of these theories, see Heimpel 1993-1997, and the vast bibliography there quoted.

online database of *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature*,<sup>11</sup> unfortunately, without the possibility of using such a tool for the Akkadian literary production too, these texts were found through the reading of published anthologies<sup>12</sup> and other important publications and articles. The aim of this research was to detect all the passages within these sources in which the theme of the banquet and of the common sharing and consumption of food were concretely conveyed through well-recognizable *topoi*.

If letters, accounts and rituals can provide more practical descriptions of the actions, courses, guests, time and place of feasts, in literature it is possible to trace the reasons and meanings bestowed on these practices by those who performed them. Myths and literary texts use fiction as a sort of interpretation of the world:<sup>13</sup> they provide information about the structures of the society in which they were born, or about its costumes, in a narrative form – thus presenting an idealized version of beliefs and rituals. I do not consider myth as a mere explanation of ritual, nor is ritual treated as pure performance of one myth or another: these two levels are undoubtedly connected, but each one has its own physiognomy, that deserves a separate discussion.<sup>14</sup>

It should not be forgotten in fact, that the creation and the drafting of texts are social practices, grounded on concrete historical and geographical circumstances: literature gives us, therefore, a hint of what the people who wrote the texts thought about them. While portraying ancient or «mythical» traditions, whose roots were sunk into a distant past, ancient writers gave a sense to their present: in Mesopotamia, historical facts were enclosed in mythological frames with the purpose of conferring them reliability and sense.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, this means that differences should also be pointed out: not every description that we read can be considered valid for all the inhabitants of Mesopotamia, nor be evaluated independently from their provenance, social class or the generation they belonged to. Nevertheless, through these works it is possible to get a reflection of the life lived by

11 Black et. al 1998-2006: <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/>.

12 Particularly useful have been the two anthologies published by Bottéro, Kramer 1989 and by Foster 2005.

13 Doty 2000, pp. 7-8.

14 For an in-depth account on the relationship between myth, writing and history, see Assmann 1992 and 2000: in his publications, the scholar advocates the setting aside of a sharp distinction between myth as fiction (charged with symbols and deep meanings) and history as reality (and as objective science). He has convincingly proved that ancient cultures remembered and interiorized their past by converting it into myth – this functioned, thus, as a link between a previous time and the customs and society of their present.

15 See Xella 1976, esp. pp. 5-46 on the relationship between myth and historical facts.

those literates who, while creating and fixing them in a written form, described what they experienced normally. This does not mean, either, that all the situations depicted in the literary texts are to be taken literally, but that they can be used together with the other sources at the scholars' disposal, to get a complete outline, in this case, of banquets and of the kind of social occasions that they represented in ancient Mesopotamia. These compositions are not prescriptive, their purpose is not in fact to establish a behaviour to observe during feasts: the answers to clarify these aspects can be found, instead, in ritual texts. The stories presented in the following pages might describe ceremonials but they do not fix their rules: literary texts are intended as narrative and descriptive.<sup>16</sup>

From a literary point of view, it is possible to single out some instances in which the banquet constitutes a substantial structural element indispensable for the whole plot. This is the case of *Inanna and Enki*,<sup>17</sup> where the feast offers the occasion to show how Enki got drunk and assigned, without being aware of what he was doing, the *me* to his daughter, who brought them to Uruk. Drunkenness is essential too for the development of the story of *Enki and Ninmah*,<sup>18</sup> justifying the unusual behaviour of the two gods in the presence of the whole divine assembly called to celebrate the creation of mankind. Finally, in *Lugalbanda and the Anzu bird*<sup>19</sup> the banquet scene is situated at the beginning of the narrative and it explains the donation of the abnormal strength and speed which let the hero accomplish remarkable war feats.

In other cases, feasts are used within a text to highlight critical points of the story and create a new starting point for subsequent development: the most well-known example of this is the one of the third tablet of the *Enūma Eliš*.<sup>20</sup> Here, the family of the gods gather around the dining table and, while sharing food and beer in a joyous atmosphere, also make critical decisions for the future of the world. Another instance can be found in the Sumerian account of *Gilgameš and the Bull of Heaven*:<sup>21</sup> in this case in fact, the feasting event separates the first half of the narrative (with the celebration of the hero, his offence to Inanna and the decision taken by the goddess to send

16 Bottéro, Kramer 1989, pp. 80-81. For the relations between myths and festivals, see also Heimpel 1993-1997, pp. 551-552 and Assman 2000 (esp. pp. 148-184).

17 A complete edition of the text is provided by Farber-Flügge 1973; a new source was published afterwards: see Farber-Flügge 1995.

18 For the edition, see Benito 1969.

19 Edited by Wilcke 1969.

20 The text has been firstly fully edited in copy by Lambert, Parker 1966. A new edition is now available, see Kämmerer, Metzler 2012.

21 The first edition of this text was provided by Cavigneaux, Al-Rawi 1993a. Afterwards, George (2010) published many new fragments and collations, thus bettering our knowledge of the drinking scene (see esp. pp. 111-115).

the Bull of Heaven onto the earth) from the second part, with the fight of Gilgamesh and Enkidu against the monstrous animal, ending with their victory.

There is a specific literary genre in which banquets are depicted quite often, playing one of the two important roles just described: it is the genre of the Disputations, or Debates.<sup>22</sup> Here, communal meals and feasts are functional to the creation of an occasion for the beginning of the disputation itself, obtained through different devices: a quarrel can start over a matter of precedence, a normal discourse can develop into a more debated argument, or disputes can also be 'ordered' or even provoked on purpose, as in *Tamarisk and Palm*.<sup>23</sup> It is very likely, in fact, that disputations were considered as a sort of entertainment: we have hints of this also from some other literary texts, where similar situations are described:

lú-e-ne kaš ì-na<sub>g</sub>-na<sub>g</sub>-ne kurun im-dùg-ge-ne  
<sup>zabar</sup>aga im-gur<sub>4</sub>-gur<sub>4</sub>-re-e-ne  
 zabar-e <sup>4</sup>uraš-é a-da-mìn mu-un-di-ne<sup>24</sup>

All of them were drinking and enjoying beer and liquor.  
 They filled the bronze *aga*-vessels to the brim  
 and started a competition, drinking from the bronze vessels of Uraš.

If this was the case, then the banquets during which they were performed should not be counted as «an occasion for *dis*-harmony, resulting in verbal fighting»<sup>25</sup> - because the point was not to engage in a quarrel, but rather to practice and show oratory.<sup>26</sup> That meals were the main settings for debates can be inferred also from an administrative text from Drehem, datable to the fourth year of king Amar-Suen, whose first line reads:

3 udu muḫaldim-e-ne a-da-mín ak<sup>27</sup>

3 sheep for the cooks: for the disputation.

<sup>22</sup> This topic has been treated in depth in several articles by Vanstiphout, see for example Vanstiphout 1992, and the bibliography there quoted.

<sup>23</sup> This dialogue was published by Lambert 1996, pp. 151-164; for a recent translation and commentary, see also Streck 2004.

<sup>24</sup> *Enki's Journey to Nippur*, lines 110-112. The text is edited by Al-Fouadi 1969. A description of a similar situation can be found also in *Inanna and Enki*, lines ii 27-30.

<sup>25</sup> Vanstiphout 1992, p. 14.

<sup>26</sup> The same idea is supported also by Ponchia 1996, see esp. p. 9.

<sup>27</sup> See Kang 1972, n. 155 and n. 190, i 19. On these texts as witnesses of the coexistence of repast and debate, see also Alster 1990, in particular at p. 13, where the scholar translates this line as «3 sheep for bakers performing a disputation».

In the competition undertaken by *Winter and Summer*,<sup>28</sup> the festival motif is not explicitly mentioned as a framework, but the debate shows how the two elements of the pair are at the same time complementary and necessary for the providing of food. Moreover, after the announcement of Winter, the celebration took place in the guise of a banquet, that lasted a whole day and included exchange of gifts and tributes:

é-me-eš en-te-en-ra im-ma-an-ši-in-gam ù-gul mu-na-an-ĝá-ĝá  
 é-a-na kaš-ulušin kurun si ba-ni-in-sá-sá  
 zag-bi-a ĝišbun níĝ dùg-ge ud mi-ni-ib-zal-zal-e-ne  
 é-me-eš en-te-en-ra kug-siĝ<sub>17</sub> kug-babbar za-ĝìn mu-un-na-ba-ba-e  
 nam-šeš nam-dùb-sa ì li-gin<sub>7</sub>, i-im-bal-bal-e-ne<sup>29</sup>

Summer bowed to Winter and offered him a prayer.  
 In his house he prepared emmer-beer and wine,  
 at its side they spend the day at a succulent banquet.  
 Summer presents Winter with gold, silver and lapis lazuli.  
 They pour out brotherhood and friendship like best oil.

Also in *Bird and Fish*<sup>30</sup> the appropriateness or non-appropriateness of one contender or another at the sacrificial table or at Enlil's holy table, or «at banquets in the great dining hall of the gods»,<sup>31</sup> is a recurrent topic in the two protagonists' arguments, throughout all the debate.

There is one particular dispute in which banquets play a major role both for the contents and for the development of the story: it is *Ewe and Wheat*.<sup>32</sup> The topic of food is present from the beginning of this composition, with the description of mankind living as animals («like sheep they ate grass with their mouth and drank water from the ditches»<sup>33</sup>). Ewe and Wheat were created in this primeval time – and one of the first divine actions was to gather in the banqueting chamber to partake of their products. But since these required considerable work, the deities decided to assign them to men, giving birth in this way to farming and breeding. The celebrating feast that assembled all the gods is described with these words:

28 Only a partial edition of the text has been published, by Van Dijk 1953. The rest of the composition can, however, be consulted on the etcsl website.

29 *Winter and Summer*, lines 310-314.

30 Until today, no complete edition is available. The text can be found, however, on the ETCSL website.

31 Line 172: kíĝ-siĝ únu gal diĝir-re-e-ne-ke<sub>4</sub> me-te-aš im-mi-[ib-ĝál].

32 Published by Alster, Vanstiphout 1987.

33 *Ewe and Wheat*, lines 24-25: udu-gin<sub>7</sub> ka-ba ú mu-ni-ib-gu<sub>7</sub> / a mú-sar-ra-ka i-im-na<sub>8</sub>-na<sub>8</sub>-ne.



ġeštín níġ ðùġ i-im-na<sub>8</sub>-na<sub>8</sub>-e-ne  
 kaš níġ ðùġ i-im-ðùġ-ðùġ-ge-ne  
 ġeštín níġ ðùġ ù-mu-un-naġ-eš-a-ta  
 kaš níġ ðùġ ù-mu-un-ðùġ-ge-eš-a-ta  
 a-gàr-a-gàr-ra du<sub>14</sub> mi-ni-ib-mú-mú-ne  
 ki ġišbun-na-ka a-da-mìn mu-un-ak-ne<sup>34</sup>

They drank sweet wine,  
 they enjoyed sweet beer.  
 When they had drunk sweet wine  
 and enjoyed sweet beer,  
 they started a quarrel in the midst of the watered fields,<sup>35</sup>  
 they began a debate in the dining hall.

So a debate begins between two elements (bread and meat) that were often if not always the main ingredients of a banquet. They were so conscious of these roles that they included them among the arguments used to support their thesis, in the attempt to win the contest.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, going back to literary devices, there are other instances in which banquets are just mentioned, usually to picture a lavish, happy time. An example is given by the *Cursing of Agade*:<sup>37</sup>

ùġ-bi ú nir-ġál gu<sub>7</sub>-ù-dè  
 ùġ-bi a nir-ġál na<sub>8</sub>-na<sub>8</sub>-dè  
 saġ a tu<sub>5</sub>-a kisal ħúl-le-dè  
 ki ezem-ma ùġ sig<sub>7</sub>-ge-dè  
 lú zu-ù-ne téš-bi gu<sub>7</sub>-ù-dè<sup>38</sup>

(Holy Inana did not sleep as she ensured)  
 that its (i.e. of the city) people would eat splendid food;  
 that its people would drink splendid beverages;  
 that those bathed for holidays would rejoice in the courtyards;  
 that the people would throng the places of celebration;  
 that acquaintances would dine together.

34 *Ewe and Wheat*, lines 65-70.

35 In the etcs1 website this line is translated as: «they started a quarrel concerning the arable fields».

36 See, among the argumentations, lines 111-112 and 157-161.

37 For the edition of the text, see Cooper 1983.

38 *Cursing of Agade*, lines 14-18.

In these cases, the descriptions of sharing of meals are not essential for the development of the plot, but add details to the larger frame of the narrative. The *topos* of the banquet was so well-known among scholars that they could also decide to rework it in an ironical context: it is the case of the *aluzinnu*-text, of the so-called *Sargon Lord of the Lies*, and of the *Poor Man of Nippur*.

In the *aluzinnu*-text,<sup>39</sup> the literary device used by the compilers was symbolic inversion, intended as behaviour which voluntarily inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms.<sup>40</sup> This parody plays «with the *normative* value of gastronomic recipes, as well as with the *normative* value of ritual practices»,<sup>41</sup> in particular with prohibitions connected with the menologies. In a dialogical form in fact, the *aluzinnu* presented very unlikely menus for the different months of the year, in a mixture of disgusting, poisonous or tabooed ingredients with perfectly edible ones. This text requires a remarkable awareness and attention by ancient and modern recipients as well, in order to detect all the different levels subject to sarcasm, with the frequent cross-references to medical prescriptions, real culinary recipes,<sup>42</sup> and religious behavioural rules.

The parody *Sargon Lord of the Lies*<sup>43</sup> imitates in form, style and contents the royal inscriptions of Sargon of Akkad, with explicit cross-references to the original<sup>44</sup> but making the imitation amusing and unlikely. The target of this satire may have been that particular inscription, or the genre it belonged to, or the subject to which the imitation is applied, or all of them.<sup>45</sup>

39 The first edition of the text was provided by Ebeling 1931, pp. 9-19; for the section relating to food and recipes (r. iii 1-23) see now Milano 2004.

40 Babcock 1978, pp. 14-15. For a definition of the *aluzinnu* as trickster, see Foster 1974, in particular pp. 78-79, with the quotations from Ricketts 1966.

41 Milano 2004, p. 249.

42 See the ones published by Bottéro 1995.

43 The text (mentioned here according to the title attributed to it by Foster 2005) was originally published by Günbatti 1997; a new edition is provided by Van De Mieroop 2000: he interpreted it as a parody of the Sargonic royal inscriptions. For the definition of this text, see Abrahams, Galt Harpham 2009, p. 36, s.v. 'burlesque': «A parody imitates the serious manner and characteristic features of a particular literary work, or the distinctive style of a particular author, or the typical stylistic and other features of a serious literary genre, and deflates the original by applying the imitation to a lowly or comically inappropriate subject». *Contra* the interpretation of this document as a parody, see (in chronological order): Cavigneaux 2005 (according to whom the texts represents a written improvisation); Dercksen 2005 (who interprets the text as part of the official cult of Aššur); Hercksen 2001 (who defined it as a «Selbstpreis Sargons»); Alster, Oshima 2007 (stating that the text is «not a parody, but a humorous overstatement», p. 6).

44 The original inscription is published in Frayne 1993 (RIME 2): Sargon E2.1.1.11 and E2.1.1.12.

45 This idea corresponds also to what Vanstiphout 1986 defines as «the tertiary or final phase in the life cycle of a historical genre» (see p. 8).

The text represents a fine example of literature, both for its many puns<sup>46</sup> and for its conscious use of irony, that works through the overturning of renowned *topoi*. In particular, the king himself describes a long, chaotic and disastrous meal offered to eleven thousand warriors, runners and cupbearers. During the banquet, that lasted «seven years, one month, and fifteen days»,<sup>47</sup> at first the food ran out and afterwards, when enough meat was found, the cook burned it and was therefore forced to slaughter one hundred oxen and two hundred sheep, and to feed the servants, too. It is clear that this situation, far from the official, formal meals consumed by Sargon and his five thousand four hundred men, is totally disorganized and confused. Moreover, at the end of the text another typical motif of the royal inscriptions is reversed: instead of a boast of guaranteeing regular provisions to temples, we find a request directed to Adad and to a king (a future one?) to provide the ruler with regular food supplies.

Finally, in the *Poor Man of Nippur*,<sup>48</sup> defined as «a masterfully wrought humorous tale of an abused pauper's triumph over his oppressor»,<sup>49</sup> the starting point of the whole plot, and the reason for all the subsequent actions of the protagonist, is a poor man's desire to organize a banquet, describing also the difficulties encountered during the practical organization. Having obtained a goat, not without personal sacrifice, he still could not follow the social customs, according to which he had to invite all his friends and relatives to share it with him. Not having enough food, and especially not having any beer (fundamental to accompany the food) he therefore decided to turn to the Mayor of Nippur, believing that, by giving him his poor belongings, he would obtain in return a whole feast for him and his relations:

*tu-šá-am-ma ina gi-pa-ri-ia a-aṭ-ab-ba-aḥ en-za`  
ul i-ba-áš-ši nap-ta-nu a-li-e ši-ik-ru  
i-šem-mu-ma ši-i-`i KA-ia i-šab-`bu-su`  
kim-tum `ù` sa-al-la-tú i-ze-en-nu-u KI-ia  
lul-qí-ma a-na É<sup>16</sup>ḥa-za-an-ni lu-bil en-za  
ṭa-ba-a ù dam-qa lu-ša-am-me-ra ana KARA-`bi`<sup>50</sup>*

46 For an accurate presentation of all the puns contained in this text, see Van De Mieroop 2000 and Foster 2002.

47 *Sargon Lord of the Lies*, lines 41-42: MU.7.ŠÈ ITI.KAM | ù ša-pá-tám.

48 The first edition of the text was provided by Gurney 1956; for a new translation and more comments, see also Cooper 1975 (esp. p. 163 fn. 1) which included additions and collations.

49 Cooper 1975, p. 163.

50 *Poor Man of Nippur*, lines 17-22.

Suppose I slaughter the goat in my yard –  
 there could be no feast, for where is the beer?  
 My friend in the neighbourhood would find it out and be furious,  
 and my family and relatives would be angry with me;  
 (instead), I'll take the goat and bring it to the mayor's house,  
 attempting to favourably influence him!

After his expectations were defeated, he began a long and accurate plan to get revenge. He even obtained fortuitously what he wanted, when he showed up at the Mayor's palace pretending to be a nobleman, and obtaining «a plentiful meal»<sup>51</sup> as the laws of hospitality dictated. If the necessary presence of friends and family in the *Poor man of Nippur* shows how this meal was intended to strengthen social bounds, it is also true that there was no other evident reason for the protagonist to offer it: it seems instead that he was just looking for an occasion for celebrating and having fun. The same circumstances of holding a banquet for the sole aim of uniting members of the same family, so that they could spend time together and share their lives for a moment, can be found in the first lines of the *Nergal and Ereškigal* poem.<sup>52</sup> In this case, however, the family of the gods was involved. The pleasure of enjoying good food, beer and each other's company is present in a few other texts of different genres: private people had in fact various occasions to participate in banquets both in taverns and at home. One proverb for example states:

*ana q[é-r]e-et áš-tam-me la ta-ḥa-áš-ma  
 šum-man-na la te-en-né-'-i[l]*<sup>53</sup>

Do not hasten to a b[an]quet in the inn,  
 and you will not be boun[d] with a halter.

In the omen series *Šumma alu ina mēlê šakin*,<sup>54</sup> we find evidence of a 'domestic banquet', in which also the divinities could participate (even if it seems that the consequences could turn out to be unfavourable).

DIŠ ina É LÚ DINGIR ana qé-re-e-ti TU-ub

51 *Poor Man of Nippur*, line 92: *ma-ka-li-šú*.

52 Various editions of this text are now available: two are Italian and almost contemporary (Pettinato 2000 and Saporetti 2003); the most recent one is Ponchia, Luukko 2013.

53 K.9050 + K.13457, lines 9-12. For the edition of this text see Lambert 1996, 256.

54 Published by Freedman 1998-2006.

ZI-GA u pu-uḫ-pu-uḫ-ḫu-ú ana LÚ i-sad-dar<sup>55</sup>

If a god enters a man's house for a festive meal,  
uprising and contention will be regular for the man.<sup>56</sup>

The fun derived from these parties is easily detectable in a hymn that constitutes an exception in its genre. In this text, at first the celebration of the beer goddess Ninkasi is presented, with the poetic review of all the phases of the brewing process, and after this first hymnic part begins what the original editor of the poem called «the only Sumerian drinking song so far discovered».<sup>57</sup> Independently of the concrete situation that brought to the creation of this poetic text,<sup>58</sup> what is interesting here is the description of the joyous feelings derived from the drinking of the precious alcoholic beverage, which gives an image of the celebrations of the time:

sagi lú-tur-ra lùnga bí-in-gub-en  
a-nígin-e nigin-na-gu<sub>10</sub>-ne  
gur<sub>4</sub>-gur<sub>4</sub>-re-gá gur<sub>4</sub>-gur<sub>4</sub>-re-gá-gu<sub>10</sub>-ne  
kaš-nag-e me-e sig<sub>10</sub>-ga-gu<sub>10</sub>-ne  
kúrun-nag-a ul-ti-a-gu<sub>10</sub>-ne  
šag<sub>4</sub>-ḫúl<sup>!</sup>-la ur<sub>5</sub>-sag<sub>9</sub>-ga-gu<sub>10</sub>-ne  
šag<sub>4</sub>-gá šag<sub>4</sub>-ḫúl-la gál-la-bi  
ur<sub>5</sub>-sag<sub>9</sub> túgpa<sup>!</sup>-a ša-mur<sub>10</sub>-ra-gu<sub>10</sub>-ne<sup>59</sup>

I will make cupbearers, boys and brewers stand by,  
while I turn around in the abundance of beer,  
while I feel wonderful, I feel wonderful,  
drinking beer, in a blissful mood,  
drinking liquor, feeling exhilarated,  
with joy in the heart and a happy liver  
- my heart is indeed full of joy,  
and I cover my happy liver with a garment fit for a queen!

55 *Šumma alu*, X line 224.

56 The same protasis is reported in the *namburbî* ritual text, K.8819 + K.9456 + K.10961 r. 18': [DIŠ i]na É LÚ DINGIR ana KAŠ.DÉ.A KU<sub>4</sub> DU<sub>14</sub>], see Maul 1994, pp. 373-377.

57 This very particular text was published by Civil 1964; this quotation is at p. 67. A new edition of the source is now available, by Sallaberger 2012a.

58 Civil suggested that this could be «a poem celebrating the inauguration of a tavern or éš-dam-ma kept by a lady», see Civil 1964, p. 68. Differently, Sallaberger (2012a, p. 324) considers it as a possible «Festlied, das man beim Beziehen eines neuen Hauses feierte» or, as an alternative, as a song used within the context of the temple cult.

59 *Hymn to the Beer Goddess*, lines 70-77.

All the texts here presented were copied in Mesopotamian scribal schools year after year, and the oldest Sumerian ones often stood (even if, admittedly, not always: each case must be considered singularly) side by side with the newest ones, written up until the first millennium. This does not necessarily mean that nothing changed in this span of time in the cultural behaviour or social traditions, nor that their content was shared totally by the new younger scholars: yet these texts were always present as forerunners and examples at the moment of the drafting of new compositions, and represented an integral part of their cultural background.

## 2.2 The Constitutive Elements of a ‘Literary Banquet’

Considering all the instances of a banquet or common meal in the literary texts analyzed in the present work, we can try to reconstruct the different phases considered essential for a valid execution.

The time of the gathering is not always defined, and it varied probably according to the different situations and necessities, but we know that the celebrations could last many hours, an entire day<sup>60</sup> and sometimes also extended to the night.<sup>61</sup> The place chosen for the meal was usually one of the houses of the gods or the area immediately in front of it,<sup>62</sup> and in particular a room defined «the great banqueting hall».<sup>63</sup> In case of need, other places could be used for a banquet: a private house<sup>64</sup> or more fortuitous places as described in the *Lugalbanda* myth, where the hero arranged it

60 *Winter and Summer*, line 312.

61 See *Ninurta's Journey to Eridu*, Segment B, line 6; the text was published by Reisman 1971.

62 The «shrine of Nibru» in *Enki's Journey to Nippur*, line 104; «in front of the Lions' Gate» in *Inanna and Enki*, Segment C, lines 11, 23; «out from the Ekur», in *Nanna-Suen's Journey to Nippur*, line 322 (for the edition of this text, see Ferrara 1973); «the courtyard» in *Ninurta's journey to Eridu*, line 17; the Esagila in *Enūma Eliš* VI, line 70.

63 The term used is unu (written únu or unu<sub>6</sub>): see the two hymns *Nanna E* 52 and *Nanna M* 17 (for the editions of these texts see respectively Charpin 1986, pp. 366-379; and Sjöberg 1960, pp. 89-96); *Enki and Ninmah*, line 8; *Bird and Fish*, line 172; *Temple Hymns*, lines 2, 19, 107, 137, 304, 320 (text edited by Sjöberg, Bergmann 1969).

64 So it seems from the *Winter and Summer* line 311, unless the ‘house’ mentioned here is once again a temple, possibly the E-namtilla (named in the text «house of Enlil»), where all the debate took place.

in a pit<sup>65</sup> and in Anzu's nest.<sup>66</sup> The expedient to perform in this case, was to adorn the selected place, festoon it and make it «like a god's dwelling-place», so that it could be considered suitable for such a ceremony. Besides the two Lugalbanda stories already cited, there is also the allusion in one school text, where the student affirmed that he had made «the sheep and banquets attractive, so that your god is overjoyed».<sup>67</sup> The embellishment of the setting was therefore a primary aspect of the arrangement required to obtain the certainty of a successful banquet.

Some more actions were to be performed even before taking one's place at the table. One of these, that had in all likelihood both ceremonial and hygienic reasons, was the washing of the hands. The fact that this was a fundamental action is inferable from some proverbs:

šu nu-luh-ha ka-e tum<sub>3</sub>-da nig<sub>2</sub>-gig-ga-am<sup>68</sup>

Putting unwashed hands in one's mouth is disgusting.

In another similar Sumerian proverb it is written that serving beer with unwashed hands is an abomination to Utu.<sup>69</sup> We know that these recommendations were not handed down in vain, because some literary texts echo this moral duty: in *Enlil and Sud*,<sup>70</sup> before pouring the welcoming drink for his guest, the maiden washed her hands «according to the instructions of her mother».<sup>71</sup> Again, in the *Dialogue of Pessimism*<sup>72</sup> the master asked his servant:

ara[d mi-tan-gu]r-an-ni an-nu-u be-lí an-nu-u  
ši-[šir-ma di-kan]-ni-ma A.MEŠ ana šu<sup>11</sup>-ia bi-nam-ma lu-up-tu-un<sup>73</sup>

65 *Lugalbanda in the mountain cave*, line 374: si-dug<sub>1</sub>-ta ġišbun-na im-ma-ni-in-dúr-ru, «(the gods) sit down to a banquet at the pit, at the place in the mountain which he had prepared».

66 *Lugalbanda and the Anzu bird*, lines 90-92: mušen-e ġùd-bi-šè ħè-em-ma-tèġ-ġe<sub>26</sub>-da-ka | anzud<sup>mušen</sup>-dè ġùd-bi-šè ħé-em-ma-tèġ-ġe<sub>26</sub>-da-ka | ki diġir til-la-ġin<sub>7</sub> im-ak ġiri<sub>17</sub>-zal im-du<sub>8</sub>-du<sub>8</sub>, «it seemed to the bird, when he approached the nest, it seemed to Anzu, when he approached the nest, that it had been made like a god's dwelling-place, it was brilliantly festooned».

67 *E-dub-ba-a C*, line 43: udu-bi ú-ġu<sub>7</sub>-bi ħa-ma-saġ<sub>9</sub>-saġ<sub>9</sub> diġir-zu ħè-ħúl. The text is still unpublished; for a transliteration and translation see the etcscl website.

68 See Alster 1997, n. 3.161.

69 Alster 1997, n. 3.8.

70 For the edition of this text, see Civil 1983.

71 Line 82: [dug<sub>4</sub>]-ga ama-na-šè šu bí-in-luġ zabar šu-na bí-in-ġar.

72 See Lambert 1996, pp. 139-149.

73 *Dialogue of Pessimism*, lines 10-11.

«Slave, [listen] to me.» «Here I am, sir, here I am.»  
 «Quickly, [fetch] me water for my hands, and give it to me  
 so that I can dine.»

Later in this text, the servant, mentioning the same god as the one present in the proverb previously quoted, states that «Šamaš accompanies washed hands». <sup>74</sup>

Food placed on the table could have been previously presented as an offering to the gods, as it is depicted in *Enki's* and in *Nanna-Suen's Journey to Nippur* (respectively, line 93 and lines 315-318), and in *Lugalbanda in the mountain cave*, where the first offerings made by the hero's brothers and companions in arms (probably intended as funerary offerings, see lines 89-109) <sup>75</sup> became later in the text crucial for the recovery and the subsistence of Lugalbanda, who, finally fed, could thus feed in his turn the gods who had made him healthy again (lines 371-393). The consecration of the ingredients before eating had the advantage of making them sacred and therefore suitable for a divine repast. Being accepted by the higher gods of the pantheon, the food became somehow more special and meaningful and contributed to making the recipients' mood favourable and joyous, a condition necessary for an unproblematic celebration and for obtaining a benediction, a positive destiny or any other practical purpose the banquet had been organized for.

Diners could, then, take their place at the table: the texts do not describe in what order, but we assume that each one of them was well aware of the place that he was supposed to occupy and went there spontaneously. Within the context of a divine, ceremonial meal, a chaotic situation with a random seating plan is, in fact, inconceivable. That etiquette was to be followed also in this phase is clear from some allusions like the ones present in *Nergal and Ereškigal* (lines ii 2'-7') and in *Enūma Eliš* (III, lines 132-133), with the exchange of pleasantries and expressions of respect. For this reason, also the place at the table must have mirrored the hierarchy of the divine assembly, as in *Enki's Journey to Nippur* (lines 106-109) where An sits at the head of the table, Enlil next to him, and then all the others, in order of importance. <sup>76</sup>

74 See *Dialogue of Pessimism*, line 13: *it-ti šu<sup>II</sup> mi-sa-a-ti il-lak* ʾUTU.

75 Cfr. Wilcke 1987, p. 122.

76 Apparently, the presence of the sacred «triad» An-Enlil-Enki was fundamental for the celebration of a banquet: in all the texts in which guests are explicitly named, the first two are, in fact, always cited. In addition to *Enki's Journey to Nippur*, see also *Lugalbanda in the mountain cave*, line 373 (An, Enlil, Enki, Ninhursaga), *Lugal-e*, line 19 (Ninurta, An, Enlil; for the edition see Van Dijk 1983), and the Akkadian hymn *Ištar queen of Heaven*, line 64 (Ištar, Anu, Enlil, Ea; see Lambert 1982). For a parallel with Ugaritic materials, see Ferrara, Parker 1972. It seems, moreover, that the table itself, around which the gods gathered to enjoy the pleasures of good food, bore the name of the chief of the pantheon – he was, in this way, always present even if not personally. See the two occasions in *Inanna and Enki*, lines 13, 25 and in *Nanna M*, lines 17, 20 with the mention of the ʾiš-banšur kug ʾiš-banšur ana-ka, «the holy table, the table of An».



The atmosphere was gladdened by the sound of music: percussion instruments were mostly played, as is shown by the frequent mentions of *ala*, *ub* and *šem* drums,<sup>77</sup> *tigi* and *zamzam* (possibly other kinds of drums, even if identification is not sure)<sup>78</sup> – but also stringed instruments must have been used, in particular to accompany songs, as attested by *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven*:

nar-mu lugal-gaba-ġâl èn-du-zu da-ga-ab sa-a-zu [sì-bi-ib]  
kaš mu-un-naġ<sup>1</sup> zabar sîla gi<sub>4</sub>-bi-ib [...] <sup>79</sup>

My musician, Lugal-gabaġar, perform your song, [tune] your strings!  
Give me beer to drink! Fill my bronze jug again!

The presence of singers is proved also by other instances, such as the mention of *adab*-songs<sup>80</sup> in the *Temple Hymns*, line 107, and other mentions in *Winter and Summer*, line 236, and *Dumuzi-Inanna C*, lines 28-29.<sup>81</sup>

Once everything was set up, and the participants were in the best state of mind to enjoy the courses presented to them, the actual drinking and eating could finally take place:<sup>82</sup> foodstuffs and beverages could vary from text to text, but were always characterized by abundance, variety and refinement, as suited to such noble diners. They sat on their golden thrones and used trays, cups and tools made of lapis lazuli and precious metals.<sup>83</sup>

In this phase, great stress was set on the flowing of beer, liquors and wine, both in terms of libations and especially of consumption, with the various vessels filled to the brim: this excessive consumption had as its

77 *Enki's Journey to Nippur*, lines 93-95; *Temple Hymns*, line 107; *Winter and Summer*, line 236.

78 *Winter and Summer*, line 237. For a presentation of the different percussion instruments, see Hartmann 1960. For the identification of *tigi*, see also Krispijn 1990, p. 3.

79 *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven*, Me-Turan version, Segment D, lines 5-6.

80 See Krispijn 1990, pp. 3-4.

81 The text is edited by Sefati 1998, pp. 132-150.

82 We have hints that a good, cheerful state of mind was essential for the performance of the banquet also from two examples belonging to the Hittite literature: in the *Hedammu* myth (5th episode, lines 2-10) and in the *Song of Ullikummi* (I lines 49-58; II lines 2-13) the gods (Ištar and the Sun God) refuse to sit at the table and share the food of their guests due to being still too scared and upset to accept the invitation. The two texts were published by Siegelová 1971; Güterbock 1951; and Güterbock 1952.

83 See the descriptions in the *Prayers of Diviners*, for example the text YBC 5023 lines 28, 37-38, 45-46: *bi-ri-im wa-ši-ib* <sup>GIS</sup>GU.ZA.MEŠ *hurāšim a-ki-il* <sup>GIS</sup>paššūr<sup>abau</sup>uqnim (edition by Goetze 1968); see also the similar text HSM 7494, line 18: *wa-ši-bu* <sup>GIS</sup>GU.ZA-a-at *hurāši a-ki-lu pa-aš-šu-ur uq-ni-im* (edition by Starr 1983). Other allusions can be found in *Lugal-e*, line 17; *Ištar Queen of Heaven*, line iv 65; *Enūma Eliš* VI, line 80.

immediate consequence the spread of cheerful feelings, which could be depicted through different images. The guests' hearts became elated,<sup>84</sup> they were made happy,<sup>85</sup> rejoiced,<sup>86</sup> were exultant,<sup>87</sup> gladdened and pleased,<sup>88</sup> filled with joy,<sup>89</sup> they felt good from drinking the beer,<sup>90</sup> their features beamed and their hearts were glad.<sup>91</sup>

All this positive energy could eventually end up, as anticipated before, in a competition that might assume the nature of a drinking one (*Lugal-e*),<sup>92</sup> a rhetorical and colloquial one, such as in all the Debates that have been fixed in a written form, or could also be more «practical», as in the case of the creation of the crippled men in *Enki and Ninmah*. There seems not to be any criticism for the excessive consumption of alcohol, except maybe for the account of *Inanna and Enki*, according to which the god bestowed the *me* on his daughter only because of his drunkenness. He realized what he had done only

kaš naĝ-ĝá-ra kaš naĝ-ĝá-ra kaš mu-un-ta-èd-da  
a-a <sup>d</sup>en-ki kaš naĝ-ĝá-ra kaš mu-un-[ta-éd-da]<sup>93</sup>

as the effects of the beer cleared from him who had drunk beer,  
from him who had drunk beer,  
as the effects of the beer cleared from father Enki  
who had d[run]k beer].

And yet, even in this case the situation could not be considered totally negative, since it had as a consequence the primacy of the city of Uruk and of its temple consecrated to the goddess Inanna – a decision that at

84 *Enki and Ninmah*, line 52: <sup>d</sup>en-ki-ke<sub>4</sub> <sup>d</sup>nin-maḥ-e kaš im-na<sub>8</sub>-na<sub>8</sub>-ne šag<sub>4</sub>-bi ul mu-un-te.

85 *Enki's Journey to Nippur*, line 116: <sup>d</sup>en-líl nibru<sup>ki</sup>-a ḥúl-la mu-ni-ib-de<sub>6</sub>.

86 *Nanna-Suen's Journey to Nippur*, line 319: <sup>d</sup>suen-ra <sup>d</sup>en-líl mu-un-da-ḥúl mí zid na-mu-un-ne.

87 *Lugalbanda and the Anzu bird*, line 98: anzud<sup>mušen</sup>-dè ní-bi silim-e-éš iri in-ga-àm-me.

88 *Dumuzi-Inanna C*, lines 30-31: ur<sub>5</sub>-re šag<sub>4</sub>-ga-ni ḥe-em-ḥúl-le | ur<sub>5</sub>-re šag<sub>4</sub>-ga-ni ḥé-em-sag<sub>9</sub>-ge.

89 *Enūma Eliš III*, line 131: im-lu-u [ḥi-du-ta].

90 *Enūma Eliš III*, line 136: ší-ik-ru ina šá-te-e ḥa-ba-šu zu-um-[ri].

91 *Ištar queen of heaven*, lines 68-70: li-[x]-x li<sup>2</sup>-in-na-ba-a-ma zi-m[u]-kun | li-li-iš l[ib-b] a-ku-nu-ma ri-iš-tú l[i-i]m-la | ri-i-ši <sup>9</sup>iš-tar l[i-i]ḥ-du-u AN x [x] KUR.

92 See lines 17-19: <sup>ḡ</sup>gu-za barag maḥ-e si-a-ni ní gal gùr-ru-ni | ezen ḡar-ra-ni ḥúl-la-na daĝal-bi tuš-a-ni | an <sup>d</sup>en-líl-da zag ša<sub>4</sub>-a-ni kurun dūg-ge-da-ni: «He (Ninurta) had taken his place on the throne, the august dais, and was sitting gladly at his ease at the festival celebrated in his honour, rivalling An and Enlil in drinking his fill».

93 *Inanna and Enki*, Segment F, lines 9-10.

the end of the text was officially accepted and ratified by the assembly of the gods, including Enki himself. Alster has identified an element of irony in the fact that in enumerating all the cultural norms that Inanna brought back to her capital, Isimud mentioned the preparation of beer at the end of the list, as if he wanted to make fun of the antecedent;<sup>94</sup> but even if there was sarcasm, there is no evident hint of blaming. The different kinds of beers, wine and liquors were not only drunk, but also (and at the same time) poured as libations, in a ceremonial activity that underlined the liturgical aspect of the whole circumstance.<sup>95</sup>

The last phase of the banquet was particularly important because in one way it justified the whole procedure. It was the final benediction or prayer recited usually for the organizer of the meal: this represented the whole point of the arrangement, and could develop in more concrete benefits such as the acceptance and the glorification of new temples (with the consequent offerings and gifts that were delivered there), or the assignment of a new personal status, or of a favourable destiny, or of particular physical abilities. One of the elements most stressed in the historical texts, the exchange of material gifts or tributes at the end of the feast (mostly oil, cloths and precious metals), is strangely almost totally absent in the literary sources. It is mentioned only in the debate *Winter and Summer*, according to which the second, being the loser,

kug-sig<sub>17</sub> kug-babbar za-gìn mu-un-na-ba-ba-e<sup>96</sup>

presents Winter with gold, silver and lapis lazuli.

Not only the manner according to which they were consumed, but also food and drink themselves have a symbolic role in literature: bread, water and beer were not just physical elements but were, instead, often charged with metaphorical meaning. It is therefore not unusual to find in the texts expressions which convey the sense of their being essential for the survival of one hero or another. The most well-known example is the poem of *Adapa*,<sup>97</sup> in which the protagonist was offered food and water

94 Alster 1974, p. 25.

95 See for example *Enki's Journey to Nippur*, line 114: kaš ba-dug<sub>4</sub> kúrun ba-dùg-ga-ta; and *Lugalbanda in the mountain cave*, lines 376-379, where it is specified that also water is libated: ġišbun ba-ni-in-ġar ne-saġ ba-ni-in-dé | kaš gíg kurun zíz babbar | ġeštín na<sub>8</sub>-na<sub>8</sub> gú-me-zé dùm-ga | edin-na a sed<sub>4</sub> ki-šè im-ma-ni-in-dé-dé.

96 *Winter and Summer*, line 313.

97 The last edition of the poem is available by Izre'el 2001.

of life, and refused, mistaking them for bread and water of death.<sup>98</sup> A better fate was assigned instead to Lugalbanda, who gained an almost miraculous recovery thanks to some special foodstuffs offered him by the gods:

kug lugal-bàn-da ħur-ru-um kur-ra-[ta] im-ma-da-ra-ta-é  
 ud-bi-a zid-du šag<sub>4</sub> kúš-ù <sup>d</sup>en-líl-lá-ka ú' nam-tíl-la i-im-tud  
 íd ħal-ħal-la ama ħur-saġ-ġá-ke<sub>4</sub> a nam-tíl-la im-tùm  
 ú nam-tíl-la-ka zú nam-mi-in-gub  
 a nam-tíl-la-ka UM nam-mi-in-rig<sub>7</sub>  
 ú nam-tíl-la-ka zú ħé-em-gub-bu-a-ka  
 a nam-tíl-la UM ħé-em-rig<sub>7</sub>-a-ka  
 gú-e-ta umbin 1(DIŠ)-a-ni ki mu-un-dab<sub>5</sub>-dab<sub>5</sub>  
 ki-bi-ta anše kur-kur-ra-gin<sub>7</sub> àm-GUL<sup>?</sup>-e<sup>99</sup>

Holy Lugalbanda came out from the mountain cave.  
 Then the righteous one who takes counsel with Enlil caused  
 life-saving plants to be born.  
 The rolling rivers, mothers of the hills, brought life-saving water.  
 He bit on the life-saving plants,  
 he sipped from the life-saving water.  
 After biting on the life-saving plants,  
 after sipping from the life-saving water,  
 here he on his own set a trap (?) in the ground,  
 and from that spot he sped away like a horse of the mountains.

Accepting any offerings or gifts, and sharing food and drink as well, meant, in the Mesopotamian conception and according to the rules of hospitality, creating a linkage with those who offered. If in *Adapa* bread and drink of heaven conferred immortality,<sup>100</sup> in *Nergal and Ereškigal* the situation was reversed, and the foodstuffs given by the queen of the Netherworld

98 *Adapa*, Fragment B, lines 61'-63': [a-k]a-al ba-la-ṭi | [i]l-qù-ni-šu-um-ma ú-ul i-k[u]-ul me-e ba-la-ṭi | [i]l-qù-ni-šu-um-ma ú-ul il[-ti].

99 *Lugalbanda in the mountain cave*, lines 264-272.

100 Food and drink in the poem of *Adapa* epitomize not just life, but specifically the eternal life peculiar to the gods. This profound meaning derives from the setting of the episode in which the offering to Adapa is made: even if bread and water symbolize the basic human necessities, when transferred to the celestial realm they gain even more value. The fact that Adapa does not accept them, but takes the other two gifts that are presented to him (garment and oil) highlights his liminal position between life and death, mortality and immortality. On the importance of the four elements offered to Adapa and their different handling, see also Liverani 2004a.

could only have death as a consequence.<sup>101</sup> It is therefore for this reason that Nergal was told by Ea not to accept any gift, rejecting also bread, meat, and beer (Late version, lines ii 41'-43'). It is also noteworthy to notice how Ereškigal offered his guest a kind of food which even she could not usually enjoy, as she complained in *Ištar's Descent*;<sup>102</sup> the usual food for those who resided in the Netherworld was in fact clay and dirty water. Reiner suggested that this «special treatment» represented an intentional attempt to bound Nergal for eternity. This hypothesis is also supported by the words of the mistress of the Netherworld:<sup>103</sup> having kept her guest in her realm for seven days, she affirms with a certain conviction that he will now accept her bread and her beer, symbols of his new status as member of the Netherworld.<sup>104</sup>

### 2.3 The Feeding of the Gods and the Divine Offerings

The daily cult in a Mesopotamian temple focused on the maintenance and care of the god or goddess who dwelt there: he (or she) was personified through a statue that epitomized his (her) figure, and that needed, therefore, every kind of attention to ensure a long-lasting survival of the temple itself and of the people that lived under its protection. However, the resident of each temple did not live alone. Like what happened probably in each Mesopotamian family (it is remarkable in this sense that there is not a Sumerian or Akkadian word that indicates specifically the temple, but the word for 'house' is always used, instead), the whole extended family convened around the head of the household, at the table - not only the wife, but also sons, daughters, and brothers, in a ceremony which saw the commitment of all the servants who worked for his (or her) well-being.

Every day, first-quality products of the fields and the herds administered under the temple and royal authority were delivered to temples, to accomplish different functions: some of them were explicitly meant to feed administrators, priests and workers of the structure, while others were destined to the gods' table. Extremely plentiful offerings were presented to the gods for their meal: the foodstuffs chosen were presented twice a

101 See also Reiner 1985, p. 52.

102 Edited by Borger 1994, vol. I, pp. 95-104. See esp. line 33: *ki-ma NINDA.MEŠ a-kal IM ki-ma KAŠ.MEŠ a-šat-t[i] A.MEŠ dal-ḥu-te*: «I eat clay for bread, I drink muddy water for beer».

103 See line iv 44'-45': *DUMU šip-ri šá a-nim AD-ni šá il-li-ka-na-a-ši | NINDA.HI.A-ni li-kul KAŠ.MEŠ-ni liš-ti*, «The messenger of Anu, our father, who came to us / may he eat our bread, may he drink our beer».

104 See also Walls 2001, p. 148.

day in the form of a ceremonial meal, and special ingredients were also used for these occasions, avoiding the cheapest, 'most popular' ones in favour of others, more exotic and expensive. The presence of food taboos and some strict regulations in the kind of food that could be considered suitable for the different deities is known and attested under different forms,<sup>105</sup> and yet there is no trace of them in the literary texts.<sup>106</sup>

This moment was so important for the life of the ancient temples, and so constitutive of the whole conception of Mesopotamian religion, that some of the religious buildings themselves were defined, in the collection of the *Temple Hymns*, as «great banqueting hall»,<sup>107</sup> «container feeding all lands»,<sup>108</sup> «great libation pipe»,<sup>109</sup> «mighty banqueting hall»,<sup>110</sup> «place where the great gods dine».<sup>111</sup>

The fact that mankind had been created by the gods only to serve them and endow them with all they needed to have the most comfortable and carefree life possible (including, therefore, also abundant food and drink) is a well-known concept of the Mesopotamian religion. As it has been already pointed out,<sup>112</sup> three are the myths that most clearly support this argument. The first are *Enki and Ninmah* and *Atrahasis*,<sup>113</sup> with their similar description, at the beginning of the narration, of the complaints and rebellion of younger gods, forced to toil in order to provide food for the whole divine family, and the consequent resolution of giving birth to a new species, mankind, that will carry that burden. In the *Enūma Eliš* epic instead, this *topos* is presented at the end of the story, when Marduk -hav-

**105** The most well-known is the Late-Babylonian text which lists the daily offerings for the temple of Anu in Uruk (AO 6451), published by Thureau-Dangin 1921, pp. 74-86; see also the Ur III name of the sanctuary of Ninurta at Nippur é-ku<sub>6</sub>-nu-gu<sub>7</sub>, «House where fish is not eaten»: George 1993, p. 115, n. 669.

**106** The only trace of these taboos is in *The marriage of Martu* myth, line 128: here, the god is, in fact, described as one that «eats what Nanna forbids», an-zil gu<sub>7</sub>, <sup>d</sup>nanna-[kam]. This exception, however, does not provide any other indication, since the references to truffles and raw flesh in the following lines indicate a condition of 'barbarousness' and are not related to this concept of taboo. A revised edition of the text was published by Klein 1997b.

**107** *Temple Hymns*, line 2: unu<sub>6</sub> gal.

**108** *Temple Hymns*, line 104: pišaĝ gu, kur-kur-ra.

**109** *Temple Hymns*, line 179: a-pap gal.

**110** *Temple Hymns*, line 304: únu uru<sub>16</sub>.

**111** *Temple Hymns*, line 384: ki ninda gu, diĝir gal-gal-e-ne. Beside this list, further proof is the existence in Uruk of a temple named é-sù-sù-ĝar-ra, «House where meals are set out» (see George 1993, p. 142, n. 1001).

**112** See Lambert 1993 and Maul 2008.

**113** For an edition of this poem, see Lambert, Millard 1999. For a discussion about the definition to assign to its genre ('epic', 'myth', or 'mythos'), see also Shehata 2001, p. 1.

ing defeated Tiamat and the other rebellious gods – created men, with the assignment of provisioning the shrines of the gods. From these texts it seems, thus, that since the very moment of its creation, mankind had already all the knowledge, skills and tools it needed to fulfil its duty.

A rather different version of the story can be found, instead, in the Sumerian debate between *Ewe and Wheat*. In the opening scene, when the primeval world is presented, gods and men seem to coexist, but

nam-lú-ùlu ud re-a-ke<sub>4</sub>-ne  
 ninda gu<sub>7</sub>-ù-bi nu-mu-un-zu-uš-àm  
 túg-ga mu<sub>4</sub>-mu<sub>4</sub>-bi nu-mu-un-zu-uš-àm  
 kalam ġiš-ġen<sub>6</sub>-na su-bi mu-un-ġen  
 udu-ġin<sub>7</sub> ka-ba ú mu-ni-ib-ġu<sub>7</sub>  
 a mú-sar-ra-ka i-im-na<sub>8</sub>-na<sub>8</sub>-ne<sup>114</sup>

The people of those days  
 did not know about eating bread.  
 They did not know about wearing clothes,  
 they went about with naked limbs in the land.  
 Like sheep, they ate grass with their mouths  
 and drank water from the ditches.

They were apparently incapable of being of any use to the divine creatures. We do not find here a description of the hard work of the gods as in the three myths mentioned before, but there is a synthetic statement that they could not be satiated with the by-products of the sheep and grain that were available to them, and for this reason decided to hand over farming and breeding to the men, for the sustenance of both the terrestrial and the celestial species. Even if the story did not correspond precisely to the same cultural stream as the *Enki and Ninmah*, *Atrahasis* and *Enūma Eliš*, the underlying concept was exactly the same.

This presupposition also implied that, from the moment of the creation of mankind onwards, the gods were totally reliant on humans. Their destruction would have meant a return to the original, hard-working situation that was simply unconceivable. An example of this is traceable once again in the *Atrahasis* narrative: with the sending of the flood and the annihilation of humans, with all the earth covered with water and no possibility of working the fields or breeding animals, the deities sat in thirst and hunger, «their lips were agonized with thirst, they were suffering cramps from

114 *Ewe and Wheat*, lines 20-25.

hunger». <sup>115</sup> This explains also the unusual, unseemly reaction they had on the occasion of the first offering presented after the Deluge: attracted by the smell of the burned offerings, they gathered around them «like flies», <sup>116</sup> in an attitude that was thus very far-away from the composed, ceremonial divine banquets usually described and that was, in this case, motivated by the situation of extreme emergency. It is evident therefore that men and divinities were intermingled, complementary beings, as the proverbial sentence states «a man without a god obtains no food». <sup>117</sup>

Being divine creatures, gods were not content with normal, everyday ingredients served in an ordinary way: they expected proper banquets, suitable to their rank. Mesopotamian men were well aware of that, having in mind the descriptions of the ceremonial meals reported in literary texts: their deities must have been supplied with golden thrones, lapis lazuli trays, silver cups, and the most delicious dishes. Even though in the Sumerian and Akkadian religion there was no such thing as the Hebrew idea of a Kosher killing, <sup>118</sup> in literature there are some allusions to the fact that the offered meat must have been pure and of the best quality, in order to be accepted by the supernatural beings.

In *Lugalbanda in the mountain cave*, the highest deities of the Sumerian pantheon physically partook of the flesh of the animals at the sacred meal convoked by the hero in their honour, after his recovering. But before accepting to sit at his table, they sent him, in a dream, the instructions for an appropriate slaughtering – indications that are carried out to the letter by Lugalbanda at his awakening:

ḏlugal-bàn-da i-im-zìg ma-mú-da im-bu-lu<sup>1</sup>-ùḥ ù-sá-ga-àm  
 igi-ni šu bí-in-kíḡ níḡ-me-ḡar suḡ<sub>4</sub>-ga-àm  
<sup>urud</sup>ḥa-zi-in-na-ni kug-bi nagga šu im-ma-an-ti

**115** See *Atrahasis* III, lines iv 21-23: *ša-mi-a ša-ap-ta-šu-nu bu-ul-ḥi-ta | 'i-na' bu-bu-ti | i-ta-na-ar-ra-ar-ru*.

**116** The passage is quoted almost literally both in *Atrahasis* III, lines v 34-35 and in *Gilgamesh* XI, lines 161-163, from which I report the transliteration since the text is better preserved: DINGIR.MEŠ *i-ši-nu i-ri-šá* | DINGIR.MEŠ *i-ši-nu i-ri-šá* DUG<sub>3</sub>.[GA] | DINGIR.MEŠ *ki-ma zu-um-bé-e* UGU EN SÍSKUR *ip-taḥ-ru*. For the latest edition of the *Gilgamesh* epic, see George 2003.

**117** This is a quotation from the Sumerian poem *Man and His God*, line 9: *lú-ùlu diḡir-da nu-me-a ú-gu, la-ba-ak-e* (see the online edition from etcs1). An expanded and more elaborated transposition of the same concept is present in the text UET 6/2 251= 255, for which see the edition by Edzard, Wilcke 1974-1977 and the translation and comment by Klein 1982, in particular fn. 34. This scene finds a parallel in the Biblical account of the Flood, and in particular in Gn 8, 20-22: in both these textual sources, there is a clear connection between the fragrant offers smelled by a divine entity, and the consequent safety of humankind.

**118** See Lambert 1993, pp. 193-194.



ġíri úr-ra-ka-ni an-bar-sug<sub>4</sub>-àm im-ma-da-MÚŠ<sup>?</sup>  
 am su<sub>4</sub> am kur-ra-ke<sub>4</sub> lú-ġéšpu-ġin<sub>7</sub> im-ma-DU.DU  
 lú-lirum-ma-ġin<sub>7</sub> im-ma-šġ-gam  
 lipiš-bi im-ta-an-zġg <sup>d</sup>utu è-a-ra mu-na-an-ġar  
 máš su<sub>4</sub> máš-ud<sub>5</sub> máš 2-a-bi saġ-du-bi še-ġin<sub>7</sub> im-ta-an-dub  
 úš-bi si-dug<sub>4</sub>-ga im-ma-ni-in-dé-dé  
 ir-bi edin-na DU.DU-a-bi<sup>119</sup>

Lugalbanda awoke, it was a dream. He shivered, it was sleep.  
 He rubbed his eyes, he was overawed.  
 He took his axe whose metal was tin,  
 he wielded his dagger which was of iron.  
 Like an athlete he brought away the brown wild bull,  
 the wild bull of the mountains, like a wrestler he made it submit.  
 Its strength left it. He offered it before the rising sun.  
 He heaped up like barleycorns the heads of the brown goat and the  
 buck-goat, both of the goats.  
 He poured out their blood in the pit  
 so that their smell wafted out in the desert.

Presumably, then, it was this particular performing of the butchering that made the consumption of the meat possible: Hallo saw in this scene the aetiology of both the sacrificial cult and of meat-eating, «that explains its origins as derived from the straits in which Lugalbanda finds himself, thus replacing a prior, vegetarian order of things». <sup>120</sup>

In the other epic concerning the same hero, in his first speech, while thinking about the banquet he wanted to organize, he underlined only the presence of beer (through its divine personification Ninkasi) – most likely, because this was the crucial component to get what he wanted. From the beginning, in fact, his purpose and what he wanted to gain from his actions were explicitly mentioned:

mušen kaš naġ-ġá ul ti-a  
 anzud<sup>mušen</sup> kaš naġ-ġá ul ti-a  
 ki unuġ<sup>ki</sup> ba-ġen-na ġa-ma-an-pàd-dè  
 anzud<sup>mušen</sup>-dè ġar-ra-an šeš-ġu<sub>10</sub>-ne-ka  
 ġé-em-mi-ib-sig<sub>10</sub>-sig<sub>10</sub>-ġe<sup>121</sup>

When the bird has drunk the beer and is happy,

119 *Lugalbanda in the mountain cave*, lines 361-369.

120 See Hallo 1987.

121 *Lugalbanda and the Anzu bird*, lines 24-27.

when Anzu has drunk the beer and is happy,  
 he can help me find the place to which the troops of Unug are going,  
 Anzu can put me on the track of my brothers.

Actually, after the creation of all these expectations with an insistence on the topic of the feast, the banquet did not even take place. It was enough for Lugalbanda to act as a provider and care-giver toward the nestling of Anzu, to provide meat and cakes, to decorate the chick's head with kohl and cedar. Just by seeing these arrangements, without even tasting the meat or drinking the beer, the supernatural bird declared his willingness to «fix the fate» of whoever had been responsible for them.

## 2.4 Travelling Gods

Divine statues were usually firmly fixed in place, inside temples. Sometimes, however, and in particular during festive times, these images took part in ceremonial processions, showing themselves to all the population convened to attend the event. Because of this public character, and due to their theological and political meanings, these processions constituted the apex of festivities, the most public and most spectacular moment. The participation of the gods themselves, accompanied by the king, the priests, and all the high officers of both religious and royal administrations resulted in an extraordinary event where people of all social classes could take part, just by being present there.

Being such a meaningful moment for the religious life of the cities of all the State, different kinds of texts recorded these occasions and the various aspects involved in processions. Administrative records and letters listed offerings presented at the different stations of the journey, reports to the king described how the ceremony was getting along, ritual texts indicated the procedures to obey for each of their moments, and, finally, literary texts, thanks to their descriptive nature, help us to understand the reasons that led deities (and humans) to undertake such a journey. Even if they cannot be considered prescriptive, these stories must be considered as «anchored in a way or another to within a ritual framework».<sup>122</sup>

The motif of the 'travelling god', which included also a sumptuous banquet at the end of the journey, is present only in Sumerian literary texts: there is no known example in the later Akkadian production. There are no doubts that this religious tradition was still spread all over the Mesopotamian country, also in the second and first millennium: we have clear evidence from the royal correspondence and administrative texts,

122 This expression was used by Pongratz-Leisten 2006-2008, p. 100.

as well – but scholars decided not to transpose it in a literary style. The reason for this choice is not clear, but maybe these texts had ceased to fulfil their task, if, as has been suggested by Pongratz-Leisten, while describing and defining hierarchies within the pantheon, their ultimate aim was to mirror political contacts or dependencies within the system of the Sumerian city-states.

The motif of the divine journey, in fact, had as one of its central themes the pilgrimage undertaken by a deity to a cultic centre outside his/her own district, to pay homage to a ‘colleague’ of higher rank. The reason for the procession was mainly linked to the awarding of a favourable destiny for him/herself, or for a newly-built temple. This good fate was obtained through a benediction, that usually followed the presentation of offerings and a rich ceremonial meal held in the house of the patron of the main religious centre<sup>123</sup> – texts about divine journeys as a rule start or end with a hymn to, or about, a god. Among texts belonging to this category, three in particular explicitly mention the common consumption of food in a ceremonial setting (*Enki’s Journey to Nippur*, *Inanna and Enki*, *Nanna-Suen’s Journey to Nippur*); one, although less detailed, is quite clear;<sup>124</sup> and the other two are rather fragmentary, but certainly contained allusions to offerings and eating (*Pabilsaĝ’s journey to Nippur*,<sup>125</sup> *Ninisina’s journey to Nippur*<sup>126</sup>). It is clear therefore that the banquet was a focal moment of the whole literary journey, as well as of the actual religious procession (we must assume, if as we said before these texts are to be read in the context of a ritualized frame).

In Enki’s journey, the god ‘provided a meal’ for his father Enlil (literally, he «made his father Enlil eat bread»<sup>127</sup>); later on, the text depicts the gods while drinking beer and liquor: thus we have a synecdoche which included the mention of the two essential elements of a banquet. The ultimate goal of this trip was the request of an official benediction and approval for Enki’s new temple that had been, in any case, already built: what the god needed was the turning of «un simple état de fait en état de droit». <sup>128</sup> That is the reason why Enki had to appeal to the ‘family council’, to submit a ‘family affair’ – that is how Bottéro considers the divine ban-

123 For a general introduction on this type of literary texts, see Ferrara 1973.

124 *Ninurta’s Journey to Eridu*, Segment B, line 6: <sup>d</sup>nin-urta eridug<sup>ki</sup>-ga kur<sub>9</sub>-ra-ni ud ḥé-ġál-àm ḡi<sub>6</sub> ġiri<sub>17</sub>-zal-àm, «when Ninurta arrived at Eridu, the day was spent in abundance and the night in celebration».

125 The text is still unpublished; for a transliteration and translation, see the etcscl website. A schematic summary was presented by Al-Fouadi 1969, pp. 42-47.

126 See Cohen 1975, esp. pp. 609-611.

127 *Enki’s Journey to Nippur*, line 105: a-a-ni <sup>d</sup>en-líl-ra ninda mu-un-gu<sub>7</sub>-e.

128 Bottéro 1994, line 6.

quet: an «affaire de famille». It must be stressed that Enki behaved like a perfect guest at Enlil's place: he provided foodstuffs, supervised sacrifices, personally got the best beer and liquors, decided where each god must sit, and seemed to be the main organizer of the situation, even if the text alludes to some kind of servants or waiters who assisted the celebrations, by filling the vessels «to the brim».<sup>129</sup> The meal was brightened by musical instruments (drums) and, mostly thanks to the 'help' of different kinds of beer, the gods started a competition as a form of entertainment. After all these efforts, «Enlil was made happy in Nippur» and Enki finally obtained the benediction he was looking for.

In the long description of the boat-trip undertaken by Nanna-Suen to reach Nippur, it is possible to reconstruct with precision all the itinerary and the various stops made by the god to reach his destination. Not only Nanna-Suen brought some gifts himself, enumerated in a long list which included livestock, wild animals, birds, fishes, assorted sweets and delicacies (lines 157-197): he also collected some more during the five ceremonial stops before the arrival in Nippur. Differently from what happened with Enki, in this case it was the resident of the main cultic centre, Enlil, who ordered him to offer a banquet for his son – apparently without using all the foodstuffs offered by Nanna-Suen, but rather bringing out from the Ekur the choicest bread, sweet cakes, beer and syrup, that were most likely preserved for very special occasions such as the one depicted in the text. The *leitmotif* of this story seem to be the concept of abundance:<sup>130</sup> from the insistence on the richness and variety of offerings and gifts collected and presented to Enlil, to the explicit request of Nanna-Suen after the meal (lines 331-339), the reason for this journey was clearly to gain the certainty of a prosperous, fertile year. This is an absolutely plausible setting also for a real procession of the statue of the god through the same lands he was going to ask prosperity for.

A similar frame is detectable also for two other texts: the unpublished Pabilsaĝ's journey seems to focus on the project of the excavation of a channel in Isin that was fundamental for the agriculture of the city; in Ninurta's journey, on the other hand, the first lines (8-28) show how the god decided to travel and pay tribute to his father in order to make him «determine a destiny of abundance». This text also shares some contents with the one that will be discussed next, in the presentation of the quest undertaken by a divinity for the *me*.

*Inanna and Enki* is clearly an aetiological myth, whose intent was to explain the leading role of the city of Uruk both on political and religious

129 This is the interpretation of the text by Al-Fouadi 1969, line 64.

130 Ferrara 1973, p. 7.

grounds.<sup>131</sup> It has been studied and considered fundamental mostly because of the detailed presentation of the *me*, which can provide a lot of information about Sumerian cultural life and way of thinking.<sup>132</sup> But it must also be stressed that, even if this text is not usually labelled as a ‘divine journey’, its first part (although preserved in a fragmentary condition) follows exactly the same phases as the texts presented before: it opens with a celebration of the goddess who decided to start the trip, and then it includes the approach to Eridu (whose description is lost). Afterwards, the arrival is described, with the preparations made by the «master of the house», Enlil; the offering of a meal at the holy table of An followed, which included butter cake, refreshing water, beer, and the joyous drinking which ended up with a competition (with the use of the same expression used also for the banquet mentioned in *Enki’s Journey to Nippur*).<sup>133</sup>

Glassner suggested that this competitive moment was essential for the hospitality rules of the Mesopotamian world, together with the eating and drinking of bread and beer as symbols of culture (because of their requiring the use of advanced skills for baking and fermenting raw materials), and defined it as a «competition normée».<sup>134</sup> It is certain, however, that the consequences of excessive drinking were not related to the competition itself, nor did the situation get out of hand or become aggressive: up to this moment we can read it, thus, as the description of a cheerful, ‘usual’ welcoming-banquet.

A particular interpretation of the motif of the ‘travelling god’ is provided by the myth of *Ninĝišzida’s Journey to the Netherworld*.<sup>135</sup> Even if in this case we do not find one of the typical destinations, and the topic is revised in a mythical form to justify the task of Ninĝišzida as the throne-bearer of the Netherworld, the text keeps the main features of a typical journey of a god. The divinity, in fact, travelled by boat, was welcomed by music, joy and prayers, bathed and got ready for the meal, sat on the throne and then, finally:

niĝ-gu<sub>7</sub> ka-a mi-ni-in-tukur<sub>x</sub> (KA) tin suĥ<sub>5</sub>-bi ì-naĝ<sup>136</sup>

he ate food in his mouth, he drank choicest wine.

131 Kramer, Maier 1989, p. 15.

132 See, for example, the main edition by Farber-Flügge 1973, and Glassner 1992.

133 More precisely, *Inanna and Enki*, Segment C, lines 29-30 = *Enki’s Journey to Nippur*, lines 111-112.

134 Glassner 1992, p. 78. See also Glassner 1990.

135 For the edition of this text, see Jacobsen, Alster 2000.

136 *Ninĝišzida’s journey to the Netherworld*, line 90.

We have here, then, an example of an intentional re-interpretation of a *topos* that was renowned within the circle of Mesopotamian scholars: the setting was changed from a real, geographical one (Nippur, Eridu) to the Netherworld, and the new text was patterned on material belonging to other cycles,<sup>137</sup> but in so doing it was also decided to maintain the basic literary structure normally used for all the other divine journeys.

## 2.5 The Gods' Assembly and the Decision-Making Council

Two motifs are apparently poles apart, but as a matter of fact are, instead, strictly connected to each other: one is the description of banquets that seem to have no other reason than the simple reunion of members of a family or group with the consequent strengthening of social links between them – the other is the feast whose primary or unique evident target is to unite all those who have the right to speak, for a critical decision procedure. The reason why these two representations of banquets are not so far apart, is that the ones belonging to the first group were crucial to the maintaining of social cohesion and of the feelings of belonging to the same cultural, ethnic, or familiar group, that were necessary to obtain a constructive discussion and a successful outcome on occasion of the 'decision-making' meals. Even when there was no great conversation around the table, what was important was just being there, having a place with the others, and partaking of the same food and beer.<sup>138</sup>

For this reason, the banquet described in the opening of the poem *Nergal and Ereškigal* must be considered, as Bottéro<sup>139</sup> and Saporetti<sup>140</sup> suggested, a regular, periodic meeting within the family of the gods and not, as Pettinato declared, an extraordinary occurrence.<sup>141</sup> And yet, nothing inside the text clearly suggests a possible transposition on a divine level of the monthly ceremonial of the *kispu*, as Bottéro stated. He theorized that to the images of men, who met once a month to celebrate their 'blood solidarity' with dead relatives, corresponded the ones of the gods who met on a regular basis. The banquet was held where the divine community lived, that is, in heaven, but this meant that Ereškigal, like the dead people of the earthly *kispu*, could not be physically present at the meal and had,

137 See Jacobsen, Alster 2000, pp. 317-318.

138 It is significant in this sense that the same root of the Akkadian word for 'assembly', *puḫru*, also appears in Syriac, *puḫrā*, with the meaning 'banquet, mess, company'.

139 Bottéro, Kramer 1989, p. 456.

140 Saporetti 2003, p. 11.

141 See Pettinato 2000, p. 66.

therefore, to send a substitute, Namtar. It must be stressed, however, that though I agree with the regular character of this ceremony, the only references to monthly meetings (the main argument of the theory proposed by the French scholar) can be found exclusively in the Middle Babylonian version, in broken context (as in line 40) or in passages that allude generically to the past (lines 58 and 87). Also the simile of Ereškigal likened to the spirits of the dead family members, and for this reason unable to reach her 'brothers' in heaven, does not seem convincing.<sup>142</sup>

The poem usually most considered when it comes to the matter of a banquet as an assembly of gods is the *Enūma Eliš*: in this literary composition, a ceremonial meal appears twice within the story. In the third tablet, the divine council is convened according to the request of Anšar, who also decides the procedures to follow - most likely, according to the usual rules of behaviour and social customs. The announcement of this meal was repeated many times in the speeches of Anšar and of his vizier Kakka before the banquet itself actually took place, and even if the moments immediately before are apparently characterized by panic and fear, the meal seems instead to be filled with joy, pleasant conversations, and the enjoyment of food and liquors ever since its first instants.<sup>143</sup> If seven lines of the poem are devoted to the description of the feast, only at the end of the table, summarized in one single line, the final resolution of the assembly that actually convened for that very specific reason is reported. Only when the gods felt «most carefree, their spirit rose» (because of the influence of alcohol), free from the fear they felt before, they finally decided to assign special authority to Marduk, in the war against their enemies. The text, then, reads as follows:

[i]š-mu-ma ʿlāḥ-ḥa ʿla-ḥa-mu is-su-ú e-li-tum  
 ʿí-gì-gì nap-ḥar-šú-nu i-nu-qu mar-ši-iš  
 mi-na-a nak-ra a-di ir-šu-ú ši-bi-it ʿ[<sub>4</sub>e-mi šu-a-t]i  
 la ni-i-di ni-i-ni šá ti-amat e-pi[š-ta-šá]  
 ig-gar-šu-nim-ma il-la-[ku-ni]

**142** That communication between heaven and Netherworld was possible is testified also by the role played in the *Adapa* myth by three gods with strongly chtonic features: Ilbrat, Dumuzi, and Ninġišzida, presented respectively as Anu's minister (the first) and as standing at Anu's gate. Moreover, in the myth of *Nergal and Ereškigal* itself, another chtonic god, Namtar, is allowed to reach the divine realm to take part in the banquet.

**143** Note, in this case, the difference between this case and the two episodes of Hittite literature presented above in section 2.2 of this chapter, where fright prevented the gods from taking part in the meal. We must stress, however, that the different divine reactions had to do with the different kind of banquets that were held: in the *Enūma Eliš*, the festive meal represented the constituent form of the divine assembly where everyone had to sit and express his/her judgement, while in the Hittite texts gods were invited for no other apparent reason than to celebrate, an activity they no longer felt inclined to do.

DINGIR.DINGIR GAL.GAL *ka-li-šú-nu mu-ši-mu* [NAM.MEŠ]  
*i-ru-bu-ma mut-ti-iš* AN.ŠÁR *im-lu-u* [hi-du-ta]  
*in-naš-qu šeš-u a-ḫi ina pu-uḫ-ri i[n-nen-du]*  
*li-šá-nu iš-ku-nu ina qé-re-e-ti* [uš-bu]  
*áš-na-an i-ku-lu ip-ti-qu ku-r[u-un-nu]*  
*ši-ri-sa mat-qu ú-sa-an-ni-nu ra-ṭi-šu-[un]*  
*ši-ik-ru ina šá-te-e ḫa-ba-ṣu zu-um-[ri]*  
*ma-a'-diš e-gu-ú ka-bat-ta-šú-un i-te-el-[liš]*  
*a-na* <sup>d</sup>AMAR.UTU *mu-tir gi-mil-li-šú-nu i-ši-mu šim-[ta]*<sup>144</sup>

When Lahmu and Lahamu heard, they cried aloud,  
 all the Igigi-gods cried bitterly,  
 «What was wrong, that [she] has taken action against us?  
 We do not know, what Tiamat d[oes]!»  
 Then they got up and we[nt],  
 all the great gods, ordainer of the [destinies]  
 came before Anšar and were filled with [joy].  
 They kissed each other, in the assembly they [hugged each other],  
 they conversed, [sat down] at a banquet,  
 they ate grain, drank b[eer],  
 they poured the sweet liquor down the[ir] throats.  
 When they felt go[od] from drinking the beer,  
 most carefree, their spirits ro[se],  
 to Marduk, their champion, they ordained desti[ny].

The second banquet of the poem is presented in the sixth table, but within a completely different context. In this case, in fact, the reason for reuniting all the members of the divine community was the celebration of the construction of the new temple in honour of the young, victorious god – for this reason, the occasion will be reviewed in the next paragraph. Nevertheless, it is useful to remember here that also on that occasion (as in many of the examples presented in this chapter), another important decision was made after the celebration: the raising of Marduk to the head of the family council, and consequently of the whole Babylonian pantheon.

The general atmosphere of these banquets was, clearly, «délibérative et festive».<sup>145</sup> we can conclude that every important decision made by the Mesopotamian gods originated in (or after) the moment when they were holding, or better emptying, their cups. Fears and worries vanished, and

144 *Enūma Eliš* III, lines 125-128.

145 Bottéro, Kramer 1989, p. 660.



they were finally in the right mood for facing serious questions.<sup>146</sup> The close relation between eating and assigning destinies can also be found in the anthology of the *Temple Hymns*, where the city of Isin was described as:

barag-sig<sub>9</sub>-ga <sup>d</sup>en-líl-le ki áj  
 ki nam tar-re an <sup>d</sup>en-líl-lá  
 ki ninda gu<sub>7</sub>, diġir gal-gal-e-ne<sup>147</sup>

Shrine which Enlil loves,  
 place where An and Enlil determine destinies,  
 place where the great gods dine.

There is therefore an immediate combination of these two moments, and one more reference to the Anunnaki attending their great «drinking bouts» appears two lines later (386). In the case of *Lugalbanda and the Anzu bird*, the banquet which aimed at getting a favourable fate diverged from ceremonies in the temple, since it took place outside the sanctuary complex, and yet directly within the realm of the gods.<sup>148</sup>

In the poem *Ninurta's exploits: a šir-sud to Ninurta*<sup>149</sup> (more often called *Lugal-e*), an introductory section<sup>150</sup> set the scene at a feast held in Ninurta's honour, at which his wife, Bau, together with An and Enlil, were also present. In this passage, we found all the components of a decision-making meal that we mentioned before: the celebrated god took place on his throne rejoicing, sitting at ease, «rivalling An and Enlil in drinking his fill», while Bau was offering petitions «for the king» and Ninurta was making decisions.<sup>151</sup>

**146** See also Jacobsen 1970, p. 165: «Wine and beer were evidently necessary to lift the spirit out of the humdrum existence of everyday cares to original thought and perspective». An interesting echo of this practice can be found in the *Histories* of Herodotus: referring to a Persian custom, he reported that «it is their custom to deliberate about the most important issues when they are drunk. What they approve in their deliberations is proposed to them the next day, when they are sober, by the master of the house where they deliberate; and if, being sober, they still approve it, they adopt it, but if not, they drop it. And if they have deliberated about a matter when sober, they decide upon it when they are drunk» (I, 133). Even if the historical period described by Herodotus is far from the time of our literary texts, this passage strongly reminds the descriptions of decision-making assemblies about which we read in the Mesopotamian sources.

**147** *Temple Hymns*, lines 382-384.

**148** For an exhaustive, detailed study on the ceremonies connected with the assignment of destinies, see Polonsky 2002.

**149** Van Dijk 1983.

**150** Corresponding to the lines 1-21 of the text.

**151** *Lugal-e*, lines 17-20: <sup>š</sup>gu-za barag maḥ-e si-a-ni ní gal gùr-ru-ni | ezen ġar-ra-ni ḥúl-la-na daġal-bi tuš-a-ni | an <sup>d</sup>en-líl-da zag ša<sub>4</sub>-a-ni kurun dùg-ge-da-ni | <sup>d</sup>ba-ú a-ra-zu lugal-la-ka ù-gul ġá-ġá-da-ni.

The allusion to a king for whom the divine spouse pronounced prayers is interesting, because it places the whole following document not only within a ritual, but also in a historical context. The name of the king was not explicitly mentioned, but it must have been obvious for the audience present at the performance of the text, and that most probably included also the ruler himself. To the listeners, the religious celebration described in these first lines was, thanks to this literary device, firmly anchored to a well-defined celebration taking place in a real, known place but at the same time, with the continuation of the story, projected into a mythical frame. The narration was, then, 'historicized', and could also justify the authority and power of the present king – especially if we conjecture a reading of this text on an annual basis on the occasion of the religious festival, within a setting similar to the one usually pictured for the *Enūma Eliš*.<sup>152</sup>

The divine banquet was the place where gods gathered in both these compositions, and where they spent their time cheerfully but at the same time always with the awareness of the decisions that had to be made; the banquet scene in *Enūma Eliš* was, nevertheless, not so strongly inserted within a ritual frame as the banquet of *Lugal-e*. Here, the switch from ritual to myth (with the arrival of the messenger who tells about the birth of Asakku, line 22) occurred without gaps and, moreover, the historical event was always present, not only in the allusion to the living king as has been said before, but also in the allusion to the actual occasion.

The divine assembly could also assume the nature of a judicial council: in prayers recited by the diviners, for example, gods were invited to descend from the sky, take place on their thrones of gold, eat, and only after these actions were they asked to pronounce their sentence, that was transmitted to men by writing it inside the entrails of the sacrificed animals.<sup>153</sup> There was, in this case, a clear reference to the scenes of the actual judicial assemblies, with a remarkable interplay between celestial and terrestrial roles.<sup>154</sup> The divine models, in fact, could be mirrored in human society, with men shaping their actions on the basis of their celestial examples. Meals were, thus, a decision-making moment also for mankind, as was described in *Gilgameš and the Bull of Heaven*: in this poem, the singer employed to delight the king's banquet, Lugalgabaġal, played an important role in trying to open Gilgameš's eyes, explaining to him the danger constituted by the monster sent by Ištar to the earth. Even if it seems initially that the ruler did not pay attention, asking in-

152 This hypothesis was advanced by Van Dijk 1983, p. 8.

153 See Lämmerhirt, Zgoll 2009-2011, pp. 150-151.

154 For a closer examination of the role of diviners and of the comparison between divine and human judicial council, see Starr 1983, p. 57.

stead for more music, food and beer, as a matter of fact after the banquet he decided to move against the creature: as in the Mesopotamian tradition, this important resolution was made only after the consumption of an abundant meal, and in particular after the drinking vessels had been emptied.

A specular narration is presented in the short poem *Gudam and the Bull of Heaven*.<sup>155</sup> The name of the singer here is the same as the one in the Sumerian story of Gilgameš, and the similarities are so many and so striking that Alster suggested that the tale was coined as a variant of an episode of the more renowned composition. Within the context of a banquet or a religious festival held probably in Uruk, the protagonist went against the moral rules and plundered the storehouses of the city. At this critical point, the singer directed a warning and a threat to him:

ì-gu<sub>7</sub>-a-zu  
 ninda nu-e-gu<sub>7</sub>-e uzu-zu-um mi-né-gu<sub>7</sub>  
 ì-nag-a-zu ì-nag-a-zu  
 kaš nu-e-nag úš<sub>2</sub>-zu-um mi-né-nag<sup>156</sup>

«Whatever you have eaten,  
 it is no bread that you have eaten - it is your (own) flesh  
 that you have eaten!  
 Whatever you have drunk - whatever you have drunk,  
 it is no beer that you have drunk - it is your (own) blood  
 that you have drunk!»

A banquet given outside the accepted social and religious customs could, clearly, revolt against the host, since it caused the fury of the divinities. Both publishers of these two texts suggested that they were conceived to be performed during a common meal. Cavigneaux explained this hypothesis on the basis of the literary characteristics of *Gilgameš and the Bull of Heaven*: the hymnic form, together with its comic and grotesque humour that seemed to be more stressed than its mythological connotations, led the author to suppose a recitation during «quelque banquet formidable» in a royal court.<sup>157</sup> Alster explicitly stated that, from his point of view, the tale of Gudam was composed for a banquet, using old motifs from the ancient and most renowned myth: the audience knew the original story and therefore appreciated the new one as a *thema con variationi*.<sup>158</sup> This

155 Alster 2004.

156 *Gudam and the Bull of Heaven*, lines 16-19.

157 Cavigneaux, Al-Rawi 1993a, p. 100.

158 Alster 2004, p. 35.

theory is perfectly shareable, also on the basis of the relative brevity of the texts and of the allusions to banquets within them, which ‘play’ on the actual setting of the performance, as happened also in the disputations discussed above.

## 2.6 Celebration of a Success or of an Enterprise

The best way to celebrate the successful conclusion of a common effort, to underline particularly meaningful moments for those who belonged to the same social group, or also to be thankful and pay homage to a superior being who helped in solving critical situations, was to organize a rich banquet and sit at the same table. There, thanks to the good taste of food, beer and wine, the joy of finding themselves in a better situation than the one experienced before increased the joy of sharing it with brothers, colleagues and benefactors.

The first reason in history for a divine feasting was the creation of mankind. In *Enki and Ninmah*, which is (according to Klein), the earliest composition dealing with this motif,<sup>159</sup> after this undertaking, Enki set a meal for his mother Namma and for Ninmah, who gave birth to mankind. The whole family of the gods took part in the lavish meal – and all the ‘senior gods’ ended up praising him and confirming his role at the top as a father.

<sup>d</sup>en-ki-ke<sub>4</sub> kíĝ ni<sub>10</sub>-ni<sub>10</sub>-da [X] mi-ni-in-lá šag<sub>4</sub>-bi ba-ĥúł  
 ama-ni <sup>d</sup>namma <sup>d</sup>nin-maĥ-šè ĝišbun na-àm-ma-ni-in-ĝar  
 gú SIG<sub>7</sub>-EN SIG<sub>7</sub>-ĤI nun-ne-ke<sub>4</sub> nam-tar gi saĝ ninda i-im-gu<sub>7</sub>-e  
 an-e <sup>d</sup>en-líl-bi en <sup>d</sup>nu-dím-mud-e maš kug i-im-šeg<sub>6</sub>-šeg<sub>6</sub>  
 diĝir šár-šár-ra-ke<sub>4</sub>-e-ne ka tar i-im-si-il-le-ne  
 en ĝeštúg daĝal-la a-ba-a ĝeštúg ì-de<sub>5</sub>-ge  
 en gal <sup>d</sup>en-ki-ke<sub>4</sub> níĝ ak-ak-zu-šè a-ba-a ì-sig<sub>10</sub>-ge  
 a-a tud-da-gin<sub>7</sub> me nam tar-tar-ra me za-e al-me-en-na<sup>160</sup>

Enki... brought joy to their heart.

He set a feast for his mother Namma and for Ninmah.

All the princely birth-goddesses(?)... ate delicate reed and bread.

An, Enlil, and Lord Nudimmud roasted holy kids.

All the senior gods praised him:

«O lord of wide understanding, who is as wise as you?

Enki, the great lord, who can equal your actions?

159 Klein 1997a.

160 *Enki and Ninmah*, lines 44-51.

Like a corporeal father, you are the one who has the *me* of deciding destinies, in fact you are the *me*.»

The menu of this occasion is listed as reed and bread (for the princely birth-goddesses), roasted meat (for An, Enlil and Nudimmud), and obviously beer, too: it is because of the alcohol that the hearts of Enki and Ninmah «became elated», and a new development in the story could start, with the two gods engaging in a competition whose consequence was the creation of crippled men.

The other two poems that dealt with the creation of mankind do not describe a similar banquet: in *Atrahasis*, after the self-made celebratory speech of Mami (lines 237-243), the reaction of the god was of a worship nature:

*iš-mu-ma an-ni-a-am qá-ba-ša*  
*id-da-ar-ru-ma ú-na-aš-ši-qú še-pi-ša*  
*pa-na-mi ˆma-mi ni-ša-si-ki*  
*i-na-an-na be-le-[et] ka-la i-li*  
*lu-ú š[u-um]-ki<sup>161</sup>*

They heard this speech of hers,  
 they moved around freely and kissed her feet:  
 «Formerly we used to call you Mami,  
 now let your name be Bel[et]-kala-ili (Mistress of all the gods)!»

After this passage the text is unfortunately broken, but it seems to continue with the narration of the increasing population and the consequent reactions of the divine family.

In the *Enūma Eliš* poem, the birth of mankind is presented at the beginning of the sixth tablet, together with all the other actions undertaken by the victorious Marduk after the defeat of Tiamat and her army. In this episode, there is no trace of any immediate reaction of the other gods: they seemed to wait and evaluate everything that Marduk did, before deciding that the best way to thank him was to build a new temple, beyond compare. The meal described in this tablet is in fact connected to this building activity (see below), and not directly to the creation of men.

From the debate between *Ewe and Wheat*, however, one more description of a primeval feast can be derived. It was held to celebrate first the birth of Sheep and Grain (but this banquet was rather disappointing and not plentiful enough, since it left the gods «not sated», lines 30-34), and afterwards the genesis, not of mankind (men are present on the scene since the beginning), but of farming and breeding - and in this case the

161 *Atrahasis* I, lines 244-248.

meal was a very satisfying and rich one, as it suited the celestial assembly (lines 65-70).<sup>162</sup>

Following the history of human events, the next epoch-making feast is the one described in *Atrahasis* and in *Gilgameš*.<sup>163</sup> In contemplation of the imminent disaster, at the end of the construction of the boat, the wise hero invites «his people», i.e. all those who contributed to the completion of the ship, to a banquet. He could not, however, enjoy his own food and drink because he was already worried for the forthcoming Flood: he was not, therefore, in that cheerful mood that I have presented as necessary for a good outcome of the ceremony.

*i-ir-ru-ub ù ú-uš-ší*  
*ú-ul ú-uš-ša-ab ú-ul i-ka-am-mi-is*  
*ḫe-pí-i-ma li-ib-ba-šu i-ma-a' ma-ar-ta-am*<sup>164</sup>

He went in and out,  
 he could not sit, could not squat,  
 for his heart was broken, he was vomiting gall.

Food (or rather, a lack thereof) was also the reason for which the Mesopotamian gods decided to stop the catastrophe: cleverly and piously, the first thing that Atrahasis did after the end of the flood, was to satisfy the deities' hunger by presenting offers, around which they gathered until they were sated again. In this case, the man stepped reverently aside leaving space to the superior creatures, without partaking of the foodstuffs.

The description of a banquet as the celebration of a collective effort was present also, as anticipated above, in the second divine council described in *Enūma Eliš*. The main organizer of the feast in this case was Marduk himself who, after the construction of his new temple, the Esagila, in Babylon (suggested by and thanks to the hard work of the Anunna deities), «seated the gods his fathers at his banquet». <sup>165</sup> This circumstance

**162** *Ewe and Wheat*, lines 65-70: ḡeštín níḡ dūḡ i-im-na<sub>8</sub>-na<sub>8</sub>-e-ne | kaš níḡ dūḡ i-im-dūḡ-dūḡ-ge-ne | ḡeštín níḡ dūḡ ù-mu-un-naḡ-eš-a-ta | kaš níḡ dūḡ ù-mu-un-dūḡ-ge-eš-a-ta | a-gàr-a-gàr-ra du<sub>4</sub> mi-ni-ib-mú-mú-ne | ki ḡišbun-na-ka a-da-mìn mu-un-ak-ne.

**163** *Atrahasis* III, lines ii 40-41; *Gilgameš* XI, lines 71-75. Note that, in this last text, it seems that the banquet was held every day, for all the period of the construction: *a-na 'um'-m[an-na-ti] uṭ-ṭàb-bi-iḫ GU<sub>4</sub>.MEŠ | áš-gi-iš UDU.NÍTA.MEŠ u<sub>4</sub>-mi-šam-ma | si-ri-š[u ku-ru]-un-nu Ì.GIŠ ù GEŠTIN | um-ma-n[i áš-qí] ki-ma A.MEŠ ÍD-ma | i-sin-na ip-pu-šú ki-i u<sub>4</sub>-mi a-ki-tim-ma*, «For the wor[kmen] I butchered oxen, | every day I slaughtered sheep. | Bee[r, alle, oil and wine | [I gave] my workforc[e] to drink, like the waters of a river. | They were celebrating as on the feast-days of the New Year itself!».

**164** *Atrahasis* III, lines ii 45-47.

**165** *Enūma eliš* VI, 71: DINGIR.DINGIR AD.MEŠ-šú qé-re-e-ta-šú uš-te-šib.

was more official than the one described in the third tablet: drinking and joy were of course present, but there was no kissing and embracing at the beginning, and after the feast the gods sat on their throne to pronounce their judgment, as in the judicial situations described for the prayers for the diviners. Also on this occasion, the divinities made the decision of declaring Marduk supreme god *after* taking their enjoyment in the cups (of beer, we imagine). Moreover, one of the main tasks of the newly-elected head of the pantheon was to provide forever great food offerings for his fathers and brothers – or better, to make sure that men would do that in all the temples and sanctuaries of the country.<sup>166</sup>

As it happened for the divine realm, also in the human world banquets were used to stress crucial moments of a person's or a family's life. One of these occasions was the total recovery from a severe illness, as with the episode described in *The poem of the righteous sufferer*:<sup>167</sup> after the almost unexpected, complete healing granted by the gods in fact, the protagonist invited them to a lavish meal. He slaughtered and butchered many animals, libated beer and wine, offered oil, butterfat and grain and made, in this way, «their feelings glow».<sup>168</sup> Just as happened after the Flood, since this event was characterized by the consciousness of the particularity of the moment and was meant to express gratitude for those who let it happen (and was not a celebration of a common effort), after setting up the table the man stepped back and let the gods consume their repast alone.

Another major event in the life of a Mesopotamian family was marriage, since it introduced a new, extraneous member inside it and at the same time made it more numerous and as a symbol of the future members deriving from that union, ensured its survival. We have no explicit descriptions of marriage banquets in literature, but bringing together literary and administrative sources it is possible to get a complete picture of this event. In *Enlil and Sud*, the god sent his bride an incredible amount of presents and foodstuffs (listed in lines 104-123), with the purpose in all likelihood of using them for a huge banquet shared between the two families: even though the description of this meal is missing, we can assume that its place was in the lacuna which follows. According to Civil, this text can be historicized and explained also within a context of religious conflicts between the two pantheons of Ereš and Nippur, which found a solution in the poem with the identification of Sud, originally from the first city, with Ninlil, Enlil's consort in Nippur.<sup>169</sup>

166 All the allusions to this have been firstly identified by Lambert 1993, p. 198.

167 The text is edited by Lambert 1996, pp. 21-62.

168 *The poem of the righteous sufferer* IV, line 97': *ka-bat-ta-šú-un' uš-par-di*.

169 Civil 1983, p. 46.

Other texts that deal with marriage are the ones dedicated to the lovers Inanna and Dumuzi: even though also in these cases a common meal is never clearly depicted, in one of them Inanna affirms:

šeš-ĝu<sub>10</sub> é-gal-ta kur<sub>9</sub>-re<sup>2</sup>-ni<sup>2</sup>  
 nar-e-ne lú ħu-mu-ni-[...]  
 [me]-e ka-ta mu-tin ga-mu-[...]-dé  
 ur<sub>5</sub>-re šag<sub>4</sub>-ga-ni ħe-em-ħúl-le  
 ur<sub>5</sub>-re šag<sub>4</sub>-ga-ni ħé-em-sag<sub>9</sub>-ge<sup>170</sup>

When my brother enters from the palace,  
 the singers shall ...,  
 and I shall pour wine into his mouth.  
 That should gladden his heart,  
 should please his heart.

The goddess, then, exhorts the chorus (probably composed by female singers) to welcome the groom with the best food (lines 32-41). Music, wine and joy were the same elements of all the feasts described before: we assume, then, that what we have here is a synecdoche which alludes to a complete ceremonial. A list of wedding gifts is present not only in this composition, but also in another song. In this text Dumuzi, after the celebration of the marriage, wishing to specify and celebrate the new *status* gained by Inanna after the wedding, says that she will now find a place «at a splendid table», occupying a place that not even his mother or his sister are allowed to take.<sup>171</sup> The existence of wedding banquets is attested also in other non-literary texts, that seems appropriate to introduce here since they support the interpretation of the other sources discussed.

An Old Babylonian administrative text,<sup>172</sup> for example, represents a wedding list and related expenses kept by the father of a bride: it recorded, among other things, also different ingredients in various quantities, offered to temples (maybe to propitiate a good outcome of the contract) and exchanged between the two families. By reading this text, we assume that the marriage gifts, consisting of food as well as of non-edibles (exactly as in the accounts listed in literary compositions), were delivered on a table or tray; and that the bride's father was expected to return it with a second amount of foodstuffs so that the groom's family could also take part in the celebration. The amount of food mentioned gives hints of a rather large party of guests (8-10 people), present to celebrate both at the groom's and

170 *Dumuzi-Inanna C*, lines 27-31.

171 *Dumuzi-Inanna C1*, lines 5-13.

172 The tablet UET 5 636 has been published by Greengus 1966.



at the bride's house for many days.

In two paragraphs of the Middle Assyrian collection of laws (§42 and §43) it was considered essential for the ratification of a marriage, together with the bathing and the anointment of the bride, to have a banquet consisting of many courses.<sup>173</sup> The foodstuffs were brought on trays to the bride's house, and these constituted the edible portion of the marriage gift. The last literary evidence of the existence of a marriage banquet, the most evident, is preserved in an Old Babylonian edition of the *Gilgamesh* epic.<sup>174</sup> In this text, Enkidu asked a passer-by about his business and the reason of his haste, and was given this answer:

*bi-ti-iš e-mu-tim iq-ru-ni-ni`  
 ši-ma-a-at ni-ši-i-ma  
 ḫi-ia'-ar ka-lu-tim  
 a-na BANŠUR sak-ki-i e-`še'-en  
 uk-la-at É e-mi ṣa-a-a-ḫa-tim*<sup>175</sup>

«They invited me to a wedding ceremony:  
 it is the lot of the people  
 to take a bride in marriage.  
 I shall load the ceremonial table  
 with tempting foods for the wedding feast.»

It seems therefore that in case of an invitation to a wedding feast, guests (that most likely were not just acquaintances, but relatives and members of one of the two families involved) were requested to bring gifts of food, in order to contribute to the celebration. We can imagine that these gifts were carried on trays, exactly as was described in the administrative and legal texts.

**173** The word used to mention these many courses is, in effect, not the word referring to the contents but the one for the container: *ḫuruppu* indicates, in fact, a metal dish or tray. This evidence fits well, then, with the setting presented in UET 5, line 636. For the edition of the Middle Assyrian laws, see Roth 2000.

**174** See George 2003, pp. 166-192.

**175** *Gilgamesh* IV, lines 149-153.



## Commensality and Ceremonial Meals in the Neo-Assyrian Period

Stefania Ermidoro

### 3 Eating with the King The Earthly Banquet

**Summary** 3.1 Sitting at the Table with the King. – 3.2 The King, His Family and His Officials. – 3.3 The King and His Soldiers. – 3.4 The King and the Stranger.

#### 3.1 Sitting at the Table with the King

Mesopotamian kings of every epoch made a great effort of reporting all their deeds and practical achievements in their royal inscriptions, together with the merciful, pious and successful sides of their character and behaviour. Various types of texts were therefore composed, with the purpose of making the ruler's name eternal, justifying his role within the human community, and proving that the gods had trusted the right man: annals, building inscriptions, reports, letters (of the king to a divinity, or of various officials and scholars to the ruler), hymns, administrative records etc. allow quite a clear reconstruction of life at court and in the king's entourage.<sup>1</sup>

Food appears frequently in these sources originating from within the royal inner circle, in the guise of offerings made to the gods, tributes and gifts presented by vassal kings, rations distributed to officers or court personnel, or banquets and meals consumed in different circumstances. This fact testifies how, in the Mesopotamian perception, food conveyed profound and varied meanings, pertaining to the spheres of social and political life. I have already discussed in the first chapter how commensality mirrors profound social relations and opens a view on the mechanisms of politics:<sup>2</sup> therefore, analysing how the Assyrian rulers consciously used this tool will improve our knowledge of the cultural and socio-political history of this period.

<sup>1</sup> As Llewellyn-Jones 2013 pointed out, the term 'court' may refer to a location (a palace), an institution, a group of individuals (the entourage) or even to an event ('holding court'). In the following pages, I will use it to refer to both to the architectural spaces which represented the seat of power in Assyrian and to all those people who orbited around the king and had therefore access to those spaces, as well.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion on the sociological implications of commensality, see also Därmann 2008 with references.

The king showed himself to all or part of the population on the occasion of special events, during which he played the role of leader and benefactor of his country: textual and iconographical sources describe triumphs celebrated after victories in military campaigns, hunting scenes, big receptions and welcoming of foreign ambassadors and subdued kings, great religious festivals, and other peculiar occurrences. Private meetings with the ruler were extremely difficult to arrange even for his closest officers, even though direct contact with him was theoretically always possible through the medium of written correspondence (in which we can find, in fact, complaints about the difficulties in seeing the king face to face).<sup>3</sup> Occasionally, however, the head of the State could be admired at his best and at the height of his royal power.

These events were so magnificent that they caused a great sensation, crossing both geographical and chronological borders. Not only the participation of men belonging to every social class from all the regions of the empire ensured appropriate propaganda for the king and the messages conveyed by these banquets all over the land under his direct control, but the echo of such festivals continued also in later generations, even increasing with the passing of time, up to the later Biblical accounts and the descriptions provided by Greek and Latin historians, centuries later.<sup>4</sup> The huge amount of food and drink presented at the king's table, the incredible expenses involved in organizing these events, and the incredibly large number of guests invited were reported with amazement in the accounts that followed, and from the sources at our disposal we

3 A private meeting is often asked by governors and other officials. To mention a few examples: *a-na* 15 *ša* ITI.ŠU *la-al-li-ka* IGI.MEŠ *ša* LUGAL EN-*ia* *la-mur*? KIN-*i*, «On the 15th of Tammuz I would like to come and see the face of the king, my lord, (about) my work» (SAA 5, 47, lines r. 1-4); *la-al-li-ka* [pa]-*ni* ŠA LUGAL *be-li-ia* *la-a-mur*, «Let me come and behold the face of the king, my lord!» (SAA 10, 17, lines r. 20-21); *a-ki-ma pa-an* ŠA MAN EN-*ia* [x x] *a-na* *mi-i-ni* *a-ba-laṭ*, «If I [cannot see] the face of the king, my lord, why should I live?» (SAA 13, 184, lines e. 1-2). See also the letter SAA 13, 80, mentioned below. People also sent letters to the ruler to give advance notice of their arrival (in order to be sure that he could receive them): various scholars describe themselves as «on their way to the palace» in SAA 1, 186-187; or else they informed the king that they have sent someone to him: SAA 15, 301-302. A specific attendant, the *rabi ekalli*, was in charge of keeping lists of those who had access to the palace (the <sup>16</sup>*ēribūte*): an example of such records has been published in SAA 15, 50.

4 Some practical examples are given below in the following sections of this chapter; for the present, it is enough to mention the main descriptions of banquets held mostly at the Persian court included in the accounts by Heracleides of Cyme *apud* Atheneus, *Deipnosophistae* 4.145e (who describes the killing of thousands of animals performed every day in front of the king), and Herodotus, *Historiae* VII.119 (where the historian illustrates a banquet staged by Xerxes in his camp during the campaign against the Athenians). In the Bible, see for example the book of Esther 1, 1-8 (that reports in two versions, Greek and Hebrew, a detailed description of a big feast organized by Artaxerxes II/Ahasuerus) and 1 King 5, 2-3 (a list of the ingredients used for the daily meals of king Solomon).

can imagine similar occasions for banquets organized in Neo-Assyrian palaces.<sup>5</sup>

The first duty of a good, legitimate king was to guarantee the survival of gods and humans dwelling in his country: in fact, prosperity and the fertility of land and livestock were signs of the benevolence of the gods, while good management and the wealth and consequent increase in the well-being of his people and country testified to the ruler's worldly-wise, dexterous skills.<sup>6</sup>

A banquet represented the moment in which the link between the city and its institutions was forged, and the control of the central administration in both the primary sector and the productive system was made visible to the community, which had the opportunity to verify the ability and the productivity of the élite class, and at the same time to enjoy the proceeds of its own work. The distribution of food was influenced also by military campaigns conducted by the king: the need for centralizing the supplies of food for the subsequent redistribution to the huge army moving all over the empire had a consequence on the tax burden applied to the various provinces. Finally, the etiquette and ritualized welcoming reserved to messengers and ambassadors mirrored the quality of the relationships between countries, and the hostile or friendly intentions of the host (and guests, as well).

Food can, therefore, legitimately be considered as firmly integrated within the complex semiotics of Neo-Assyrian propaganda, in the sense that it was a concrete personification of a wider, coherent and complex system of signs and metaphors. In this perspective, meals shared by two or more persons can be read as powerful moments of communication, and so the choice made by the kings of depicting these meals in the iconographic

5 Two examples will suffice to show the wonder and the disapproval of Greek authors before the magnificence of the oriental banquets: Polyaeus, *Stratagems of war*, 4.3.32 reports «a bill of fare for the king's (i.e. Cyrus') dinner and supper», that was (according to his statement) engraved on a column in the palace of the Persian ruler. It is interesting to note how this deposition edges away from what we know from Xenophon's account in the *Cyropaedia*, where Cyrus is represented, instead, as a model of sobriety and moderation. Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 4.146, quotes excerpts from Herodotus, Ctesias and Dinon, to demonstrate how, because of his exaggerated habits, the Persian king could disburse hundreds of talents to entertain thousands of guests, and even ruin those cities that were in charge of providing him dinners.

6 See Seux 1967: the king is the one who watches over the temples, provides for their needs (*idu*; *zanānu* (II); *zāninu*; *zāninūtu*), makes the divine abodes abundant (*ṭahādu*; (*w*)*atāru*, A), piles up riches and grain (*kamāru*; *garānu*), and arranges pure food (*šakānu*; *dešū*). He assists his people, helps the poor and feeds them (*epēru*), settles his people (*paḥāru* A and B; *pazāru*; *šaṭāpu*), takes care of his cities, making them lively (*zāninu*; *balātu*, A; *nadānu*, A; *qāšū*) and prosperous (*kamāru*). He provides «water of abundance», (*šakānu*, A), keeps his people in wealth ((*w*)*abālu*, B), accumulates opulence and richness (*dešū*, B; *šakānu*, A) and can define himself as «source of abundance» and «abundance» (*naqbu*; *nuḥšū*). For an overview on the Neo-Assyrian royal ideology, see Parker 2011 with references.

or textual apparatus used to decorate their residences and to promote themselves is particularly significant.<sup>7</sup>

In real life, as in literature, meals were not just an opportunity to get some refreshment, relaxation, entertainment and amusement – they were, instead, occasions during which some of the most important decisions that had repercussions on the whole community were made. Significantly, in queries addressed to Šamaš whose purpose was to investigate the future well-being of the crown prince Aššurbanipal, among members of the family, of the royal entourage, and other court officials, appear also «guests and friends». The latter were listed right after the closest king's intimates (brothers, sons, nephews, and confidants), and were identified by the terms «those who give salt» and «those who give bread», EN.MUN.MEŠ and EN.NINDA.MEŠ.<sup>8</sup> These expressions succeeded in conveying at the same time the concepts of a long-lasting and essential relationship, since salt preserves its flavour for a very long time, and bread is indispensable for life.

The political function of banquets mirrored, on a larger scale, the role that shared meals performed in families: as in a private home, they served the purpose of symbolizing and contributing to the cohesion of the kin, and on a grander, national level they functioned as a test and demonstration of social solidarity.<sup>9</sup> The ruler was the head of an extended family, composed of all those who lived in his palace or gravitated toward it: as a father, he was in charge of nourishing his clan, and as a ruler, this duty was extended to all his people.<sup>10</sup> Banquets brought practical benefits to the ruling élite: the surplus that the central administration had stored in the course of time was invested, creating in exchange job mobilization, the emergence of social solidarity within different social classes, trade, the development of dependence relationships and the demonstration of the effectiveness of the head of the State.

The system and its functioning can be quite well reconstructed for the city of Mari in the second millennium, thanks to the huge amount of information coming from the royal archives: the city administration kept

7 For the concept of a cultural phenomenon (such as a banquet) as a semiotic entity, see Eco 1979, p. 174: «Without doubt verbal language is the most powerful semiotic device that man has invented; but [...] even though this latter is the more powerful, it does not totally satisfy the effability requirement; in order to be so powerful it must often be helped along by other semiotic systems which add to its power. One can hardly conceive of a world in which certain beings communicate without verbal language, restricting themselves to gestures, objects, unshaped sounds, tunes, or tap dancing; but it is equally hard to conceive of a world in which certain beings only utter words».

8 These terms appear in two queries: SAA 4, 139, line 14 and SAA 4, 142, line 14.

9 On the complex relationship between daily meals and feasts in the ancient Near East, see Pollock 2012 (in particular the contribution by Pollock, Twiss and Otto).

10 For a discussion of the role of banquets in a political context, see Dietler 1999.

an accurate record of the foodstuffs to be delivered to «the royal table» (g<sup>is</sup>BANŠUR LUGAL, *paššūr šarri*). We can recognize two main moments connoting communal meals shared within the palace walls: a first phase, with the distribution of rations to the guests, and a second, more ceremonial one, i.e. the banquet itself – which could include the presence of the king and the distribution of gifts.<sup>11</sup>

Some texts describing the *naptan šarri* in Mari suggest that royal repasts were consumed not only in the capital (although most of them took place there), but in other cities as well, along itineraries covered by the king for various reasons (mainly military or diplomatic ones). Guests at the royal table might be from a few dozen up to hundreds of persons, including technical and domestic staff, local members of various institutions such as judges, merchants, elders, local leaders, bodyguards and soldiers, scholars (diviners), and sometimes even ‘minority groups’, such as strangers and (though only rarely) also women. An indication of the difference in hierarchy within the large group of people allowed to eat together with the ruler can be delineated between those who sat at the table (*wāšib kussîm*) and those who assumed a different posture, sitting or squatting on the ground (*muppalsiḫum*).<sup>12</sup> Some days were more favourable than others for the celebration of feasts, and these were held mostly in the winter season, probably because during spring and summer the king was not in the capital, but was instead busy leading his army in battle throughout the country. Moreover, days mentioned in the records often overlap with religious festivals recorded by other sources.<sup>13</sup>

The number of texts relating to the *naptan šarri* in Mari is rather impressive: about one thousand three hundred letters belonging to the archives of the city (that is, over a fifth of the total documents) described the outlay of food for meals and banquets. On the whole, however, these texts do not tell us very much about the ritualized gestures and etiquette followed at the king’s table. They contain instead plenty of information about the foodstuffs served, and the personnel responsible for food processing and its distribution within the palace – and nevertheless, it is important to

11 This two-moment system seems to have been in use in all the main centres of the regions around Mari in Old Babylonian time, including Chagar Bazar, Tell Leilan, Tuttul, Tell Rimah, Tell Shemshara: see Ponchia 2012. On the *naptan šarri* in Mari, see also Charpin 2013; Glaeseman 1978; Sasson 2004.

12 A similar dichotomy between sitting on a chair or squatting on one’s heels at a meal can be found in the literary work *Atrahasis* III, line ii 45: *ú-ul ú-uš-ša-ab ú-ul i-ka-am-mi-is* «he could not sit, could not squat». On this subject, see Charpin 1992.

13 Sasson 1979. See also the interesting texts ARM 7, 14; 17; 27; 40; 48; 49; 84, which mention «the occasion of the (giving of) gifts to the soldiers on the day of the banquet»: these records are discussed by Bottéro in the same volume (Bottéro 1957), at pp. 201-203 – unfortunately, however, it is not possible to know much about the nature and the exact date of such ceremony.

recognize a lack in the record, that focused on the activities carried out inside the royal residence but not so much on those performed outside. For this reason, for example, references to milk or dairy products are scanty.<sup>14</sup>

The sources from Mari inform us that kings used to offer a 'great meal' (*naptanu rabû*)<sup>15</sup> to their magnates and various aides: they took part themselves in such events (*naptan šarrim u šabîm*),<sup>16</sup> aiming at strengthening the bounds between guests and their royal authority. The symbolic gestures performed on these occasions were particularly significant. Before sitting down, the ruler proceeded with the distribution of various gifts: sometimes they consisted in objects of precious metal, but usually they were perfumed oil and garments. These two items in particular were charged with taking 'a piece of the royal person' back home, where the recipients lived: through their scent, they were a constant reminder of the king's benevolence and presence. This fact is proved by a letter sent by a provincial governor to the ruler where we read: «My lord has rubbed his hands on the fringes of my garments and I can now smell the wonderful scent of my lord throughout the house».<sup>17</sup> Pollock has underlined how tangible remainders of such feasts played a crucial role as a kind of 'social storage'; also the witnessing of festive occasions offered by the attendants once they went back to their homelands represented a way to spread and perpetuate the host's good name.<sup>18</sup>

The sources at our disposal from the later period attest to many elements in common between the royal meal consumed at Mari and at the Neo-Assyrian court. As for the space where these repasts could have taken place inside the palace, a proper 'dining room' probably did not exist, and there was no Akkadian word that conveyed such a meaning either.<sup>19</sup> Texts always depict movable furniture, brought in and out by various servants within the particular area that had been chosen to accommodate the banquet. Most of the time, however, this location must have coincided with the boardrooms, such as the throne room or the ones around it.<sup>20</sup> So far archaeological excavation has not identified any evident eating arrange-

14 For an overview on foodstuffs presented at banquets in Mari, see Dalley 2002, pp. 78-96.

15 ARM 7, 14, line 11; 17, line 10; 49, line 11.

16 ARM 9, 3, line 10; 42, line 6. ARM 12, 1, lines 16-ff.

17 For the edition of this text, see Ziegler 1996, pp. 480-481.

18 See her introductory contribute included in Pollock 2012, in particular p. 8.

19 Kinnier Wilson 1972, p. 32 suggested the identification of *naptanu* with the king's mess: on this topic, see the discussion in the Lexicon. Moreover, according to him, «at least below a certain seniority», the places for eating coincided with the places of work or sleep.

20 Throne rooms were suitable places for divine feasts, too: in the sixth tablet of the *Enūma eliš*, in fact, the banquet of the gods is set up in the *paramaḫu* of the newly-built Esagila (*ina BARA.MAḪ ša ibnû šubassu*, VI, line 70).



ment inside Near Eastern monumental buildings, and no big spaces specifically characterized as kitchens have been excavated in palaces dating to the Neo-Assyrian period. The most likely scenario, therefore, is that spaces reserved for the handling of foodstuffs and their preparation were distributed throughout all the palatial area and in its immediate environs.<sup>21</sup>

Bigger events were likely held in the open air around the palace, and in the cases of thousands of guests they must have been scattered all over the residential quarters, including the gardens of which the kings proudly talk in their inscriptions. Courtyards of palaces and temples were well suited areas for open-air rites, a proper theatre for gathering big groups of Mesopotamian inhabitants, in the manner of those divine assemblies that, according to all the literary sources, were summoned in these very same open spaces for banquets and other decision-making moments. As shown in the previous chapter, in fact, in ancient Near Eastern literature the festive meal represented the council *par excellence*, and the convocation of a human assembly created the right atmosphere of assistance and dialogue between diners, often leading to decisions made within the context of a banquet, just as literary texts depict divine assemblies as decisive moments for the assignment of destinies.

Beyond the official, political and civic motivations, more personal events too must have been celebrated inside the palace walls, but these events were not recorded in the official documents in our possession. For example, in the Neo-Assyrian sources there are no traces of banquets held on the occasion of the king's birthday, that was instead a common practice in later Persian time, as attested by Herodotus:<sup>22</sup>

21 For a discussion on the kitchen of the palace in Mari, see Sasson 2004, p. 180, fn. 2, and the bibliography there mentioned. The simile with palaces of more recent times, in which a decentralization of functions (cooking, sweets-baking, coffee-making, wine-cellar and so on) correspond also to a decentralization in locations, seems very convincing and likely applicable also to the historical frame under analysis.

22 An indication of the existence of birthday celebrations for the king is present also in Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, 1.3.10, when Cyrus warns his grandfather, the king Astyages, against his cupbearer, saying: καὶ γὰρ ὅτε εἰστίσασας σὺ τοὺς φίλους ἐν τοῖς γενεθλίοις, σαφῶς κατέμαθον φάρμακα ὑμῖν αὐτὸν ἐγγέειντα, «When you entertained your friends on your birthday, I discovered beyond a doubt that he had poured poison into your company's drink». Apparently, not only the king but also every Persian citizen celebrated this occasion with a special repast, as Herodotus witnesses (*Historiae* I, 133): ἡμέρην δὲ ἀπασέων μάλιστα ἐκείνην τιμᾶν νομίζουσι τῇ ἑκάστος ἐγένετο. ἐν ταύτῃ δὲ πλέω δαῖτα τῶν ἀλλέων δικαιοῦσι προτιθέσθαι: ἐν τῇ οἱ εὐδαίμονες αὐτῶν βοῦν καὶ ἵππον καὶ κάμηλον καὶ ὄνον προτιθέσθαι ὅλους ὅπουδ' ἐν καμίνοισι, οἱ δὲ πένητες αὐτῶν τὰ λεπτὰ τῶν προβάτων προτιθέσθαι, «The day which every man values most is his own birthday. On this day, he thinks it right to serve a more abundant meal than on other days: oxen or horses or camels or asses, roasted whole in ovens, are set before the rich; the poorer serve the lesser kinds of cattle». On the *tycta* at the Persian court (mentioned among other typologies of banquets) see also Llewellyn-Jones 2013, pp. 127-133.

τοῦτο δὲ τὸ δεῖπνον παρασκευάζεται ἅπαξ τοῦ ἐνιαυτοῦ ἡμέρη τῇ ἐγένετο βασιλεύς. οὐνομα δὲ τῷ δείπνῳ τούτῳ Περσιστὶ μὲν τυκτά, κατὰ δὲ τὴν Ἑλλήνων γλῶσσαν τέλειον· τότε καὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν σμᾶται μοῦνον βασιλεὺς καὶ Πέρσας δωρέεται<sup>23</sup>

This feast is served up once in the year on the day on which the king was born, and the name of this feast is in Persian *tycta*, which in the tongue of the Hellenes means «complete»; on this occasion the king alone washes his head, and makes gifts to the Persians.

Oppenheim first, and other scholars after him, stated that in order to reconstruct the practices observed for a meal at court, the descriptions of the repasts consumed by gods in their temples could be used: in his opinion, Mesopotamian divine images were served their meals «in a style and manner befitting a king».<sup>24</sup> However, in the light of the premises formulated in the previous chapters, and thanks to new publications of original texts at our disposal today, there is now a clear need for a closer observation of the sources. This will highlight the differences in the execution, timing, procedures and participation requested for events that were so different, like a meal consumed in a sacred building or in the royal residence. It must be admitted that we can only reconstruct those repasts which were consumed on special occasions: the procedures observed for ‘normal’, daily meals consumed in private by the Assyrian king when he was distant from his entourage still remain unknown to us.<sup>25</sup>

In the following pages, the case of banquets at court is analyzed, together with various repasts presented according to the different groups of people who had the chance of sitting at the same table with the king, following an order that goes from the closest to the farthest possible guests and ‘regulars’ of the royal palace. An account of the events that took place inside the divine shrines is given subsequently, in the fourth chapter.

### 3.2 The King, His Family and His Officials

Control over a society, and especially over such a wide, varied and multiethnic society as the Neo-Assyrian one, was not a static phenomenon: the ruler had to make a constant effort to maintain his supremacy over many centrifugal forces. In order to achieve this goal, he used military force outside the borders of the core of his realm, but within it he relied

23 *Historiae* IX, 110, 2.

24 Oppenheim 1977, p. 188.

25 On this topic see also the synthetic but detailed article by Villard 2013.

mainly on the repetition of a series of symbolic practices which embodied the structure of the established hierarchy.

Being able to fix and control the carrying out of these ritualized moments, he had the power of choosing how to represent his own person and office – obviously, keeping himself in that stream of tradition which ensured him legitimacy before the whole population. The moment of the partaking of food was a substantial element pertaining to such symbolic practices: its importance had been recognized in fact, ever since the third millennium, when images of the king sharing his food with his sons and people were repeatedly carved on the stones of seals and votive plaques found in all the major cities of southern Mesopotamia.<sup>26</sup> In the same period, kings also started to boast in their written memories that they fed daily thousands of people who ate in their presence, as the example of Sargon of Akkad's inscription attests.<sup>27</sup>

Administrative records, letters and inventories of commodities delivered to the royal residence provide us with a great amount of details that help in reconstructing life at the Neo-Assyrian court, together with the size and sometimes also with the protocol followed on these occasions within the imperial household. In fact, the organization of such a complex and articulated entity as the king's court, needed the creation of a variety of lists and tables concerning the food to be purchased, prepared and consumed, and the individuals who were entitled to such honour.

As Goody has pointed out, such documents not only provide us today with some hints about certain aspects of the ancient social organization, but because of their format and the impact they had on their audience, they could even have influenced the behaviour of the members of that society in the past.<sup>28</sup> He distinguished three types of lists that may be found in a 'culinary context', and we can retrace each kind of these types in the Neo-Assyrian corpus. Firstly, there is the nominal roll, which indicates the individuals of a group who are (or should be) present, or who are entitled to certain privileges (in this typology he includes the ration list of an army, «honour since entrance on the roll and participation in the activities of the organization are two sides of the same coin»). Then, he mentions the selective list, which refers to those members who have put their names down or who have been chosen for a certain activity («such as dining in Hall»). Thirdly, the retrospective list written only

26 See the descriptions and the exemplars presented in Selz 1983.

27 Frayne 1993 (RIME 2), E2.1.1.12, 27'-30', for which see below.

28 Goody 2008, pp. 79-80: «The list in the form of a single column also gives a peculiar shape to hierarchy; unlike the positions in a table of organization, no one can be equal to any one else. There is no horizontal placement; every item must be vertically ordered, even if this means forcing hierarchy on what is in practice a looser form of social organization».

after the mentioned event took place, that provides the names of those who did attend it.<sup>29</sup>

Beside the great events during which the ruler shared his meals with hundreds or thousands of people, the king's table corresponded more often to his most secluded council, the place where he could talk in private with his associates. Therefore, every member who had access to it must have been a trusted, loyal man: the smaller the circle was, and the more private the circumstance of the meal, the greater the trust that the king placed in his guests.<sup>30</sup> Eating under the protection of the ruler, even when done at a distance, was the ultimate proof of his trust and special benevolence:

*mi-i-ni 'pal'-ḥa-a-ka*  
 [ma]-a ú-ma-a GIŠ.MI LUGAL be-'lí-ia' NINDA.MEŠ-ka akul  
 A.MEŠ-ka ši-ti ma-a ŠÀ-ka 'lu' [DÜG].GA-ka<sup>31</sup>

What are you afraid of?

[No]w eat your bread and drink your water  
 under the protection of the king, my lord, and be [hap]py.

In banquet accounts, and in the group of texts usually referred to as the Nimrud Wine Lists, civilian officials as well appear as guests at the king's table, listed with their names and with the indication of the quantity of food or beverage that they received. Apparently, they were mixed with royal family members, military officials and members of the domestic staff. In the texts published as SAA 7, 7-12 we find, moreover, the indication of the respective lodging designated for each of them: the authors of the volume have suggested that these were lists of 'hotel rooms' for people who wanted to linger and stay until late at the palace on the occasion of great meals and events held in Nineveh.<sup>32</sup> The fact that some of the guests stayed for several days in the city seems confirmed also by the reference, in a few records, to the distribution of wine already the day before the

29 See Goody 2008, esp. pp. 78-80.

30 The equivalence 'trusted officer of the king = someone who eats at the king's table' is made explicit in the Elephantine version of the *Ahiqar* poem, in lines III 33-34. In this Aramaic composition, originated under the direct influence of the Assyrian culture and court, king Esarhaddon charges with a delicate task an old man, who is considered particularly loyal to his family since he also ate his father's bread (*zy lḥm 'by | 'kl*). On this poem, see Fales 1994a.

31 SAA 1, 1, lines 39-41.

32 SAA 7, pp. xvii-xix.

proper party, *ina nubatti*.<sup>33</sup> This temporal indication suggests, therefore, that the central administration provided drink (and food) throughout the whole period of their stay.

There are no big differences in the classes of servants and dignitaries who appear in these two groups of texts (as showed in Chart 1), although the records belonging to the Nimrud Wine Lists must have registered bigger events, as it is inferable by the greater quantities of foodstuffs and the higher number of participants. Members of every level of the Assyrian society appear: from the higher, business-oriented or cultural functionaries (generals, administrators, scholars and diviners) to the lower classes, workers, servants, musicians (both male and female ones), and even strangers coming from all over the empire.

An estimate of the number of persons usually attending the king's table has been attempted by many authors, relying on different kinds of texts. Kinnier Wilson suggested the presence of about six thousand people gathered at court on the occasion of a great event he imagined taking place in the royal residence in Nimrud, involving the distribution of great amounts of wine, and Fales generally agreed with these calculations (although he imagined a different scenario for the process which led to the compiling of these sources, see below).

The 57 administrative records found in the *ekal mašarti* in Kalhu, that go under the name Nimrud Wine Lists and date back to the early eighth century, deal exclusively with wine, distributed to various persons and professional groups in the form of rations, during a formal occasion that took place in the palace.<sup>34</sup> They were found *in situ*, in Room 6 of the building; significantly, this was a wine store, and wine jars were excavated contextually with the cuneiform tablets. In these documents, the king is never mentioned; the reason for this might be the fact that the foodstuffs for his table (wine included) came from special, separate storehouses and were, therefore, not included among the normal ones, counted in these texts.<sup>35</sup> The king functioned, moreover, as the main donor, at least symbolically if not concretely: the head of the State, in fact, ensured the provision of the basic supply to his people, and on a few exceptional occasions was the protagonist of donation ceremonies, during which more prestigious and rarer goods were allocated. The queen and the king's sons appear in these texts instead, mentioned at the beginning of the lists

33 See the texts NWL 11, line 22; NWL 21, line 17; NWL 23, line 6 and NWL 29, line 5.

34 The first edition of these texts has been provided by Kinnier Wilson 1972; some more texts were identified later and included in the publication of Dalley, Postgate 1984. On the possible circumstances that led to their drafting, see in particular Kinnier Wilson 1972, pp. 114-120.

35 Fales suggested that the absence of the king depended on his being «presumably involved in cultic activities elsewhere» (Fales 1994b, p. 370, fn. 52).

of distribution, thus expressing their high status, but also giving us the information that they not always ate with the king, and needed, therefore, to receive food and beverage allotments just as other functionaries living in the palace.<sup>36</sup>

The texts of the Nimrud Wine Lists are dated mostly to the last or the first month of the year, that is from around February to April; it does not seem possible, instead, to detect a pattern in the days of the distributions. Scholars have suggested various explanations for the reasons that led to their being compiled: Kinnier Wilson viewed them as registers of allowances distributed before they were written, in a ration plan which needed a new record every ten days. Parpola, on the other side, believed that the Nimrud Wine Lists were written before the distribution itself took place, that is only once per year, and that the rations were forecasts of the amounts of wine that could be apportioned during the year after the date on the heading. Finally, Fales suggested, on the basis of the quantities mentioned in the texts, that the validity of the sources did not necessarily last for more than the day of the writing itself: he considered these records, therefore, as the result of a one-day distribution.

If we imagine that all the persons listed in the text assembled the same day, to receive their rations of wine in the presence of the highest offices of the State and of the king himself, the most probable scenario is, in fact, a large event, probably a big banquet, held in Nimrud at the time of the vernal equinox (that is right before the beginning of the military campaigns, possibly to celebrate the end of winter). It may have implied the participation of all the court personnel and the civil and military officers of every level: looking for an explanation for this occasion, Dalley and Postgate noted that records of the Nimrud Wine Lists were sometimes found in Kalhu together with the so-called «Horse Lists», suggesting, thus, a military ambient that would also fit the timing of the festivities.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, R. Mattila connected the event to a yearly muster of troops during a ceremonial occasion that may have occurred «at the turn of the Assyrian calendar year».<sup>38</sup>

However, we should also consider the possibility that these documents witness a «kind of partial or skewed commensality»,<sup>39</sup> i.e. a form of provi-

**36** In particular, the queen very likely ate in a separate place from the room where the king consumed his repast: she must have eaten together with the other women, in the palace wing that was reserved to them.

**37** The two scholars suggested that these texts registered a particular event anchored to the military calendar, that included the gathering of equids (recorded separately, in the Horse Lists) and the feasting of the army in the presence of the royal family and foreign emissaries: see Dalley, Postgate 1984, p. 24.

**38** Mattila 2000, p. 157.

**39** See Pollock 2012, p. 11: «In contrast to those who take part in other forms of commen-

sion. While analyzing the Persepolis Fortification Tablets, Henkelman has identified a group of texts which present many similarities with the ones described in this chapter.<sup>40</sup> They describe, in fact, the distribution of various kinds of food and beverages at the same location during the same year (with no month dates) to different suppliers, storekeepers and officials. In all these tablets, the expressions «consumed before the king» or «poured before the king» appear. However, not only does the scholar warn that big numbers should not automatically be considered as evidence of big feasts, he also proves that the two sentences mentioned above did not necessarily imply the physical presence of the king but stood, instead, for «consumed/poured at the king's court». Similarly, the Nimrud Wine Lists may record the allocation of large amounts of wine to all the members of the court, as an expression of commensality which did not imply the consumption of the distributed goods all together, at the same time and place.

A second closed and well-recognizable group of documents comes from Nineveh, probably from the South-West Palace, and dates back to the reign of Esarhaddon and Aššurbanipal: they have been classified as 'accounts from ceremonial banquets' held in the Assyrian capital. Seven of these texts, although different and each one conceived as an individual document, have been united convincingly by Mattila,<sup>41</sup> who considered them as a composite source, or better as a group of texts composed by the palace 'bookkeepers', using a unique model. They listed various amounts of food with the indication of the recipients, mentioned with their names or their positions; the commodities listed probably came from offerings presented to gods in various temples, and referred to seven different occasions. It is interesting, in fact, to notice that only already-processed edibles appear in these texts: instead of emmer, wheat or other cereals, for example, we find bread and beer. That means they represent the final stage of a process which started before, in a different place: they record the last phase, the actual consumption.

Mattila, following a suggestion proposed by Parpola, hypothesised that these texts record allotments distributed during the New Year festival in the Assyrian capital. There is however, no certain evidence to confirm this, and although the edible items listed follow the order usually found in ritual and other religious texts for offerings presented to the gods, this fact can

salinity, the recipients of provisioning do not consume the food or drink they are given in the same place and/or at the same time as the donor of the provisions. In this way provisioning emphasizes the separation between provisioner and recipient rather than that which they have in common».

40 See Henkelman 2010, with references.

41 See Mattila 1990. The texts are published separately in the SAA 7 volume, nos. 148-157: on the circumstances and the events registered by these accounts, with a comment on Mattila's article, see the introduction by Fales, Postgate 1992, p. xxxi.

be considered a scribal habit, and not necessarily proof of the ceremonial nature of these repasts.<sup>42</sup>

From these accounts we can deduce that women were present during the king's banquet, occupying different positions: some of them had the task of serving the royal guests, others took care of the entertainment as dancers, musicians and singers. High status women, wives or daughters of the Neo-Assyrian ruler, could, in some cases, even share the food with him, although it is not clear under what circumstances. It seems undeniable that they usually consumed their meals in the female apartments of the royal residence, and nevertheless a few hints in the administrative texts suggest that in some occasions they sat down together with their lord and other high officers of the State.<sup>43</sup>

The total number of guests belonging to the 'inner circle' of the royal domestic establishment seems roughly equivalent to that given by later historians, such as Dinon and Ctesias (for which see Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, 4.164). The volume of food and drink consumed at these feasts may also be compared to the record found in Polyaeus' collection of *Stratagems of War* (4.3.32), where a great variety of edible items is listed. Various kinds of flour, sheep, goats, lambs, cattle, horses, geese, birds, gazelles, milk, garlic, onions, spices, fruit, various oils and seeds, and wine, to mention only some of the ingredients that appear in the text, are recorded as consumed daily in the Persian royal residence.<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, the menu of the dinner varied, according to the Greek historian, depending on the residence used by the king: he drank palm and grape wine while he was in Babylon or Susa and added safflower and saffron during his permanence in Media, thus adjusting the menu of his repasts according to local traditions and ingredients available from the regional environment. Polyaeus compiled this list to offer his moral conclusions about the deleterious consequences of an excessive diet, and yet the account is indicative of the huge number of courtiers associated with the

<sup>42</sup> The order, that lists somehow the animal according to size (cattle - sheep - birds - fish - rodents), can be recognized, in fact, not only in offering lists and in these administrative accounts of banquets, but also in monumental inscriptions like the Banquet Stele and the Annals of Sargon and Esarhaddon.

<sup>43</sup> SAA 7, 153, 154 and 155. It is interesting to note that in SAA 7, 154, the name of Esarhaddon's daughter Šeru'a-eṭirat is mentioned after that of the crown prince Aššurbanipal, but before three other princes (Aššur-mukin-pale'a, Aššur-šamê-eršeti-muballissu and Šamaš-metu-uballit): this detail provides insight into the hierarchy within the royal family, since Neo-Assyrian documents conventionally list the highest-ranking persons first. Also letters belonging to the Mari archives (see in particular ARM 10, 74) confirm that eating at the king's table was considered a sign of the king's preference for women, and in particular it was a honour usually reserved to his favourite wife.

<sup>44</sup> For a translation and a comment of this text, and a description of the Persian royal banquet, see Briant 2002, pp. 286-297.



Persian palace before the arrival of Alexander and his army, and of the richness and variety presented daily at the Great King's table.<sup>45</sup>

Beside these documents, conceived and written for practical purposes inside the administrative circle of the royal court, other sources can be used to reconstruct the carrying out of big events in the capitals. Monumental buildings, whose construction engaged all the Neo-Assyrian kings so greatly, were erected in order to commemorate: their purpose was to remind the people of one person or one single event, and served, thus, as a link between past, present and future. Not only was their function practical, but they also worked as physical reminders of ideological statements, and social and political relations as well. Moreover, they publicly displayed the success of the labour force that only the king could initiate, and because of this, they made visible the superiority of the dominant élite.

The Banquet Stele, set up to commemorate the inauguration of the North-West Palace at Nimrud, built according to the instructions of Aššurnasirpal II, suggests some conclusions regarding the demography of the city and the classes of people who could move within the royal household.<sup>46</sup> The presence of sixteen thousand «people of Kalhu», apparently all resident in the new city, indicates that a large part of the population was somehow affiliated with the palace or the other civilian or religious city institutions. To this number, we must add one thousand five hundred *zarīqu* officials employed at the palace, who may, then, account for the officials directly associated with the royal household, actually moving each day within its walls. The classes of people mentioned before these are instead explicitly differentiated and characterized as strangers. In all, 69,574 people were hosted in the royal household for ten days, and it should not be forgotten that humans were not alone: the first guests on the list, the first ones to enter the newly built capital city, were in fact «Aššur, the great god, and the gods of the entire land».<sup>47</sup> Mankind had the honour, therefore, of participating in not only the king's, but even the gods' meal, though only for a limited period of time.

The question of the reliability of this particular source especially concerns figures: the number of guests invited, the duration of the feast, and the quantities mentioned for the various ingredients. All these numbers seem, in fact, overstated, and doubting exaggeration for propagandistic

45 Cfr. Henkelman 2010: the author proves that even if, overall, the data from the Persepolis Fortification Tablets confirm the information provided by the classical authors (in particular Polyaeus and Heraclides), there are also some differences in the detail. This was due to a difference of perspectives: while the Greeks listed all the ingredients for the meals, the Elamite tablets mention only locally produced foodstuffs.

46 The text was published by Grayson 1991 (RIMA 2): Ashurnasirpal II A.0.101.30.

47 Gods are, in fact, mentioned at lines 104-105, while the totals for people are given only at the very end of the text, lines 141-151.

purposes of the text would be legitimate: ancient near eastern peoples loved lists and catalogues, especially in these kinds of royal inscriptions directed to a wide, variegated audience. However, by comparison with contemporary documents and with later texts describing meals in the Achaemenid court, all the quantities mentioned in the Banquet Stele seem trustworthy, with the possibility of the amounts of vessels and ingredients being eventually rounded up, but without too much discrepancy from reality.<sup>48</sup> This does not mean, however, that the portions coming from the foodstuffs mentioned were egalitarian: most likely (and almost surely) there were, instead, remarkable differences in the food supplied to members of various social classes. Rations were divergent in both quantity and quality, depending on the rank, social status and sex of each diner (it is remarkable that according to the Banquet Stele, women belonging to the Assyrian population had been invited to the big event, together with men).

We know other royal inscriptions which celebrate the inauguration of a new capital or of a royal palace,<sup>49</sup> but none of them is so detailed about the number and the quality of guests invited: in most cases in fact, the event is described using more general terms. Sargon, for example, at the dedication of Dur-Šarrukin and his palace invited to a «joyous banquet» the gods of Assyria, the kings of the four quarters of the world, his provincial governors, princes, eunuchs and the elders of the land of Assyria.<sup>50</sup> In another version he expanded the list somewhat, mentioning supervisors and officers too.<sup>51</sup> The king gave no other indication about the carrying out of these festivities, and the only list of ingredients that we have (included in the longer version of the inscription) concerned offerings presented to the gods as they entered the new palace as guests.

We know even less from Sennacherib, who used in his accounts expressions such as «at the dedication of the palace, I drenched the foreheads of the people of my land with wine, with mead I sprinkled their hearts»:<sup>52</sup> this seems more a description of a toast than of a banquet, and the general indication of the «people of the land» does not provide any specific information about the nature or the number of the invitees.

Esarhaddon, finally, declared that he had «the officials and people» of his country seated «at festive tables, ceremonial meals, and banquets». About the feast proper, we are informed that he «made their mood ju-

48 On Achaemenid royal banquets, see Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1995; Briant 1989; Briant 2002.

49 These texts are discussed in detail in chapter four.

50 Fuchs 1993, *Prunkschrift* from the Room XIV of the Palace, lines 75-81 and 307-312.

51 Fuchs 1993, *Annalen* Room II, lines 176-188 and 337-342.

52 See Frahm 1997, T12, T 13, and T30.

bilant», «watered their insides with wine and *kurunnu*-wine», and had his guests' heads anointed with fine and perfumed oils.<sup>53</sup> Although this information is scanty, it does not imply that the events promoted by later rulers were conducted on a smaller scale than the inauguration of Aššurnasirpal's capital.

The Banquet Stele never mentions finished, elaborated dishes presented at the king's table, but lists, instead, the various raw ingredients and beverages, without giving any hints on how they are to be processed and mixed together. The difficulty in the interpretation of this source lies in its vocabulary: the indication of vessels and the edible vegetal and animal items is in fact extremely precise, and it uses Semitic terms for specific elements of flora and fauna, whose translations are nowadays unknown, or at least uncertain.<sup>54</sup>

We may ask what the purpose was of mentioning such banquets in royal accounts and annals, together with meals shared by the king with his family, internal and foreign functionaries, civic and military officers, and all the population or closed groups of it. Beside the obvious level of content, whose propagandistic message could spread throughout the empire thanks to the oral accounts of those who took part in these events and then went back to their homelands – these inscriptions functioned also on other nonverbal levels. The simple fact of the presence of the inscription, engraved on the palace walls, was meaningful: in the whole of Assyria, in fact, the only person who had the resources and the authority to conceive of such a project, order its composition and follow its fulfilment, was the ruler. Moreover, the importance of the idea of power inherent in the control of the craft of writing should not be underestimated: palace inscriptions, together with the images that matched them, reminded the majority of courtiers and visitors that the king was ideologically and concretely their superior.<sup>55</sup> Finally, and more obviously to us nowadays, Neo-Assyrian palace inscriptions served as a record of the king's accomplishments, and of his good relationship with the gods and the peoples under his direct control. For this reason, banquets were described and depicted in images and words on the walls of almost every Assyrian capital city.<sup>56</sup>

53 Leichty 2011 (RINAP 4); Esarhaddon 1, lines vi 44-vi 53; Esarhaddon 2, lines vi 10-vi 24; see also the fragmentary text Esarhaddon 19.

54 For a synthetic but exhaustive study on the lexicon of this text, see Finet 1992.

55 As highlighted by Russel 1999, anyone who had the chance of entering an Assyrian palace would have been surrounded by texts; and though their content may have been unintelligible to many visitors, their context was not. «Royal inscriptions are the physical images of the royal word and are therefore a form of royal imagery [...] We make the modern mistake of trying to imagine an audience for the *content* of these inscriptions when in fact what seems to have been of greater importance is their presence as visual icons of kingship» (p. 230).

56 See Russell 1991, pp. 8-10.

### 3.3 The King and His Soldiers

The *topos* of the king eating with his soldiers went back to the third millennium: Sargon of Akkad, in fact, stated in one of his inscriptions that he ate everyday in the presence of five thousand four hundred of his men.<sup>57</sup> This assertion caught the attention of his contemporaries, and of his successors as well. Its success was confirmed also by the fact that it became the subject of a witty, sarcastic literary parody (already mentioned in the second chapter with its modern name *Sargon, Lord of the Lies*), in which all the main elements of a huge banquet consumed by the king in the presence of his closest functionaries are recalled and systematically changed, in order to give the idea of a chaotic, pointless event.

Considering this source in its context (recognizing and deconstructing, therefore, the literary mechanism that brought to its redaction) gives today a clear impression of how important the *topos* of the banquet was in recalling the heroism of a king to the listeners' memory: its purpose was to celebrate the ruler's cohesion with his army and all the other members of the court. According to *Sargon, Lord of the Lies*, the catastrophic meal was offered to eleven thousand warriors, runners and cupbearers (militaries were, thus, the majority, as in the original text by the king of Akkad),<sup>58</sup> and it lasted seven years, one month, and fifteen days. The purpose of the text is to make the described situation unreliable by using hyperboles, a feature that we can detect throughout the whole parody. It is remarkable how the duration of the banquet is clearly exaggerated even for later times, while the number of guests, seemingly implausible for the second millennium when this text was drafted, looks, instead, very likely and even limited, when compared to the numbers known from the later first millennium texts.

In the Old Babylonian time, the king of Mari Šamši-Addu wrote a letter to his son Yasmah-Addu, warning him to satisfy the troops composed of natives of the region, by spending some time with his soldiers, and eating abundant meals regularly with them. He particularly recommended that the soldiers should not receive anything too dainty, but instead a plain abundant repast.<sup>59</sup> The peculiarity of this text lies in the explicit statement of the

57 See RIME 2, E2.1.1.12, lines 27'-30': 5400 GURUŠ | *u-um-šum<sub>6</sub>* | *ma-ḥar-šu* | NINDA KÚ. The term used in this passage, *eṭlu*, referred to adults, able-bodied men and, when used as a collective or in the plural form, it had the specific connotation of «soldiers capable of bearing arms»: see CAD E, p. 411, s.v. *eṭlu*. The military character of this inscription is also given by the fact that this statement belongs to the source which describes Sargon's military campaign against the cities of the Upper Euphrates and Ebla.

58 Soldiers were recalled in this text also by the wordplay on *ummānu* 'troops' and *ummiānu* 'creditors', listed among the king's invitees.

59 ARM 1, 52, lines 32-33: *ina naptanim [m]aḥrīka lu kajanu NĪG.DU šuḥ'h'am la tu[š]aptan NĪG.DU taḥda[m] l[i]ptattanu*. This text has been discussed by Ziegler 2008, pp. 51-52.

reason why such behaviour was important for a good ruler: «set them by your side, for them to defend you and thus strengthen Mari's foundation». The meal consumed in common was therefore perceived as an instrument to affirm the connections between the head of the State and those people whose role was to protect him and ensure the safety of his reign.

From the same chronological and geographical setting, more letters described the welcoming of foreign troops in Mari, and the distribution of rations of food to soldiers. In a few cases, warriors even had the honour of consuming their food with the king himself: Babylonian dignitaries housed six hundred soldiers coming from Mari,<sup>60</sup> and Hammurabi personally ate with one thousand men from Kazallu.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, hostility between countries could be made visible through an adverse treatment reserved to the foreign army, as happened in the case of the Elamite soldiers in Mari.<sup>62</sup>

We do not really know how the Assyrian king and his troops ate in the course of a military campaign, in the months they were moving throughout the empire and living in camps.<sup>63</sup> While images provide some clues about various phases of production and cooking of edibles inside military encampments, texts do not tell us about life in these uneasy situations, and annals only present concise, repetitive sentences like «I set up my camp there». A few indications come once again from administrative records, such as a letter recording a first shipment delivered from the 'household of the magnates' to the cavalry, that included millstones, household utensils, and pigs – while beds, chairs and something else, that is now lost, were still to be given.<sup>64</sup> Central administration, thus, made sure that the cavalry (and probably all the other troops, as well) had both the tools and the foodstuffs necessary to feed its soldiers. Moreover, in a report written to the king and concerning the troops of Mazamua, among chariot drivers and fighters, cavalrymen, donkey drivers and other soldiers, appeared also sixty-nine 'domestics', including eight lackeys, twelve tailors, twenty cupbearers, twelve confectioners, seven bakers, and ten cooks. The total

60 ARM 26/2, 369.

61 ARM 26/2, 366.

62 ARM 26/2, 368. On this topic, see also Ziegler 2003; for an historical overview of these sources, see Charpin 2013, esp. pp. 35-38.

63 Fales, Rigo 2014 have provided a complete record of images dated to the Neo-Assyrian period, related to cooking activities within military camps. See, however, their remark at p. 425: «We may end our survey with representations of the *meal*. The first point to be noted here is that there is no direct evidence in our reliefs of a common mess-hall inside the precincts of the camp».

64 SAA 13, 82, lines 14-18: *a-na* 50 LÚ-ša-BAD.ĪAL.MEŠ | *an-nu-te* NA<sub>4</sub>.ĪAR.MEŠ *a-nu* -[*ut é*] | ŠAĪ.MEŠ *ni-ta-na* -[*šu-nu* x x] | GIŠ.NA.MEŠ GIŠ.GU.ZA.'MEŠ' [x x x] | *ri-ĥa a* -[*na ta-da-ni*], «We have given millstones, [household] ute[nsils], and pigs to these 50 cavalrymen [...]. Beds, chairs [and...] remain to [be given]».

of the ‘king’s men’ was reported at the end of the letter and amounted to 1430 persons: the ratio was, then, quite remarkable, with only one cook for 140 soldiers. These kitchen specialists might be helped by colleagues who were in charge, however, of specific kinds of dishes or beverages.<sup>65</sup>

Despite the distance in time, it seems not too unlikely to imagine a situation similar to what has been described for the Median and Persian armies by Xenophon: soldiers shared tents according to their companies and each shared his meals with his comrades – thus strengthening friendship and loyalty bonds, since «even animals that were fed together had a marvelous yearning for one another, if any one separated them».<sup>66</sup> Troops must have received their shares of basic ingredients, and probably provided for their food on their own, or were organized in groups or units with one cook who took care of everyone. The king had his own tent, but he could invite his generals there, to discuss war strategy while sharing the food; individual soldiers, or even platoons or whole companies could be invited as a sign of honour, or as a prize for having shown particular merit during the battle.<sup>67</sup>

Before venturing to a new war, the good Assyrian ruler made sure that his army had enough provisions to survive the following months: he fed his troops even in extreme situations, for example by embarking grain and other supplies, including hay for the horses, when they were sailing for a military campaign.<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, as it was impossible to accumulate and carry enough food for thousands of warriors for all the months of the military offensive, the army relied greatly upon booty and tributes collected during the march. They were accurately listed in annals and administrative records, and included every kind of livestock (mostly oxen and sheep, but also donkeys and asses, horses, birds, geese; more rarely even camels

65 SAA 5, 215: see in particular lines 15-18: LÚ.GIŠ.GIGIR.MEŠ ‘8 LÚ’.šá-é-2-e | 12 LÚ.KA.KEŠ 20 LÚ.KAŠ.LUL | 12 LÚ-kar-‘ka’-di-ni 7 LÚ.NINDA.MEŠ | 10 LÚ.MU PAB 6g UN.MEŠ É, «8 lackeys, 12 tailors, 20 cupbearers, 12 confectioners, 7 bakers, 10 cooks: in all 69 domestics».

66 Xen. Cyr., 2.1.28: καὶ τὰ θηρία τὰ συντρεφόμενα δεινὸν ἔχοντα πόθον, ἦν τις αὐτὰ διασπᾶ ἀπ’ ἀλλήλων.

67 Xen. Cyr., 2.1.30: Κύρος δ’ ἑαυτῷ σκηνὴν μὲν κατεσκευάσατο ὥστε ἱκανὴν ἔχειν οἷς καλοῖη ἐπὶ δεῖπνον. ἐκάλει δὲ ὡς τὰ πολλὰ τῶν ταξιάρχων οὓς καιρὸς αὐτῷ δοκοίη εἶναι, ἔστι δ’ ὅτε καὶ τῶν λοχαγῶν καὶ τῶν δεκαδάρχων τινὰς καὶ τῶν πεμπαδάρχων ἐκάλει, ἔστι δ’ ὅτε καὶ τῶν στρατιωτῶν, ἔστι δ’ ὅτε καὶ πεμπάδα ὄλην καὶ δεκάδα ὄλην καὶ λόχον ὄλον καὶ τάξιν ὄλην. ἐκάλει δὲ καὶ ἐτίμα ὁπότε τινὰς ἴδιοι τοιοῦτόν τι ποιήσαντας ὁ αὐτὸς ἐβούλετο ποιεῖν. «And for himself Cyrus had a tent made big enough to accommodate all whom he might invite to dinner. Now he usually invited as many of the captains as he thought proper, and sometimes also some of the lieutenants and sergeants and corporals; and occasionally he invited some of the privates, sometimes a squad of five together, or a squad of ten, or a platoon, or a whole company in a body. And he also used to invite individuals as a mark of honour, whenever he saw that they had done what he himself wished everybody to do».

68 See Frahm 1997, T29. On this topic, see also Fales, Rigo 2014, pp. 420-421.

and fishes are mentioned), cereals, wine and beer of various qualities, and hay to keep all these animals alive. Part of this booty was brought along, and part was sent instead to the capital, to increase the provisions kept there for the whole year. On the ideological level, the ability of the leader to gather wealth in his hands was shown making goods from all over the known world flow into the centre of the empire:

[US<sub>5</sub>].‘UDU’.ĤI.A GU<sub>4</sub>.MEŠ UDU.MEŠ *ana* UDU.SISKUR.MEŠ EN.MEŠ-*ía*  
*u nap-tan MAN-ti-ía ina KUR aš-šur ri-i-tú ʔa-ab-tú ú-šá-aš-bit*<sup>69</sup>

I put out to fine pasture [sheep and] goats, oxen, and cattle destined for offerings to my lords and for the royal table in Assyria.

We find echoes of such a perception of the leader’s role also in the detailed account of Sargon’s eighth campaign.<sup>70</sup> Here the power of the ruler is epitomized concretely by his authority and capability to capture his enemies’ granaries and warehouses and so feed his own soldiers. This distribution is never said to be a banquet and, given the nature of the circumstances, with the army on the road together with its chief, it is likely that there was neither the time nor the will to linger and have a big meal every time a new city was captured. Furthermore, the indication of the king opening the granaries and feeding his troops is repeated so many times, with an almost obsessive frequency, that the possibility that each of these occasions materialized in a big banquet is out of the question.

It has been written that this text represents a *unicum* within the corpus of Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions, because of this insistence on the overabundant nutrition of the troops based on cereals, apparently absent in other annalistic texts.<sup>71</sup> A review of all the sources dating back to the first millennium, however, does not confirm this hypothesis. On the contrary, the idea of the king as the one who piled up grain for his people’s<sup>72</sup> need and even sent it to foreign countries in need,<sup>73</sup> always appears. What is

69 RINAP 4, Esarhaddon 33, lines iii 35’-36’.

70 For the latest edition of this text, see Mayer 2013.

71 Zaccagnini 1989.

72 To mention only two examples dating to the transition period between the Middle- and Neo-Assyrian period, showing thus the continuity of this concept at that time, I must recall the royal inscriptions of Aššur-dān II and Tukultī-Ninurta II. The rulers affirm that they built palaces in various districts of the empire and piled therein «more grain than ever before», for the needs of the land (see RIMA 2, Aššur-dān II A.0.98.1, lines 60-67; Tukultī-Ninurta II A.0.100.5, lines 132-133). More examples can be found in almost every royal inscription of the Neo-Assyrian kings.

73 For example, Aššurbanipal in his annals affirmed that he had sent grain to Elam during a famine: see Luckenbill 1927, vol. 2, pp. 328-329, §855.

recognizable here, however, is the ultimate actualization of the concept of king as wealth-provider, known from royal epithets from the third millennium onwards; the identification of grain (or bread) as food *par excellence* is known from literary texts, as has been demonstrated before. The main focus was, then, not on the object of the allotment, but on the act itself of distributing food.

On the occasion of particularly significant deeds or conquests, the Neo-Assyrian king might decide to interrupt the campaign momentarily, to celebrate meaningful moments with his army. For example, several times during his campaigns through the Babylonian territories, Šalmaneser III entered Borsippa, one of the most important Babylonian religious capitals, and used this circumstance to strengthen his links with the local religious and civic authorities, and with the people of that land. In order to show the special status of the city, after performing sacrifices and rites for the patron gods:

*ana URU.KA.DINGIR.MEŠ u [URU] bār-sípa<sup>ki</sup> ERIN.MEŠ BAR šu-ba-re-e šá  
DINGIR.MEŠ GAL.MEŠ qé-re-ti iš-kun-ma NINDA.ĪI.A ku-ru-na i-din-šú-nu-ti  
TÚG bir-me-e ú-lab-biš NÍG.BA.MEŠ ú-qa-i-su-nu-ti<sup>74</sup>*

For the people of Babylon and Borsippa, his people, he established protection and freedom under the great gods at a banquet. He gave them bread (and) wine, dressed them in multicoloured garments, (and) presented them with presents.

Even in these particular circumstances, when the Assyrian king could have been considered an invader or intruder by the members of an important long-living renowned culture, a banquet gave the ruler the chance to overturn the situation in his favour, by assigning special privileges to the Babylonians and distributing the ‘usual’ gifts: food, beverages, clothing and probably also oil and precious metals, together with other presents.

Šalmaneser III himself celebrated another military and ideological deed in a similar way: twice during his reign, in the seventh and ninth year, after reaching the source of the Tigris,

*GIŠ.TUKUL aš-šur ina šà ú-lil UDU.SISKUR.MEŠ a-na DINGIR.MEŠ-ni-ia  
as-bat nap-tan ħu-du-tú áš-kun ša-lam MAN-ti-ia šur-ba-a e-pu-uš ta-na-ti  
aš-sur EN-a al-ka-ḳát qur-di-ia mím-ma šá ina KUR.KUR e-te-pu-šá ina  
qer-bi-šá áš-tur ina lib-bi ú-še-ziz<sup>75</sup>*

<sup>74</sup> The text is engraved on the bronze gates in Balawat and in other annalistic reports of this king: see Grayson 1996 (RIMA 3), Šalmaneser III A.0.102.5, lines vi 4-5, and its parallel A.0.102.16, lines 60'-62'.

<sup>75</sup> RIMA 3, Šalmaneser A.0.102.14, lines 70-72. See also Šalmaneser A.0.102.16, lines 40-44 and 50'-65'.



I washed the weapon of Aššur therein, made sacrifices to my gods, and put on a joyful banquet. I created my colossal royal statue and wrote thereon praises of Aššur, my lord, and all my heroic deeds which I had accomplished in the lands. I erected it therein.

Reaching the sources of the Tigris, a significant and symbolical place, was emphasized by various ceremonial acts. These included washing Aššur's weapon in its water,<sup>76</sup> feeding the gods with animal sacrifices and offerings and setting up royal images. This recalled a long Mesopotamian tradition, established by Sargon of Akkad, which aimed at commemorating in perpetuity the king's ability to reach the edges of the world).<sup>77</sup> He also fed the soldiers who accompanied him with a banquet staged in that very place. How magnificent and rich this meal might have been is not clear. Given the situation, embedded in a military march, probably staged in the open without all the facilities that were, instead, available in a royal residence, it is very likely that rather than a banquet it was actually 'just' a richer meal than the ones the army enjoyed during the campaign. Even though not so lavish in ingredients and quantities as the ones that the king could offer in his palace, these meals must have assumed a profound meaning in the participants' consciousness, because they represented the achievement of a success in the most concrete possible way: they were the perfect celebration of a mutual victory.

The king used the same stratagem, that is the distribution of special meals to his soldiers (not only to the highest military officers but to all the members of the army), in order to keep them in high spirits and maintain a gregarious cohesion. In particular, after the conquest of vassal reigns, he might hold banquets within the palaces of the defeated foreign leader, as Aššurnasirpal II and Šalmaneser III proudly stated in their annals, using nearly the same words:

*a-na URU a-ri-bu-a URU dan-nu-ti-šú šá <sup>m</sup>lu-bar-na KUR pa-ti-na-a-a  
KU<sub>4</sub>-ba URU a-na ra-me-ni-ia as-bat ŠE.AM.MEŠ u ŠE.IN.NU šá KUR lu-ḫu-ti  
e-si-di ina ŠÀ DUB-uk ta-ši-il-tu ina É.GAL-šú GAR-un LÚ.MEŠ-e KUR áš-šu-ra-a-a<sup>78</sup>*

I entered the city Aribua, the fortified city of Lubarna, the Patinu, (and) took the city in hand for myself. I reaped the barley and straw

76 See Yamada 2000, pp. 297-299.

77 See Yamada 2000, pp. 273-297; the author discusses all the examples within Šalmaneser's inscription, in which the king declares that he has erected royal images, and compares these texts to the older tradition.

78 RIMA 2, Ashurnasirpal II A.0.101.1, lines iii 81-82.

of the land Luhutu (and) stored (it) inside. I staged a banquet in his palace, I settled people of Assyria in (the city).

*a-na URU saḥ-la-la u URU.DU<sub>6</sub> ša-tur-a-ḫi lu KU<sub>4</sub>-ub DINGIR.MEŠ-ia ana É.GAL.MEŠ-šú lu ú-še-ri-ib ta-ši-il-tu ina É.GAL.MEŠ-šú lu áš-kun na-kam-te-šú lu ap-ti ni-šir-tú-šu lu a-mur<sup>79</sup>*

I entered the cities of Sahlala and Til-sha-turahi, brought my gods into his palaces, and held a celebration banquet in his palaces. I opened his storage area and saw his treasure.

In these cases, the army could relish some unusual moments of joy and comfort despite the difficulties of the war, at the defeated king's expense. They must have observed, therefore, the same etiquette that was in use in their homeland, with the highest military officers sitting inside the palace, together with the king and the local noblemen, who had the opportunity of proving their loyalty to the new leader. The rest of the company enjoyed instead a richer common meal in the close proximity, in the same residence or in its courtyards, experiencing the generosity and recognizing the heroism of its leader.

If a vassal or foreign ruler wanted to please the greater, more powerful colleague and avoid, therefore, a dreadful destructive invasion, he could offer the provisions stocked in his city to set up a special meal for the Neo-Assyrian troops. A clear example is reported in Sargon's account of his eighth campaign, where the Mannaean Ullusunu behaved «as if he had been one of my own officials or governors of the land of Assyria» (a sentence which offers a clue to how the soldiers could survive during months of battles all over the Assyrian territories). He therefore welcomed Sargon's army during its march toward Urartu and fed the soldiers, «to guarantee his kingship».<sup>80</sup>

Not only did he provide the army with grain and wine but also gave livestock as a tribute; in exchange, as a demonstration of accepting his requests and his peace offering, according to Sargon's words:

*ša<sup>m</sup> Ul-lu-su-nu LUGAL be-lí-šu-nu<sup>giš</sup> BANŠUR tak-bi-ti ma-ḫar-šu ar-ku-su-ma UGU ša<sup>m</sup> I-ra-an-zi a-bi a-lidi<sup>di</sup>-šú ú-ša-q-qi<sup>giš</sup> GU.ZA-šú šá-a-šu-nu it-ti UN.MEŠ KUR Aš-šur<sup>ki</sup> i-na<sup>giš</sup> BANŠUR ḫi-da-ti ú-še-šib-šu-nu-ti-ma ma-ḫar AN.ŠÁR ù DINGIR-MEŠ KUR-šú-nu ik-ru-bu LUGAL-ti<sup>81</sup>*

79 RIMA 3, Shalmaneser III A.0.102.2, lines ii 80-81.

80 This text can be reconstructed from various tablets and fragments: see the latest edition provided by Mayer 2013. The translation mentioned here refers to lines i 52-53.

81 *Sargon's eighth campaign*, lines i 62-63.

I set up a table of honour in front of the king Ullusunu, their lord, and placed his chair higher than Iranzi, his father who begot him, I had them take their place at a joyful table with people of the land of Assyria. They blessed my royalty before Aššur and the gods of their land.

This brief passage summarizes all the main elements of a royal banquet in the Neo-Assyrian mentality, by using some keywords: the subject of the whole action is Sargon who, fulfilling his duties as a good king, provided his people and new vassals with food. They could partake of it (probably the same staples, wine, cattle, sheep and goats that Ullusunu had just presented as a tribute) together with «people of the land of Assyria», i.e. high military officers and probably some of the private citizens who followed the army – sealing, thus, their new affiliation to the Assyrian empire.

The most honourable witnesses of such an oath of loyalty in the form of a banquet, were the patron gods of both the lands, who were present as icons and statues and who must also have had their share of sacrifices and offerings. Sargon underlined in his inscription how he decided to mark the new status of the local leader by arranging his seat higher than everyone else's, and Ullusunu was probably also sitting near him, to show everyone (Assyrians and Mannaeans), that he was now Sargon's new favourite and *protégé*. Finally, we encounter in this text two typical motifs of every literary source describing banquets in Mesopotamia: the characterization of this repast as joyful, and the natural conclusion of the whole scene with a blessing for the organizer of the meal, coming out spontaneously from the recipient's lips.

A similar episode, set almost two centuries later, is described again in the *Cyropaedia*, interestingly having an Assyrian as the protagonist.<sup>82</sup> Desiring to present himself as a new potential ally, Gobryas went out from his fortress to welcome Cyrus and his troops, taking with him all his followers and carrying wine, flour, barley-meal, cattle, goats, sheep, swine, and every kind of provisions with which they planned to set up a dinner for all the army. While they were organizing the meal, the Persian king checked the Assyrian citadel, verified the loyalty of his partner, and then went back to assure him and his people trust and support. This agreement was celebrated with a meal, but following the moderation typical of the character of Cyrus in this literary work, he declined the invitation to feast at Gobryas' palace and organized a more moderate, sober dinner in his camp – thus causing, the amazement and admiration of the Assyrian ruler. Gobryas, in fact, «saw the simplicity of the food set before them, and thought his own people more refined than they».<sup>83</sup>

82 Xen. Cyr. 5.2.1-21.

83 Xen. Cyr. 5.2.16: τὸ μὲν δὴ πρῶτον συνδειπνῶν αὐτοῖς ὁ Γωβρύας καὶ ὄρων τὴν φαυλότητα τῶν παρατιθεμένων βρωμάτων πολὺ σφᾶς ἐνόμιζεν ἐλευθεριωτέρους εἶναι αὐτῶν.

### 3.4 The King and the Stranger

As I have demonstrated above, the etiquette and ceremonial of a banquet consumed together with the ruler were, according to the Mesopotamian perception, a fundamental part of the king's internal politics: it mirrored, in fact, the complex system of hierarchy inside the court. But meals were meaningful outside the palace walls too, and could become a symbol for the international relationships held with other reigns around and outside Assyria.

Establishing important social bounds between diners was the focal point of most of the banquets: the more crucial and interesting the relationship sought was for the central administration, the greater the effort made to organize the big event. For this reason when the guests sitting at the king's table were foreigners, the magnificence of the preparations and the behaviour of the diners before and during the feast were particularly under examination, since they mirrored the political interest of every person concerned and, even more important, the partakers' future intentions.<sup>84</sup> Even in those cases when the meal did not take place in the royal court, and yet the foreigners were still considered the king's guests, they were properly entertained, and the ruler himself took care that they were treated as their status required. This is shown, for example, by the arrangement organized personally by Sargon II to welcome a high-status woman and her escort.<sup>85</sup>

Entertaining foreign embassies was a delicate task involving a strict protocol. Each guest was treated as the etiquette required, but from the point of view of the person who was staging the banquet: his opinion did not necessarily correspond with his guests' expectations, and possible discrepancies between them might lead to a political crisis or incomprehension. Culture clashes, sometimes unwanted and sometimes maybe sought after, were possible when the representatives of two different societies came into contact: for example, the delegation coming from Mari, received at the Babylonian court, felt offended because Hammurabi refused to donate one garment for each of the members of the embassy. This caused a reaction from the king, who sarcastically asked them «Do you imagine now that you can dictate in my palace about garments? Who pleases me, I outfit; who does not, I do not. I will not go back on this. I will

<sup>84</sup> On the protocol for diplomatic contacts and the stipulation of treaties, see Charpin, Edzard, Stol 2004, pp. 293-299.

<sup>85</sup> The text is unfortunately very damaged: SAA 15, 359. See in particular lines 4-9: LUGAL *be-lí* [*i-sa-ap-ra*] | *ma-a* DUMU.MÍ 𐎶𐎵 [x x x x] | *ta-la-ka* ERIM.MEŠ [x x x] | *ma-a'-du-ti* i-[*si-šá* NINDA.MEŠ] | '*ma'-a le-ku-lu* 'GEŠTIN'. [MEŠ *li-si-u*] | [?].MEŠ DÜG.GA *da*-[x x x x] | [x x]-NAM 'LÚ'. [x x x x], «The king, my lord, [wrote me]: 'The daughter of [NN] is coming, and there are many men and women wi[th her]. Let them eat [bread] and [drink] wine, [.....] sweet [oil]'...».

not outfit messengers at banquets!».<sup>86</sup> Similarly, on one occasion diplomats of the Elamite sovereign arrived in Babylon felt dishonored despite receiving sheep, wine and ice in their own quarters, since they considered their portions too small and the gifts inadequate to their status; they also complained that the king did not come out personally from the palace to welcome them on their arrival.<sup>87</sup>

Also in these circumstances, the position occupied at the table marked social differences: the most honoured guests could use a chair or a stool, others had to sit on the ground. Ambassadors probably always used seats, but their place more or less near to the person of the king was a marker of the consideration they were taken into: the nearer to the ruler was the seat, the easier it would be to talk about business and political affairs.

Eating was a private, potentially dangerous moment, since the king did not carry any weapon and was therefore more exposed to assaults and insidious aggressions, such as poisoning. Such dangers were even greater, when sitting at his table were not his closest friends and dignitaries, but foreigners and strangers. On the other hand, the possibility of sitting close to the ruler was a clear sign of open trust and friendship. The same awareness of the importance of the place occupied at the table is testified once again for later times by Xenophon. Cyrus, in fact, usually celebrated his military deeds at a banquet, and in a few cases decided to do it together with his most loyal allies:

ὡς δ' ἦλθον οἱ κληθέντες ἐπὶ τὸ δεῖπνον, οὐχ ὅπου ἔτυχεν ἕκαστον ἐκάθιζεν, ἀλλ' ὄν μὲν μάλιστα ἐτίμα, παρὰ τὴν ἀριστερὰν χεῖρα, ὡς εὐεπιβουλευτοτέρας ταύτης οὔσης ἢ τῆς δεξιᾶς, τὸν δὲ δεῦτερον παρὰ τὴν δεξιάν, τὸν δὲ τρίτον πάλιν παρὰ τὴν ἀριστερὰν, τὸν δὲ τέταρτον παρὰ τὴν δεξιάν: καὶ ἦν πλείονες ὥσιν, ὡσαύτως.<sup>88</sup>

So when invited guests came to dinner, he did not assign them their seats at random, but he seated on Cyrus's left the one for whom he had the highest regard, for the left side was more readily exposed to treacherous designs than the right; and the one who was second in esteem he seated on his right, the third again on the left, the fourth on the right, and so on, if there were more.

Every reception of foreign embassies at court apparently included a meal, consumed in the presence of the hosting king, and anointment and distri-

<sup>86</sup> ARM 2, 72. On the reception of ambassadors and strangers in Mari, see Charpin 1988, pp. 142-143.

<sup>87</sup> ARM 13, 32 and ARM 14, 122.

<sup>88</sup> Xen. Cyr. 8.4.3.

bution of gifts to all those who took part in the event as well. These customs were certainly in use in the court at Mari, and we have very similar accounts coming from the Neo-Assyrian palaces. Glassner proposed the identification of several phases that formed the social practice of welcoming reserved to strangers in ancient Mesopotamia: first, a moment of polite conversation and exchanges of pleasantries, followed by a shared meal that included both food and beverages. Often, during this banquet, a toast might be proposed, that could lead to a verbal or a physical challenge (oral debate or dispute in the first case, agonistic competition in the second), and at the end of this challenge a new balance and order were established (sometimes like the previous situation, but in any case renewed).<sup>89</sup>

It is possible that these phases were present also in the protocol of the first millennium, but the available sources do not provide us with such detailed descriptions and what we get is, instead, a more general sequence of moments. As a start, embassies were welcomed and accommodated in the palace, and they received rations of basic foods such as bread and beer. Afterwards, messengers were given clothes and oils with which they dressed and anointed themselves for the second, official moment. After completing these administrative stages, strangers were admitted to the Assyrian king's presence and enjoyed a lavish meal, during which not only public affairs were discussed, but entertainment was also provided by musicians, singers and sometimes probably even jugglers and tumblers.<sup>90</sup> Finally, the king distributed further gifts to everyone, usually gold and silver rings and other items made of precious metals.<sup>91</sup> After this convivial moment, ambassadors were sent back with their rich endowments and, more importantly, with a message to report to their chief.

Administrative records confirm the presence of strangers at court, and they received their rations of food and drink just like every other Assyrian officer and worker. Kinnier Wilson suggested that the foreign names reported in the Nimrud Wine Lists referred to captives deported in the capital city after military campaigns; Dalley and Postgate, however, published new texts that attest how, among these strangers leaders and ambassadors were included too, and they received a special treatment since they could drink their wine from the prestigious lion-headed rhytons usually used by the élite on official occasions.<sup>92</sup> Interestingly, in one of these texts, a

89 Glassner 1990.

90 See the iconographic evidence discussed in the sixth chapter.

91 The distribution of gifts, and in particular of garments and silver bracelets, was a significant and essential element in the receiving of a stranger ambassador: it took place even without the presence of the king, as many letters show: see for example SAA 1, 29; SAA 15, 90 and 91; SAA 18, 152.

92 See Kinnier Wilson 1972, pp. 92-94 and Dalley, Postgate 1984, p. 24. A complete list of

foreign Chaldean cook is mentioned, who was probably in service in the same palace where the allocation took place. Under these circumstances, the Assyrian king had an advantage over his invitees, since the place where the meeting took place was not a neutral zone but was, instead, his own realm: he played, therefore, the role of the master of the house and, by establishing the rules, he had the chance of making everyone well aware of his pre-eminence.

In a few cases, the encounter of two parties at a banquet could become the setting for concluding a pact: treaties dating back to the seventh century explicitly declare that drinking from the same cup meant taking a mutually binding oath, since an analogy was drawn between interiorizing the wine as well as the oath:

*ki-i šá NINDA.MEŠ u GEŠTIN.MEŠ ina šà-<bi> ir-ri-[ku-nu] er-rab-u-ni [ki-i ḫa-an-ni]-i ta-me-tú an-ni-tú ina šà-bi ir-ri-[ku-nu] ir-ri šá 'DUMU'. [MEŠ-ku-nu DUMU.] MÍ.MEŠ-ku-nu lu-še-ri-bu<sup>93</sup>*

Just as bread and wine enter into the intes[tines], [may the]y (= the gods) make this oath enter into your intes[tines] and into those of your son[s] and your [dau]ghters.

Another treaty concluded possibly in the year 754 between Aššur-nerari and the king of Arpad Mati'-ilu,<sup>94</sup> clearly states that a lamb was sacrificed on this occasion.

*UDU.NIM an-ni-ú TA ŠA pit-qí-šú la a-na UDU.SISKUR še-lu-[a]  
la a-na qa-ri-ti še-lu-a la a-na qí-ni-ti še-[lu-a]  
la a-na mar-ši še-lu-a la a-na ṭa-ba-ḫi a-na` [x x še-lu-a]  
a-na a-de-e šá <sup>m</sup>aš-šur-ERIM.GABA MAN KUR-[aš-šur]  
'TA' <sup>m</sup>ma-ti-i'-DINGIR šá-ka-ni še-[lu-a]<sup>95</sup>*

This spring lamb has not been brought out of its fold for sacrifice, nor for a banquet, nor for a purchase, nor for (divination concerning) a sick man, nor to be slaughtered for [...]:

the countries of origin of strangers mentioned in the Nimrud Wine Lists was firstly provided by Kinnier Wilson 1972, p. 91, and afterwards implemented by Dalley, Postgate 1984 in the final indexes of the book. For the lion-headed rhytons, see the Lexicon.

93 SAA 2, 6, lines 560-562. This text is well-known, since it records the treaty imposed by Esarhaddon in the year 672 to «the people of Assyria, great and small, from coast to coast», concerning the succession of his son Aššurbanipal: see Parpola, Watanabe 1988, pp. xix-xxxi.

94 On this text see Parpola, Watanabe 1988, esp. pp. xxvii-xxviii and xliii-xlvi.

95 SAA 2, 2, lines i 10'-14'.

it has been broug[ht] to conclude the treaty of Aššur-nerari, king of [Assyria], with Mati'-ilu.

We may assume that the meat was then shared among the contractors, to ratify the oath: in fact, the text contains meaningful analogies between various parts of the body of the sacrificial lamb and the physical or metaphorical 'body' of Mati'-ilu and his family. It is declared, in fact, that if in future he acts against the pact, he will experience the same dismemberment suffered by the victim whose flesh he ate together with his new ally, the Assyrian king.<sup>96</sup>

Significantly, refusing a meal could become an equivalent of refusing an oath, as letters attest.<sup>97</sup> Promises made during an official repast were, thus, legally acknowledged, and their breach had consequences on a practical, political ground.<sup>98</sup> Aššurbanipal, in his *Cylinder B*,<sup>99</sup> reported a long description of the welcome he offered to a Babylonian mission, sent by his deceitful brother Šamaš-šumu-ukin to the Assyrian capital. The ambassadors, theoretically sent to pay their respect to the great king and confirm the friendly agreement between the two brothers, were received according to all the oldest Mesopotamian traditions: they were invited to a sumptuous banquet, received brightly coloured garments, and were given gold rings for their fingers. The Babylonians received this special treatment during all the time they spent in Nineveh, guaranteeing in exchange their loyalty and obeying Aššurbanipal. For this reason, having accepted the Assyrian presents and hospitality, their betrayal and uprising side by side with Šamaš-šumu-ukin resulted even more unexpected and hideous for Aššurbanipal, who in his inscription expresses all his disdain for those who broke the bond of brotherhood stipulated at his table.

96 On ceremonial banquets following the conclusion of a treaty, see also Parpola 2011 (esp. ch. 10).

97 See, for example, the letter ABL 1240, published by Pfeiffer 1935, pp. 11-12, n.12 (in particular lines r. 4 ff.). The author of this text writes to the king that when the messenger sent by him would arrive in his city, «I will not eat food with them, I will not drink water with them, I will not walk beside them, I will not rise before your messenger, I will not inquire after the health of my king».

98 For the significance of such «covenant repast», and parallels for the Mari period and the Biblical account, see van de Toorn 1985, pp. 50-51. In particular, texts from Mari allude to kings drinking from a cup and performing other symbolic gestures such as giving gifts and anointing themselves with oil when concluding an alliance: see Charpin 2008, pp. 131-140. Interestingly, contracts from this city report the expression *nīšam akālum*, «to eat an oath», as synonym for *nīšam tamûm*, «to swear an oath»: thus, it has been suggested that in Mari the concluding of a pact was linked to the ingestion of some edibles (in particular sweepings, SAR.MEŠ, recorded in these same texts) that were intended to bear a curse should one of the contractor violate his oath. See Charpin 2008, esp. pp. 134-138 with the abundant bibliography mentioned, and Charpin 1997.

99 See Luckenbill 1927, vol. 2, 300-302, § 789.



Finally, in order to show the power of the king and his legitimacy as their leader, foreign missions were invited to the big inauguration ceremonies of palaces and capitals, together with the inhabitants of the core lands of the empire, with the purpose of making them feel «like Assyrians» – even though this very denomination underlines their being non-Assyrians. By asking other rulers, princes and governors to participate in the highest moments of his reign, and parading gifts and foodstuffs from every region of his empire parade in front of them (including tributes and audience gifts that the same embassies had brought with them from their homelands), the Neo-Assyrian ruler presented himself as a universal leader, who offered himself to the homage of his vassals.

The clearest example is provided again by Aššurnasirpal's Banquet Stele. In that circumstance, 47,074 men and women «from every part of my country» and 5,000 dignitaries and ambassadors from the foreign lands of Suhu, Hindanu, Patinu, Hatti, Tyre, Sidon, Gurgumu, Malidu, Hubuškia, Gilzanu, Kumu, and Musasiru were summoned to Kalhu.<sup>100</sup> It is interesting to note that all these envoys came from lands that were included in the report of the territories conquered by the king, mentioned at the beginning of the same text. These lands were said to be «brought within the boundaries of my land», and the population who lived in them could, thus, be «accounted.... as people of my land»:<sup>101</sup> being counted «like Assyrians», they acquired, therefore, the right to partake of the king's meal.

Conquered people brought into the new capital cities, together with the inhabitants of the surrounding territories, were summoned not only to populate them, or enjoy the banquets and the generosity of the ruler: the purpose of these big meetings was to instruct them in the duties of the citizen. Here they could, in fact, come into contact with all the major displays of 'good citizenship', that included obedience, payment of taxes and tributes to the king and to the gods, and respect for the civic and religious head of the State. At the same time, they enjoyed all the benefits they could get by accepting their social role: security, good administration, and concrete gifts and benefits to take back to their home countries. The Banquet Stele significantly ended with these words:

10 *u*<sub>4</sub>-*me* KÚ.MEŠ-šú-nu-ti NAG.MEŠ-šú-nu-ti *ú-ra-me-ek-šú-nu-ti*  
 ŠÉŠ.MEŠ-šú-nu-ti *ú-DUGUD-su-nu-ti ina šul-me ù ħa-de-e*  
*a-na* KUR.KUR.MEŠ-šú-nu GUR.MEŠ-šú-nu-ti<sup>102</sup>

100 For an accurate 'demographic' analysis of the celebratory phraseology included in this passage of the stele, see Machinist 1993, in particular p. 91.

101 *a-na* UN.MEŠ KUR-*ia am-nu*: see RIMA 2, Ashurnasirpal II A.0.101.30, lines 19-20.

102 RIMA 2, Ashurnasirpal II A.0.101.30, lines 151-154.

For ten days I gave them food, I gave them drink, I had them bathed, I had them anointed. Thus I did honour them and send them back to their lands in peace and joy.

We read, in these lines, the consciousness of the king that he would be rewarded for what he gave to his guests (food, beverages, and all the other special treatment reserved to them) once they went back to their homelands, «in peace and joy», testifying his power and generosity and so contributing to building and confirming the support of the whole population to his reign.

## Commensality and Ceremonial Meals in the Neo-Assyrian Period

Stefania Ermidoro

### 4 Eating with the Gods The Heavenly Banquet

**Summary** 4.1 Banqueting ‘of’ the Gods, Banqueting ‘with’ the Gods. – 4.2 Guests of the Gods: the King’s Role in Ritualized Meals. – 4.3 When the Banquet is a Festival: *tākultu*, *pandugānu*, and *qerētu*. – 4.4 Guests of the King: Inviting the Gods to a Meal.

#### 4.1 Banqueting ‘of’ the Gods, Banqueting ‘with’ the Gods

Ritual texts from every age and region of the ancient Near East are very keen on giving all the instructions for a perfect execution of those activities in temples that were directed to the care of the gods, including feeding, washing, clothing, entertaining with songs and music, and many others. Yet, such activities, apparently simple and similar to the ones performed every day in normal families, became specialized and ritualized, firmly integrated in temple life and elevated to a higher status because of their beneficiaries.<sup>1</sup>

In the first place, it must be stressed that one more feature is added here to the definition of ‘ritual’ provided in the first chapter, namely an action which encompasses a standardized sequence of gestures and words and whose course is strictly fixed.<sup>2</sup> In the following pages, in fact, performances always connected to a specific cultic occasion are discussed.<sup>3</sup> The word ‘ritual’ indicates, when used alone, to the actual act – instead, the written sources that describe such an act have always been defined as ‘ritual texts’. Within this broad group of documents, only those references in which eating is explicitly mentioned and actually performed are taken into consideration. Throughout Mesopotamian history, in fact, thousands of texts have been written concerning the appropriate time, quantity, quality and procedure with regard to the presentation of food offerings

1 On the interrelation between Mesopotamian literature, sacrificial practices and offerings see also the observations made by Pongratz-Leisten 2007 and 2012.

2 For the abundant anthropological bibliography concerning the discussion on the proper definition that should be attributed to the concept of ‘ritual’, see the last paragraph of Chapter 1.

3 For a recent synthesis on rituals in the ancient Mesopotamia see Sallaberger 2007, esp. p. 421 where the scholar provides his own definition of the term.

to the gods, but not so many of them describe shared meals consumed during or after these rites.

For the same reason, although it is very likely (and sometimes even almost undisputed) that a ritualized feasting should follow sacrifices and offerings, and that a distribution of the food previously donated to gods was a common practice in almost all the Near Eastern civilizations, only explicit texts have been presented analytically.

The term 'offering' has been used for every kind of food donation bestowed on the divinities, both bloodless and animal sacrifices: the focus is not therefore on the nature of the donation, but on its carrying out and purpose. Hence the definition adopted here is the one proposed by Linssen, according to which «an offering is a series of cultic acts: one brings something from a profane or secular place into a holy or sacred place, kills or destroys it, or eats it in the presence of others, in order to make a connection with the divine».<sup>4</sup> Divine meals in temples were usually served by priests; kings did, however, contribute to them, mostly in an ideological sense, by keeping the country in such a good and wealthy condition as to guarantee a constant flow of foodstuffs to the shrines. They participated, moreover, in a more concrete way, by collecting the appropriate tributes from all over the empire, assigning part of their war booties to the temples and sometimes even by personally setting up the table to feed the divinities. Private citizens also took part in a few celebrations, providing food (usually fruit or vegetables, or bakery products) according to their own funds.<sup>5</sup>

Partaking of the same food, be it symbolical or concrete, represents a ritual means to define, isolate and confirm a community, as has been discussed in the anthropological introduction to this work. In strongly hierarchical societies, and in essentially egalitarian ones as well, the principle of sharing a meal marks, in fact, a closed group, by creating boundaries and identities at the same time. It has been demonstrated that not all the attendees at the ceremonies investigated were expected to share the foodstuffs presented in every ritual feast, and even within the closed circle of those who had this honour, people had to observe a severe hierarchy and firstly had to be cleansed, before even touching the

4 Linssen 2004, p. 129. See also the definition proposed by Mayer, Sallaberger 2003. The two scholars offer a more traditional meaning of the term at first, in §1, that implies a connection between a donated object and a beneficiary. They also present, however, a broader one in §7.6, where offerings not connected with a specific addressee are listed.

5 All the original sources concerning Neo-Assyrian royal rituals and other cultic texts will be edited by Parpola in a forthcoming volume of the series *State Archives of Assyria*.

food that composed the meal.<sup>6</sup> On the occasion of religious festivals, as in civil ones too, food held a highly symbolical meaning, through which the king had the opportunity of showing his pious attitude.

According to our sources, the usual sequence of acts to be performed on the occasion of an offering ritual in a Mesopotamian temple always included the following steps (possibly in a different order and/or enhanced with details): at first, a table was brought in and placed before the image of the divinity,<sup>7</sup> then various purification rites were carried out (including the serving of water for hand washing, ablutions, incantations and prayers), in order to cleanse both the place and the cultural performers. This table was then prepared according to a prescribed arrangement, and vessels for liquids were set out together with the first foodstuffs (such as bread, fruit and sweets); animals for sacrificing were brought in and slaughtered. Frequently there is not a specific indication of the place where this bloody act was performed, but it is conceivable that this was the altar or another dedicated space, not too far from the offering table itself. Specific cuts of meat were served to the god(s), following a particular order and the indications motivated by the individual circumstances; finally, after the meal, all the vessels and containers that had been used were cleared away, and the table removed.

Some details belonging to these phases might have been lost to our knowledge, since they were not always explicitly mentioned in ritual texts; they might be reconstructed thanks to hints contained in other classes of documents, or from iconographic attestations. A clear example is the use of a cloth, spread on the offering table: in the sources analyzed in this work there is never a mention of it, however in the *nambûrbi* texts a formula is preserved, in which it is explicitly stated that someone laid it before putting various foods and drinks upon it.<sup>8</sup> Indeed looking at various images, table cloths appear on both ritual and secular occasions, and apparently the lack of reference in most of the sources might be ascribed to two reasons: it could have been omitted since it had no influence on the

6 Similar regulations were valid also in the Hittite religion: see for example the two ritual texts KUB 45.49, lines iv 8-10 and KBo 20.51, lines i 16'-18', mentioned by Collins 1995, pp. 88-89 and fn. 57-58.

7 Gods attended the offered meals thanks to the physical presence of their icons and statues: in order to be able to enjoy foods and drinks, they went through a few rituals performed by their human attendants, and specifically the ones for the cleansing and opening of the mouth. One incantation is particularly explicit in this respect: [*ša'-lam!*] *an-nu-u ina la pi-it pi-i qut-ri-in-na ul iṣ-ṣi-in a-ka-la ul ik-kal me-e ul i-ṣat*, «This statue without its mouth opened cannot smell incense, cannot eat food, nor drink water» (STT 200, lines 43-44). On this text, cfr. Dick 1999, pp. 96-100 and 114 fn. 136; for a discussion on these rituals and an edition of their original sources see also Dick 2005 and Walker, Dick 2001.

8 See for example, the *nambûrbi* text based on the observation of birds, reported in Maul 1994, p. 235, line 5: *paṭīra ana IGI Šamaš tasaḥḥap*.

progress or the success of the rituals, or else because it was considered an implicit, expectable act which those in charge of laying the table knew very well.<sup>9</sup> Musicians and singers often accompanied the whole execution with their performances; meanwhile incense and other aromatics were used to scent the air. Moreover texts sometimes mention curtains that must be pulled to hide the most crucial part of the ceremony (such as the consecration of the repast and the actual eating) from the members of the audience.<sup>10</sup>

From ritual texts, letters and administrative documents dating back to the Neo-Assyrian time, we know that almost every kind of food was included in the group of products offered to gods in temples: the best qualities of bread and other salty and sweet baked products, various cereal-based staples, meat and fish, soups, fruit and vegetables, beer, wine and milk. With such a considerable exhibit, men wanted to demonstrate to their creators how every element of the universe participated in their nourishment: creatures of earth, sky and water, products of the land and secondary goods deriving from stock breeding, as well. Mankind showed, thus, its capability to take advantage of the world that the supernal entities had literally put into its hands. Altogether, offerings presented for ceremonial and religious occasions do not seem to have differed widely from meals consumed by the *élite* in secular contexts – on the contrary, evidence coming from both texts and iconographies shows that food, beverages, vessels, and furniture did not differ at all.<sup>11</sup>

There was instead a wide gap between the contents of the tables of the common people and the deities', and it concerned in particular the consumption of meat. Richly present in the gods' diet, it was instead almost nonexistent for the «normal» population – for this reason, the moments in which meat was eaten were often symbolically marked.<sup>12</sup> In temples, thus, animal sacrifices, though officially declared as vehicles for the feeding of the supernatural beings, represented in effect a dissimulated method for sanctifying and justifying meat consumption by humans.<sup>13</sup> These events, and especially the ones that provided an unnatural display of sacrificial victims, happened so rarely that they were recorded with pride and amazement in administrative and literary texts, and in royal inscriptions as well. Edibles were used in rituals not only for nutritional purposes,

9 For both textual and iconographical references, see Maul 1994, esp. p. 49 and fn. 30. See also the examples mentioned in the sixth chapter.

10 For references to curtains in Neo-Assyrian times, see below.

11 For a reference study on this topic see Lambert 1993.

12 See Grottanelli 1988.

13 For a discussion on meat consumption in the Siro-Palestinian area, see Milano 1988.

but also to be handled in various manners. Flour could be thrown on the ground, or used to create magic lines and circles;<sup>14</sup> salt was often scattered on the table before placing the various vessels used for beverages and foods;<sup>15</sup> liquids (beer in particular, but also wine, milk and sometimes water) were poured on the ground as libations.

Though we know much of the everyday cultic activities from texts dating to older or later periods, sources describing Neo-Assyrian rituals concern almost exclusively special occasions and extraordinary celebrations, when the amount and quality of offerings were even more extraordinary than the ones usually presented in the various shrines. They mostly list days in which cultual performers had to fulfil their duties by reciting specific incantations, taking the gods' images into the city streets for processions, presenting particularly rich gifts, carrying out special purification rites, and so on. So far there are no texts at our disposal which depict a 'typical day' of a Neo-Assyrian temple, and the daily pattern has been usually reconstructed by scholars using later sources, *in primis* a Seleucid text reporting the ritual for the daily meals that were presented to Anu, in his sanctuary in Uruk.<sup>16</sup>

In her study on the Assyrian temples and the written sources related to them, Menzel divided the ritual texts that she analyzed into seven groups. These concerned: 'normal', everyday cult (in which she placed VAT 8005 only); daily cult that included the presence of the king; regular festivities in which the king did not take part (or that were performed in the presence of his representative);<sup>17</sup> regular festivities that included

14 See Maul 1994, pp. 55-56 and the bibliography there mentioned.

15 The use of salt in a cultic context mirrored its conventional use in human meals: it was in fact mainly intended as a flavour enhancer. As its various applications attest, however, salt carried both positive and negative ritual significances: on the one hand, it could symbolize health and purification; on the other, it could instead be associated with infertility, dissolution, and destruction. From a comparison with its use in a medical context, it can be assumed that salt was scattered on the offering table before the presentation of foodstuffs because of its absorbent qualities: it was used to attract the witchcraft or any other adverse *aura* that could have been present on the table itself. On the cultual use of salt, see Stackert 2010.

16 AO 6451: for the latest edition of this text, see Linssen 2004, pp. 172-183.

17 Even the king's garments, and in particular his *kuzippu*-cloak, could be used in rituals as an efficient substitute for the royal presence in Neo-Assyrian time. See for example SAA 10 339, lines 9 - r. 9: [DINGIR.MEŠ] <sup>uru</sup>kur-ba.íl [ina pa-na]-'tu-ú-a [i]-'ta-ab-bi-ú 'ku-zi-pi' ša LUGAL il-lu-ku 'šá-at-tum <ana> šá-at-ti ki-i an-ni-i il-lu-[ku] ÉR.ŠÀ.HUN.GÁ ina UGU-ḫi in-né-ep-pa-áš a-na LUGAL be-lí-ia i-ka-ru-bu 'LUGAL' be-lí 'ṭè'-e-mu liš-kun [ku-zi-pi] li-di-nu, «[The gods] of Kurba'il set off (for the *akītu*-temple) under my [direction], and the garments of the king go (along). Year after year, they go on like this; the penitential psalm is performed over them, (and the gods) bless the king, my lord. Let the king, my lord, order that they give [the garments]». For the use of the *kuzippu* in other rituals of this period, see also CAD K, s.v. *kizuppu b*.

the ruler (basically, all the festivals held in Aššur); extraordinary festivities that, precisely because of their peculiar nature, always demanded the king's participation (for example enthronizations or celebrations of military victories); private offerings to temples; and finally, other occasions which are not known from the texts at our disposal.<sup>18</sup> All the texts discussed in this chapter required the ruler's active attendance, and even when describing 'normal' activities, such as eating a meal, they were still strongly marked as ritualized moments.

Menzel, as mentioned above, suggested that VAT 8005, the so-called 'ritual of the providing with food of the temple of Nineveh', essentially reported the carrying out of the daily Neo-Assyrian cultual activities.<sup>19</sup> Van Driel on the contrary has rejected the hypothesis that it could be considered a «handbook for the ordinary cult in which any person leading a celebration might be addressed», and (on the basis of its parallel passages with KAR 215 and other texts) considered it as a local adaptation of a ceremony performed for a specific occasion, a «standardized ritual of which the different elements did not need to be written out completely every time».<sup>20</sup> He deduced, from VAT 8005, the existence of a service called *apālu* («providing of food»), celebrated in all the major temples of the empire, that included some fixed cultual acts and invocations and that was marked as special because of the presence of the king. Van Driel contemplated the possibility that the expression *apāl bīt ili* pointed to «any ritual which was intended to provide a rich meal to the gods, whether it was called *naptanu*, *tākultu* or *qerētu*»,<sup>21</sup> and went further, suggesting a link between this *apālu*-rite and the *tākultu*.<sup>22</sup> In the forthcoming edition by Parpola, VAT 8005 is presented as a compendium of «temple service rites for all Assyria»<sup>23</sup> – however, in her introduction Pongratz-Leisten suggests that this tablet written by Kišir-Aššur, chief exorcist under Aššurbanipal, is actually an abbreviated version of the *tākultu* ritual.<sup>24</sup>

Beside raising the question of how much of what we read is 'ordinary' or 'extra-ordinary', it is certain that the sources at our disposal are evidence almost exclusively of the public aspect of Mesopotamian religion. Private cultual practices are mostly unknown, and mainly limited to some

18 See Menzel 1981, p. 158, where examples for each of these categories are given.

19 See in particular Menzel 1981, pp. 151-153.

20 Van Driel 1969, pp. 60-75 (quotation at p. 63).

21 Van Driel 1969, p. 165.

22 Van Driel 1969, pp. 65-68.

23 The text will be published as SAA 20, 37.

24 See Pongratz-Leisten, «The Vision of a Unified Territory and the Development of the Tākultu Ritual in Assyrian History», in Parpola, forthcoming.



magic rites, connected to the most basic and familiar necessities such as asking for recovery, safeguard for a new-born child, protection from diseases or calamities, etc.<sup>25</sup>

As far as we can see from hints coming from letters and indications scattered in other texts (for instance the suggestions coming from the literary ones, or from omens and hemerologies), the common people's religion did not differ too much from the state religion, although it was certainly on a much smaller scale in terms of quantity, and was more modest in the *paraphernalia* that were used, as well.<sup>26</sup> Most of the cultic acts performed by common believers must have been occasional rituals: that is, ceremonies performed for a contingent occasion, carried out to obtain a specific result. In these cases, the officiant's explicit purpose was to obtain the gods' favour in reward for his commitment (in particular the offerings and meals donated to them), and to overturn a critical situation: it was, then, a chance to compel the supernal being to show his or her benevolence in concrete terms.

Whatever the circumstance was (public or private, large or moderate), once the food had been set on tables in the shrines in front of the gods, the meal acquired a different and special nature. Its consumption could take place on a high, horizontal level, that is the one of the single beneficiary god or his/her family and court. They had in common, in fact, the same supernal essence, and were part of the same exclusive group that remained, in the case of these events, clearly separated from humankind. Men were, thus, brought to a clear perception of their lower status, through their exclusion from the common table.

There existed, however, also different situations marked by a vertical, descending movement, when the divinities came nearer to men. On the occasion of such events, temple personnel and devotees lived off what came from the gods' tables but did not sit down with them; finally, on other occasions a few privileged men (and in extremely rare cases even the whole population) could share the same food and drink together with their deities. The significance of these events was clearly different: in the first case, the gods' partaking and their benevolent acceptance of the

25 The sources grouped under the title «Rituals for Private Devotees» in SAA 20 are in fact only four (nos. 29-32); they include an initiation ritual to the secrets of Ištar to be performed in the Equ-House of Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta, two texts describing a festive meal served in temples (see below) and one *nātu* rite for the Daughter-of-the-River, which seems to have had apotropaic purposes.

26 On this respect, see the very explicit passage in SAA 20, 31, lines r. 6-7. Here, while describing a banquet to be set up in the temple of an unknown deity, among various cultic ritual we find also a reference to a burnt offering where two different options are given: *šum-ma* NUN šu-ú TU.GUR<sub>4</sub> MUŠEN a-na ma-aq-lu-te i-qa-lu | *šum-ma* muš-ke-nu šu-ú ŠÀ-bi UDÚ. NITÁ i-qa-lu, «If he is a nobleman, he burns a turtledove as a burnt offering. If he is a commoner, he burns the heart of a ram».

food and drink presented as daily meals, though consumed alone, were crucial for the ideology and the maintenance of temples, since the whole purpose of their construction, support and survival was the feeding and care of the gods.

After the divine consumption, these foods were in part or completely redistributed to various groups of people, under the form of *rēhāti*, ‘leftovers’: these consisted mainly of solid food, since liquids went lost in the form of libations poured on the ground. The king’s share in particular played an ideologically important role, since only a perfectly legitimate king had the right to receive these leftovers.<sup>27</sup> The temple personnel, instead, deserved it because they allowed the proper carrying out of rites and the maintenance of the divine residence: without their constant effort, the gods would not have been fed.

Some edibles deriving from the gods’ meals could be presented at the king’s table just as they were (for example the various kinds of bread and sweets, fruit and some vegetables); some others instead needed to be processed and cooked in the palace kitchen (for example the cuts of meat). Letters sent to the kings witness that leftovers were sent to the capital also from other cities and minor centres of the empire, and these could be processed and treated before the transportation, for conservation reasons.<sup>28</sup> Foodstuffs portioned out as leftovers were not just pure means of support, but conveyed, rather, fundamental symbolical messages: they attested the status of the recipients, their commitment to the gods and to the crown, or on the contrary (when denied) the disdain and hostility of these authorities. They could even become a tool in the king’s hands, used to create around his person a sort of ‘intelligence agency’, founded on the granting of the privilege of their consumption.<sup>29</sup>

Receiving the leftovers of the gods was, therefore, usually a prerogative of the king and his family,<sup>30</sup> but on a secondary level, what came from the

27 Significantly, in the Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions from the eighth century onward, the fact that the Babylonian priests accepted to distribute the leftovers of the sacrifices performed in their temples to the Assyrian king symbolized the acceptance of this ruler also as the head of the Babylonian region. On the significance of the *rēhāti* in Neo-Assyrian time see Parpola 2004a and Joannès 2013.

28 Letter SAA 10, 108 for example refers to oxen and sheep preserved with oil and sent to the Inner City as leftovers reserved to the king: see lines 10’-11’, GUD.MEŠ UDU.MEŠ | *ina* ‘ŠA’ i.GIŠ.

29 This same conscious use of leftovers is attested in later times, as described in Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia*. In this text, the author presents a clear analysis of how Cyrus used even food as part of his political message, with explicit references to many of the literary *topoi* already present in our previous sources: see for example *Cyr.* 1.3.4-7; 8.2.1-4; 8.2.7-9; 8.2.10-12. All these passages are quoted and commented by Parpola 2004a.

30 For textual references, see SAA 13, 156, lines r. 3-10; SAA 15, 218, lines r. 8-11; SAA 16, 106, lines r. 1-8; SAA 18, 9, lines r. 17-21.

king's and the crown prince's table could be redistributed to the officials of the reign.<sup>31</sup> As Parpola effectively described them, foods deriving from the ruler's table were «tokens of royal favour which could be distributed to any faithful servant, whereas the leftovers of gods were tokens of *divine favour*, which would be extended to the king and the crown prince alone».<sup>32</sup>

The second case mentioned above, the one in which a large or small closed group of people, or even the whole population, had the chance of partaking of the food together with the gods, clearly acquired a different meaning. On the occasion of such events, in fact, human and supernal beings shared some time together and enjoyed the products of the land that the former had cultivated after being entrusted with this task by the latter. It was, therefore, an opportunity for every man to feel and appreciate the approval of the gods, living for a while the illusion of being their similar – since, as we have seen, sharing the same food implicitly means, in an anthropological perspective, sharing the same life.

According to Sallaberger, the meals consumed after the offerings and the celebrations that followed such donations did not belong to the religious ritual proper:<sup>33</sup> the arguments presented in the previous chapters of the present work, however, show that such repast was, beyond any reasonable doubt, an integrant part of the sacred ceremonies. Food previously presented before the gods was consumed at a meal precisely by reason of its new nature, loaded with a new ontological significance. Without the first moment of the ritual, a more strictly religious one, the successive festive event would have lost its profound symbolic and socially unifying meaning.

Eating together, in fact, and even more when also done together with the gods, was so significant that the circumstances in which this occurred marked the time of Mesopotamian people all the year round. Anthropologists also consider the phase of the eating proper as an integrant part of the offering rites or sacrifices: for example, Valeri identified four main acts that pertain to these ceremonies and that coincide, overall, with the ones listed above in this chapter. Even though the scholar referred in that particular circumstance to bloody sacrifices, the four moments that he pointed

31 A few Neo-Assyrian letters attest gratitude or discouragement of king's subordinates, rewarded with or deprived of such privilege: cfr. for example SAA 10, 182, lines 33 - r. 1; 294, lines 17-19. See also the indication of a distribution of leftovers to the domestic staff of the palace at the end of a royal banquet in SAA 7, 157, line r. ii 16: [*re-eḥ*]-*ti* BANŠUR.MEŠ *a-na* UN.MEŠ É, «the remainder of the tables (were distributed) to the domestic staff of the palace».

32 Ritualization of table-sharing and distribution of portions of leftover sacrificial meat are attested also in Mari, particularly in relation with the *elēnum* celebrations: see Sasson 2004, pp. 204-205 and fn. 72.

33 Sallaberger 2007, p. 424. He has recently reaffirmed that, in his opinion, «the central act of the sacrifice in Mesopotamia was the *presentation* of the offerings, and not, for example, their transformation (such as slaughtering, burning) or consumption»: see Sallaberger 2012b, p. 160.

out can be applied in fact to every kind of food donation presented to gods. They are: induction, the procuring and preparing of the victim (or of the offering); the taking of life, which is a *conditio sine qua non* of sacrifice that, in case of bloodless contributions, evolves into some additional necessary handling to prepare them for the actual eating; renunciation, i.e. the cutting off from what is the human consumption of part of the victim (in a few cases, it includes the whole animal) or of the other edibles (libations are a clear example of this phase); and consumption, finally possible since the gods have been fed, that corresponds to the most social and festive part of the whole rite.<sup>34</sup>

Rituals took place throughout the Mesopotamian calendar, with a few particularly intense periods which corresponded to the transition months between the end of one year and the beginning of the following, i.e. the vernal equinox. Feasts and cultic meals became, thus, mnemonics that marked the passing of time and of the seasons; moreover, their distribution all year long created what has been defined as «prospective memories».<sup>35</sup> While giving a sense to current moments, the religious calendar oriented people towards future memories by creating a sense of expectation and the perception of an order that rules the world.<sup>36</sup>

As for the geography of the repasts of the gods, such rites usually took place in cultic cities, and in particular within the divine abodes. Daily, ordinary meals were served in the inner rooms of the temples where the divinities spent their existence; on more important occasions, when the divine council was summoned, they could be served in larger rooms inside the same abodes, or in their courtyards, where the worshippers were present, too. Neo- and Late-Babylonian sources describe the rite of the divine meal (as well as other ones, like the kettledrum ritual) as being performed behind curtains, drawn to hide the critical moment of the eating from the main audience.<sup>37</sup> There are not as many references to curtains in the Neo-Assyrian texts, even though a few hints suggest that this custom was already in use in the seventh century.<sup>38</sup>

Food was served not only to anthropomorphic beings, but even to non-

34 Valeri 1994, see esp. pp. 109-110.

35 Sutton 2001, p. 28.

36 On the semantics of Mesopotamian calendar see Buccellati 2013b.

37 For references to Neo- and Late-Babylonian sources, see Linssen 2004, p. 139.

38 The word used to indicate curtains in Neo-Assyrian, *pariktu*, is different from the one that is normally found in the later texts (*šiddu*). The instances in which this word appears in Neo-Assyrian sources, however, are few and various: see the ritual text K.3455 (edited by Menzel 1981, II, Text no. 43); the two letters SAA 10, 247 and 345; and the list of commodities ND 2311. Eating is never explicitly mentioned to be performed behind a curtain in Neo-Assyrian time.

anthropomorphic entities: geographical or architectural elements (mountains, rivers, thresholds and door jambs), natural elements (winds), objects (beds, chariots, sceptres), etc., which were, though, often recalled in the texts with a preceding divine determinative.<sup>39</sup> This characteristic of Mesopotamian religion had been a constant, ever since its earliest attestations at the beginning of the third until the end of the first millennium, and it provides us with an interesting view on a peculiar notion of 'personhood'. According to the set of ontological premises which influenced Near Eastern religious performances in fact, this was not connected to biological or human qualities but to relational and sociological issues instead. The anthropologist A. Gell has recently provided a well-argued and appropriate framework to cultic practices such as the ones discussed below, that questions the very idea of 'agency'. This should be considered as tightly bound to the concept of causation: when an event is believed to happen because a person or a thing prompted a causal sequence, this constitutes an instance of 'agency'.<sup>40</sup> Thus, according to Mesopotamian perception offering food to a non-human (and even to a non-humanlike being) was considered as the trigger to a series of causes and effects which had tangible outcomes on those who performed the ritual. Commensality became, thus, a tool for recognizing the role of non-human entities within the human and social universe; moreover it allowed control over them.

The connection to Near Eastern cultural practice is particularly clear in the following passage: «Should we say that the object is animate not because we attribute biological life to it, but subjectivity/intentionality, which is something quite different? [...] It is surely irrational, or at least strange, to speak to, to offer food to, dress and bathe a mere piece of sculpture, rather than a living breathing human being. And so it is: those who do these things are just as aware of the 'strangeness' of their behaviour as we are, but they also hold, which we do not, that the cult of the idol is religiously efficacious, and will result in beneficial consequences for themselves and the masters they serve in their capacity as priests».<sup>41</sup>

This fact confirms, therefore the symbolic worth of foodstuffs within the Mesopotamian religious context: drinks, meat, vegetables, fruit and cereals were offered to honour and please the supernal world, in any of its con-

39 See Porter 2006.

40 Gell 1998. See also Bray 2012.

41 Gell 1998, pp. 122-123. The scholar never mentions ancient Mesopotamia, but discusses Egyptian religious practice: «Receiving food offerings is how the Egyptian gods ate their food. This is not to say that the act of feeding the god by placing an offering before it is not symbolic in the sense of 'meaningful', but the 'meaning' stemmed from the real (causal) outcome of this act of feeding; the god was no longer hungry. The essence of idolatry is that it permits *real physical interactions* to take place between persons and divinities. To treat such interactions as 'symbolic' is to miss the point» (quotation at pp. 134-135).

crete manifestations. The gods themselves wanted the kings to celebrate their nature with joyous meals: Ištar, in fact, commanded Aššurbanipal to «remain here, where the abode of Nabû is. Eat food, drink wine, provide music, honour my divinity». <sup>42</sup> Feasting was elevated, therefore, to the highest level of worshipping activities.

## 4.2 Guests of the Gods: the King's Role in Ritualized Meals

Sometimes, gods were summoned to a banquet apparently without a specific reason, as described in literary texts such as *Nergal and Ereškigal*. Beyond their everyday life, marked by the regular timing of ordinary meals consumed within the inner circle of family and friends, Mesopotamian divinities could, in fact, also enjoy some bigger events: these festivals included the participation of a wide audience and an extraordinary display of wealth. Being the occasion for showing everyone the power and authority of the worshipped god in those particular circumstances, such exhibitions included every feature of a huge ceremony: clothes, jewels, outfit, rooms, servants and obviously the menu of a special banquet served to every diner – everything must have been adequate for the situation.

A few exceptional cases are discussed next, in which deities decided to share their food with some privileged human guests: they were not, thus, a repast 'of' the gods, but 'with' them. Predictably, the main beneficiary of such honour was the king, their beloved, the one who, with his constant care, preserved the temples and their cult in good condition and made sure that the land prospered and produced in abundance the precise foodstuffs presented on the offering tables before the supernal beings. From the ruler's point of view, big religious festivals were a perfect opportunity to reaffirm that their position in the social hierarchy was due to the will of an acknowledged pantheon of gods, at the same time publicly showing their respect to the powerful religious elite. <sup>43</sup>

On rare occasions, the ruler took part also in someone else's company: his heir, the magnates or other officials, priests and personnel of the cult, and in extremely exceptional cases even the lower level of the popula-

<sup>42</sup> These words were pronounced by the goddess in a dream sent to a seer and directed to the king during the military campaign against Elam: this episode was reported in one of the king's cylinders, for which see Luckenbill 1927, vol. 2, pp. 332-333, §861.

<sup>43</sup> See Pongratz-Leisten, «The Contribution of Ritual to Create a Unified Territory», in Parpola, forthcoming.

tion.<sup>44</sup> All these people appear in the ritual texts as servants and guests at the same time. Deities and humankind appreciated the same edibles: men provided the supernal entities with food every day, through bloody sacrifices and offerings of vegetables and beverages, and consequently in a few cases they were rewarded, with the chance of sharing the pleasures of the table. It is noteworthy to remind the reader here that, in real life as in literary texts, one of the main outcomes of the banquets that took place every day in temples and in these great events was the discussing and determining of someone's good fate, usually for the one(s) who provided the delicacies set up on tables.

Within this ritualized frame, the behavioural rules of each participant must have been clearly fixed, and this is the reason why the written sources that we can consult today were drafted. Strict etiquette, appropriate to the divine guests giving the party, needed to be maintained during the whole delicate moment in which the human and the divine worlds came into close contact. We have reconstructed here not only the structure of the meal itself consumed in the presence of and in the company with the gods, but also the moments that immediately preceded and followed this repast, in order to detect similarities and differences of a banquet 'with' the gods, compared to a banquet 'of' the gods, that excluded mankind.

In the first case, the choice of the place was restricted: being invited by the divinities, the king (perhaps together with other guests) reached them in their abodes. But since the inner rooms were sacred and reserved for special religious celebrations, meals were consumed in the outer space, i.e. the courtyard. From the sources at our disposal we have explicit indications that the ruler had to go out from the private area of the temple:

LUGAL ú-ša-a ina šá'-pal'" [x x x x]  
[ina IGI <sup>gišI</sup>]G ša KAB ina UGU né-mat-[ti uš-šab]<sup>45</sup>

44 Nowhere, in the Neo-Assyrian sources, can we find an explicit description of a great, collective ritual such as the *zukru* festival held in the second millennium in Emar. On the occasion of this large-scale event, the whole city population gathered together, for the most important religious ceremony of the year, in the form of a huge banquet provided by the Palace to the community. Humans joined their gods for a feast, each participant being supplied with a portion of *pappāsu*-bread, barley bread and beverages. Meat and some more foodstuffs came probably from the numerous sacrifices and offerings presented during the celebrations. The *zukru*, thus, required the participation of the entire city: all the special rites included in the festival took place only *after* the population had eaten and drunk (*ki-i-me* KÚ NAG). Apparently, this event did not require the personal presence of the ruler, who is never explicitly mentioned even though he was by implication always on the scene, thanks to his generosity in providing all the necessary food and beverages. For a detailed analysis of this interesting ritual, which includes an edition of all the sources, see Fleming 2000, esp. pp. 48-140 and 234-267. For a comment on the social aspect of the feast, see Sallaberger 2012b, esp. pp. 163-165 and 169.

45 K.3455 (= SAA 20, 16), 7'-8' (for a previous edition of this text, see Menzel 1981, II, no. 43).

The king goes out, [...] under [...]  
[and sits fa]cing the left door, on the couch.

In other texts, the mention is not so explicit, but inferable by the high number of persons said to have taken part in the festival, and who obviously needed a space that was large enough to accommodate everyone: even the whole population, as in the case of the *akītu*. On the occasion of the ‘victory ritual’ performed in the military camp, the king ate his meal in the *qirsu*: this term, known only for the Neo-Assyrian time, referred to a sacred area, most probably situated within a temple, where various religious acts took place.<sup>46</sup>

[a-n]a qir-si er-rab nap-tu-nu GAR-an  
[LU]GAL i-ḥad-du<sup>47</sup>

He enters the *qirsu*, arranges a banquet,  
the king rejoices.

The frequency of these meetings was limited, otherwise they would have lost their pregnancy and character as extraordinary events. Some of the texts discussed here cannot be linked to a specific day of the Mesopotamian calendar, and their execution could also have been motivated by different contingencies. In the case of bigger festivals, instead, it is possible to get the precise date (the 8th-10th Nisannu for the Babylonian *akītu*, the 5th Ayyaru for the celebrations of the sacred marriage of Nabû and Tašmetum in Kalhu, etc.). These situations were, though, different from the ones previously discussed: the king and the other guests did not generally receive the leftovers from the gods’ table, but were physically present at the meal, at the same time with their divine hosts. This means, as a consequence, that such rituals took place mostly in the capital, where the ruler dwelled, and that the period was influenced by his other various engagements (especially military ones). A replacement of the figure of the king was sometimes possible in a few Neo-Assyrian rituals,<sup>48</sup> but this does

<sup>46</sup> See Parpola 1983 (LAS II), pp. 65-66; the text has been published by Deller 1992. Pongratz-Leisten (1997, p. 250) has suggested a connection between this ritual and the *akītu* performed in Arba’il, on the basis of its dedication to Ištar, its military character and, above all, because of the *erāb āli* procession (mentioned just before the banqueting scene). Cultic acts are staged within the *qirsu* in the following ritual texts included in the forthcoming volume SAA 20, 9, line r. iii 12’; 11, line r. 15; 15, line r. iii 3; 18, line 55; 21, line r. 5’.

<sup>47</sup> K.10209 (= SAA 20, 18), lines r. 22’-23’.

<sup>48</sup> For example, in the text published as SAA 10, 338, lines 9-r. 2, a priest writes to Esarhaddon his request for a *kuzippu* garment of the king, to accompany the god Sin in a procession to his *bīt akīti* in Harran.



not seem to be the case for banquets, where he had to be present personally, to enjoy the honour he was given.

The phases that composed these circumstances were apparently very similar to the ones that characterized ‘normal’ divine meals of the gods, except for a greater number of attendees and a greater visibility. Preparation firstly included the consecration of those animals, whose meat constituted the primary offer to the gods and the main course of the meal: they were brought into the sacred space, tied and killed.<sup>49</sup> The moment of the slaughtering was always conveyed through the laconic expression UDU. SISKUR *nasāhu*, «to perform the sacrifice»: only in one case do we have an idea of the treatment reserved to the animals – although it is not possible to say if this description represented the norm:

2 GU<sub>4</sub> NÍT[A.M]EŠ *i-na-saḥ*  
 ‘*ina*’ ŠÀ 1<sup>1</sup>-en<sup>1</sup> ŠÀ-šú *ina bé-ta-nu-uš-šú i-da’-[i-i]pu a-na ‘a’-ku-si*  
 [*ina* Š]À 1<sup>1</sup>-en<sup>1</sup>-ma UZU.si[!]-qu<sup>1</sup> *ep-pal*<sup>50</sup>

He (= the king) sacrifices two bulls:  
 from one of them, he pushes its heart (out) from the inside for the soup,  
 [from] the other, he provides cooked meat.

In one of his royal inscriptions describing the restoration of the Ešarra temple, Esarhaddon mentioned in more generic terms how he slaughtered and butchered bulls, sheep and birds as sacrifices for Aššur,<sup>51</sup> but no details are given there, nor anywhere else in the sources at our disposal. The animal most commonly presented as meat for the divine repast was the sheep, very likely for economic reasons: it was, in fact, at the same time the most widespread and economical animal that was available, and each

49 On the crucial importance of sacrificing animals in the process of sacred feasting, see Pongratz-Leisten 2007 and 2012; Fox 2012, p. 116. The fact that the killing act was performed inside the temples and in the presence of the gods, is confirmed by the texts themselves: see for example SAA 20, 2, lines r. iv 44’-45’: GU<sub>4</sub>.NITÁ Ša i’<sup>n</sup>-n[a]m-’mar<sup>1</sup>-u-ni | UD-22-KÁM *ina Ē-<sup>a</sup>aš-šur ina IG<sup>1</sup><sup>a</sup>aš-šur in-né-’pa’áš*, «On the 22nd day, the bull which appears is sacrificed before Aššur in the temple of Aššur».

50 K.3455 (= SAA 20, 16), lines r. iv 5-7. Collations and improvements in the reading are due to S. Parpola. Livingstone published and discussed one cultic commentary (1986, 1989) that can now be linked with no doubt to K.3455. SAA 3, 37 includes, in fact, all the activities described in this tablet, suggesting an identification between the acts carried out by Assyrian king and various mythical feats accomplished by the god Marduk.

51 See RINAP 4, Esarhaddon 57, lines vi 37-vii 1: *ú-pal-liq | le-e ma-re-e | ú-ṭeb-bi-iḥ as-li | MUŠEN.MEŠ AN-e KU<sub>6</sub>.MEŠ ap-si-i | a-na la mi-ni ú-nak-kis | mi-šir-ti tam-tim ḫi-šib KUR-e | ú-gar-ri-in ma-ḥar-šú-un*, «I slaughtered a fattened bull (and) butchered sheep; I killed birds of the heavens and fish from the Apsû, without number; (and) I piled up before them the harvest of the sea (and) the abundance of the mountains».

part of its body could be used, for a primary/nutritional purpose (as meat) or for a secondary/functional one, (skin, tendons). Sheep were followed in number by goats; lambs and kids were not usual, and at the end of this list were cattle, both adults and calves, and sometimes birds.

Whatever species they belonged to, the sacrificial victims had to satisfy particular requirements, i.e. be physically perfect, in good health, and ritually pure: only sacred animals produced sacred meat, appropriate, therefore, to the high-status diners.<sup>52</sup> Moreover every person who moved within the sacred space, including priests, the king, and all the others present on the scene, had to observe some preliminary, necessary cleansing rites: they made ablutions, put on clean clothes, and prepared themselves with spells, to be sure that nothing could upset the gods and undermine the positive outcome of the ritual.

After the killing, meat was very likely cooked before being placed on the offering tables: the texts, in fact, mention both *silqu* 'boiled meat'<sup>53</sup> and *šumû* 'roasted meat'.<sup>54</sup> This phase raises a few questions: the cooking must have been carried out, in fact, by cooks working specifically for the temples, who knew the correct procedures and the recipes fit for the deities: there were, in effect, many members of the temple staff specifically assigned to the kitchens, working under the supervision of priests.<sup>55</sup> We cannot say whether the foodstuffs offered on the altars were moved to the cookhouses of the religious buildings (that must have been outside the divine residential area),<sup>56</sup> or whether chefs assisted at the killing of the sacrificial animals, and handled the meat *in situ*, using movable cooking vessels. Whichever the method chosen, it must have taken quite some time, which was probably used to purify and cleanse the place (necessary operations, after blood had been shed) and to prepare the space with the

52 It is noteworthy to remind here a dietary taboo observed in the Hittite cult reported in the text KBo 8.86, lines 13'-14' mentioned by Collins 1995, p. 80, fn. 12: «These birds, lambs and the single calf are consecrated. No one may eat them». In Mesopotamia, however, we register an opposite situation: only consecrated animals could be eaten in ritualized contexts such as the ones described in this study.

53 See the text discussed in this work, K.3455 (= SAA 20, 16), line r. iv 3 (where it is also described as 'hot', *hanṭu*); KAR 146 (= SAA 20, 19), line ii 21. For more references, see the Glossary in Parpola, forthcoming.

54 KAR 146 (= SAA 20, 19), lines ii 22, 25, and r. i 14'-15'. For more references, see the Glossary in Parpola, forthcoming.

55 A few texts were drafted to keep record of the exact duties of each member of the cultic staff: see for example the text published as SAA 20, 50 (a list of duties for the clergy of the temple of Aššur, see esp. line r. i 1'-13' which refers to the chief baker, the chief brewer and the scribe) and 51 (a royal decree by Shalmaneser III for the same shrine, see esp. lines i 18' and ii 14'-15' where the cupbearer and the cook are mentioned).

56 Among the rituals collected by Parpola, only one mentions «priests of the Cookery» (<sup>16</sup>SANGA.MEŠ ša É-<sup>16</sup>MU), unfortunately in a broken context: SAA 20, 11, line r. 17.

proper furniture. Prayers, hymns and songs must have filled the timespan while cooks were at work.

Being such a special course of the meal, specific etiquette connected to meat had been elaborated within the cult. Every action was performed with special care, and the importance of these moments was underlined also by the fact that these operations were performed by the king:

LUGAL *i-na* UGU <sup>giš</sup>*ki-tu-ri uš-šab*  
<sup>uzu</sup>*šu-me-e i-ka-šá-du-ni*  
 LUGAL *i-ta-bi* <sup>uzu</sup>*šu-me-e ep-pal*  
<sup>uzu</sup>*pa-na-at* GÚ *ina* GÍR.TUR AN.BAR *i-ta-kip*  
<sup>d</sup>*li-si-ku-tu ú-šá-kal*  
<sup>lú</sup>NAR *šu-pe-e šu-pe-e šu-pe-e*  
*le-ku-lu i-za-mur*  
*zu-ma-ru i-ka-šá-da*  
*i-na ŠÀ a-pi i-kar-ra-ar*<sup>57</sup>

The king sits down on a stool.  
 (When) the (cuts of) roasted meat arrive,  
 the king rises and offers the roasted meat,  
 he pierces the meat from the front of the neck with a knife.  
 He provides food for the Lisikutu-spirits,  
 (while) the singer sings «Let them eat the roasted meat  
 the roasted meat, the roasted meat».  
 When the song reaches (its end),  
 he (= the king) throws (the pieces of meat) into the pit.

Apart from some rare exceptional cases such as the one just mentioned, meat was usually placed on tables,<sup>58</sup> where other foodstuffs had been set up before. The impression that we gain from ritual texts is that the courses and ingredients that composed the menu of these great celebrations, having their apex in the banquets held in the courtyards, did not differ very much from what was provided to the gods for their ordinary meals, nor from what was presented both daily and on grander occasions at the king's table. The difference lay, rather, in its quantity and in the overall ceremoniality of the circumstances.

Food was usually set by the king himself before the deities, so that they could eat: libations of various kinds could be poured before or after the eating, and singers performed for the whole period. The ruler could then,

57 KAR 146 (= SAA 20, 19), lines r. i 13'-21'.

58 The akkadian term, <sup>giš</sup>*paššūru*, refers to a movable tray or table used in private houses as well as for rituals in temples (see the Lexicon).

in his turn, finally sit down and enjoy his meal, usually after the gods had finished theirs, as a sign of respect. For a short time thus, he ceased his role of servant of the gods and was served in his turn. A table was set in front of him,<sup>59</sup> and various attendees moved around in the sacred space (which, it is important to remember, was outside the proper *cella* of the temple), while a cupbearer and other officials were at his disposal.<sup>60</sup>

He consumed his repast not actually with the gods, but in their presence, before them; the timing of this meal cannot be learned from the sources, that in this case give no indication. Because of the particular situation and the fact that it was included in a greater celebration which did not end with this ritualized action, but continued with further gestures of worship and adoration of the gods, it is presumable that it did not last long. If the king was the only man eating, as can be gathered from some of the ritual texts, it is also possible that, more than a real banquet, it was really only a symbolic gesture, that included the consumption of the courses. The moment of the eating proper, in fact, is very often depicted synthetically as:

<sup>giš</sup>BANŠUR *pa-an* LUGAL *i-šá-ku-nu*  
*nap-ta-an-šu ú-ga-mar*<sup>61</sup>

They place the table before the king,  
and he finishes his meal.

In such occasions, certainly, the fact that the ruler alone was at the centre of the scene, holding the privilege of partaking of the food of the gods, was the most important element of the ritual: the quality of the ingredients must have been still very high because of the status of both guest and host, but the matter of their quantity was in these cases pushed to the background.

59 K.3455 (= SAA 20, 16), lines 7'-9': LUGAL *ú-ša-a ina šá'-pal'*[x x x] | *ina* IGI <sup>giš</sup>IG ša KAB *ina* IGI <sup>giš</sup>*né-mat-t[i ú-šab]* | [<sup>giš</sup>BANŠUR *ina* IGI LUGAL *'i-šá-ku-nu*], «The king goes out, [...] under [...] [and sits] facing the left door, on the couch. They [place] the table in front of the king». KAR 146 (= SAA 20, 19), lines r. ii 7'-8': LUGAL *i-na nap-te-ni uš-šab* | [<sup>giš</sup>BANŠUR *pa-an* LUGAL *i-šá-ku-nu*], «The king sits down for the meal. They place the table before the king». There is only one text (a description of rituals to be held inside the *akītu* temple in Nisannu, 7th-8th) in which a table is not mentioned even though the king seems to eat something (SAA 20, 15, lines ii 18'-19'); this passage is however unclear and broken. According to Parpola's interpretation it can be read as: LUGAL *ina man-za-si i-[za-az]* | *šá li-a-mi a-na* LUGAL *'ú-[šá-ku-lu]*, «the king st[eps] upon the stand. Th[ey give] the king bits for tasting to [eat]» (italics in the original).

60 K.3455 (= SAA 20, 16), line 10': [1-*e*]<sup>n</sup> DUMU<sup>l</sup>.KAŠ.LUL *ina* ZAG LUGAL *i[z-za-az]*, «One cupbearer stands to the right of the king».

61 KAR 146 (= SAA 20, 19), lines r. ii 8'-9'.

A similar example, in which being present was more meaningful than the richness of the menu itself, was the *šākussu ša šarri*, the royal meal served on the occasion of the sacred marriage between Nabû and Tašmetum.<sup>62</sup> In this case, with the exception of the two gods who received their servings while remaining in the bed chamber, a closed group of people could enjoy a common meal on condition that each diner brought his own food.

LÚ.ŠÁMAN.‘LÁ’.MEŠ ša UDU.SISKUR-šú  
*i-ba-áš-šú-u-ni ep-pa-aš*  
 ša 1 QA ak-li-šú ú-še-el-la-a  
*ina É dAG e-kal*<sup>63</sup>

Of the apprentices, whoever has  
 an offering to present will do so,  
 and whoever brings one portion of food  
 may eat it in the temple of Nabû.

Importance was placed therefore on the act of eating together, at the same time and in the presence of the gods – who consumed their food just a few meters away, in the privacy of their bedroom. At first, the addressees seem to be the ‘apprentices’,<sup>64</sup> who must have been wealthy enough to afford a sheep or another animal as an offering, but then the letter specifies that whoever brought food was invited to take part to this meal, i.e. quite a large group of people who however, had to provide their own not-so-huge portions, too.<sup>65</sup> Beside the king and the apprentices, the other

62 For the meaning of the term *šākussu*, see the Lexicon. The original documents that help for the reconstruction of the sacred marriage of these two gods are all published in the SAA series: they consist of letters from priests of the Nabû temple in Kalkhu to the kings Esarhaddon and Aššurbanipal (SAA 13, 56; 70 and 78), of an Akkadian love song (SAA 3, 14), and of a literary hymn dedicated to the divine couple (SAA 3, 6). For an overall study on the sacred marriage, see Lapinkivi 2004; Pongratz-Leisten 2008.

63 SAA 13, 78, lines r. 6-9.

64 The authors of the SAA volume translate this word as ‘apprentice priests’; the CAD interprets it as ‘apprentice scribes’, instead. The word *šamallû* referred, in effect, to various categories: trading agents and merchants (but this meaning can be discarded because of the context), and apprentices of scribes and of other kinds of scholars. Nabû was, indeed, the patron god of wisdom and writing, and this could justify the choice of CAD; however, there are no indications of a particular role of the scribes within the ritual acts performed in the days of his marriage with Tašmetum. For this reason, I prefer to use a more ‘neutral’ translation of the term.

65 For the equivalence in the Neo-Assyrian time of 1 sĪLA = 0,823 litre, see Fales 1990. According to the scholar’s calculations, a litre of grain would have yielded no more than 600-650 grams of bread, and the quantity mentioned in our text is even smaller than a litre. «Far from being a sufficient nutritional dose, 1 qa was a ‘minimum-survival’ daily grain ration» (quotation at p. 29).

active participants in the ceremony were two civil officers: the temple administrator (*ḫazannu*), who supervised the correct carrying out of the whole ritual,<sup>66</sup> and the chariot driver of the gods (*mukil appati ša ilāni*) who took care of the transportation of the images of the gods during the various processions.<sup>67</sup> The texts mentioned here refer to the sacred marriage between Nabû and Tašmetu in particular, but several sources mention a *quršu*-ceremony for other divinities, celebrated in various cities.<sup>68</sup> Even though we have no explicit descriptions, some direct clues (such as lists of offerings to be delivered for the celebrations) suggest that a shared meal, eaten by members of the royal family and by the community of worshippers, was a common feature of this kind of festivals.<sup>69</sup> The purpose of this religious performance was explicitly mentioned in the sources: it was carried out «for the sake of the life of the crown prince» and for the other king's sons.<sup>70</sup>

A completely different situation was represented instead by the *akītu*, one of the oldest and most durable festivals attested in Mesopotamia.<sup>71</sup> The sources found useful in reconstructing the events included in the *akītu* start, in fact, at the beginning of the third millennium and last until the Seleucid era.<sup>72</sup> Even if, admittedly, there are no ritual texts dating back to the Neo-Assyrian time that explicitly mention banquets eaten by the whole population assembled in the temple outside the city walls, many implicit indications in other kinds of sources show how, on the occasion of this festival, the attention was focused both on the modality and the abundance of the repast. In his annals, for example, Sennacherib defined not only the newly-built *bīt akīti* as the «house for the festival of

66 See SAA 13, 78, lines 12-14; SAA 13, 70, lines 10 and 15-17.

67 SAA 13, 78, lines 20 - r. 5.

68 About the *quršu* ceremony, see the mentioned bibliography on the Sacred Marriage and Meinhold 2009, pp. 143-144.

69 An overview of the various sacred marriages celebrated in the first millennium is presented by Nissinen 2001.

70 SAA 13, 78, lines r. 11-12 (*a-na bu-lut nap-šá-a-te ša DUMU.LUGAL*); see also SAA 13, 56, lines r. 6-16. Significantly, offerings for the king's sons were performed in front of Tašmetu (SAA 16, 56) and the leftovers of Nabû were delivered to the crown prince (SAA 16, 106, lines r. 1-4). There was, thus, a privileged relationship between this divine couple and the king's progeny.

71 For an overview of the main theories elaborated by anthropologists on the *akītu* celebrations, see Bell 1997, pp. 17-20: it is interesting to read in these pages how scholars who did not deal directly with Mesopotamian history understood and explained such festival.

72 See Bidmead 2004; Zgoll 2006.

the banquet»<sup>73</sup>, but also the month of Nisannu, during which the celebrations for the New Year took place, as the month of the *isinni qarīti* of the gods' king, Aššur.<sup>74</sup>

During this event, believers could, in fact, eat a huge quantity of first-quality food provided by the Palace for the gods and for the citizenry, sitting in the courtyard of the same temple in which the divine assembly was convened, to establish the destinies of the king and the land of Aššur. The *akītu* was not exclusively a religious occasion: on the contrary, it held a strong civil and political connotation, and it was fundamental for the royal ideology to confirm the legitimacy of the king. For this reason, chronicles carefully recorded every instance in which the celebrations could not take place, for example in the years in which the statue of Marduk was kept in Aššur, after its removal from the Esagila as a consequence of Sennacherib's war campaigns.<sup>75</sup> In those years, after the destruction of the city in 681, the festival ceased to be celebrated in Babylon, but was moved to the Assyrian cities. In fact the king re-organized the cult of the city-god of his capital, transferring to Aššur's figure the theology that had belonged to Marduk up to that moment. The festival was held not only in the main city of the empire, but also in other centres, chosen for strategic and military reasons, with the consequent birth of some regional variants. The processions of the various divinities, together with the lavish banquets offered by the central administration to the clergy and the whole population, aimed at visualizing and making concrete the king's presence and benevolence in these peripheral areas of the empire. In addition, the repeated blessings for the Assyrian king, pronounced during all the days of the festival, reminded everyone who the supreme leader of the empire was.

Ritualized meals usually did not conclude the rite of which they were part, with the exception of the ritual text K.10209 mentioned above, that seems to end in the banquet itself, and in particular with the description of the joy that this brought to the king's heart. Usually, after the guests stood up and moved away from the place in which the repast had been consumed, and after the servants had cleared away the furniture, the vessels and everything else that had been used by men from the sacred place, the attention was focused once again exclusively on the gods, for the final

73 Grayson, Novotny 2014 (=RINAP 3/2), Sennacherib 160, line 2; Sennacherib 173, lines 8-9; Sennacherib 174, line 3.

74 RINAP 3/2, Sennacherib 167, line 15; Sennacherib 168, line 25.

75 8 MU.MEŠ<sup>md</sup> 30.ŠEŠ.MEŠ-*eri<sub>9</sub>-ba* 12 MU.MEŠ<sup>mn</sup> AN.ŠÁR.ŠEŠ.SUM.NA 20 MU.MEŠ<sup>dEN</sup> [ina B]AL.TIL<sup>ki</sup> *a-šib-ma i-sin-nu a-ki-tú ba-ṭi-il*, «For eight years under Sennacherib, for twelve years under Esarhaddon, that is to say, for twenty years, Bēl stayed [at A]ššur, and the New Year's festival was not celebrated» (Esarhaddon's Chronicle, lines 34-35 = *Akītu* Chronicle, lines 1-4). See Glassner 2004. On the political aspects of the celebration of the *akītu* in the Neo-Assyrian period, see Pongratz-Leisten 1997.

worshipping performances. These included more libations, fumigations, aspersions with water, recitations of songs and prayers, and other 'usual' gestures. Afterwards, at the very end of the ritual, the images of the gods were removed, placed back into their shrines (sometimes with an impressive procession, as in the case of the *akītu*) and returned to their everyday routine. The king also went back to his palace: after such a display of devotion and affinity between the gods and the one they had chosen to guide their land, life went back to normality.

There was one final stage of ritual performances that, although being external to the religious acts themselves, was however crucial, especially on the occasion of the major festivals. The Assyrian ruler rewarded the priests who assisted him during the days of the feasts with presents, usually derived from a redistribution of the offerings that had been presented to the gods. The importance of such moments is illustrated also by the fact that ritual texts record these distributions, either in a synthetic<sup>76</sup> or in a more detailed form.<sup>77</sup> Among these goods, we find metal items, cultic objects, raw and cooked edibles, and beverages:<sup>78</sup> it represented thus a form of payment which could assume also quite a remarkable substance and that was directed mostly to the highest religious officers and to royal or city scribes.

While the texts report a description of how the king ate his meal in the presence of deities, it is not clear how the plentiful, delicious dishes presented on trays in front of them were actually consumed. Some scholars believe that the simple act of presenting them to the gods' images was enough, since after the usual rite of the opening of the mouth, performed every morning, statues and other divine icons could consume these foods

76 See for example SAA 20, 9 (a report on rituals performed by Aššurbanipal during the Šabātu-Addāru cycle in the year 650), which states at the end (lines r. iv 21'-22'): [x ud]. '10'. KAM LUGAL *ir-ta-'kas' NÍG.BA.MEŠ [a-na] <sup>10</sup>TU.É i-ti-din*, «On the 10th [day] the king set (*the table*) and gave presents [to] the clergy».

77 In a document which records events that took place at Ešarra during the reign of Sargon II (SAA 20, 55, lines r. 12'-14') a few members of the temple staff are mentioned with the appropriate payment for their services. The royal scribe shall have the usufruct of the table placed in front of Šamaš, «including its cooked meat» (*a-di <sup>uz</sup>sil-qi-šu*), the city scribe will have the usufruct of the libations' of the ground before Šamaš, to the chanter will go something unknown (the text is unfortunately broken), and the cook shall have the usufruct of the intestines of the sacrificial animal. See also the royal decrees published in SAA 12, 68-70 and 81 which regulates in a very detailed way the distribution of offerings and cuts of meat derived from temple offerings to priests and other workers.

78 An example is provided by the list included at the end of a manual for chanters of the Aššur temple, SAA 20, 13, lines r. 3'-6'.



«with their eyes».<sup>79</sup> A few allusions to curtains however, and the story described in the Biblical narrative of «Bel and the Dragon»,<sup>80</sup> attest that the religious ‘fiction’ required that the audience believed that the gods did actually eat their meals. These documents prove that, for the Mesopotamian cultic ideology, gods did not just look at the food and drink presented in front of their images, but they actually ate and drank them.<sup>81</sup> The goddess Ištar of Arbela expressed, in effect, the physicality of these actions, asking Esarhaddon to offer her a banquet:

*ma-a ket-tu-ma 1(bán) a-kal a-su-di*  
*1(bán) DUG.ma-si-tú ša KAŠ DÙG.GA*  
*ke-in <sup>u</sup>ur-qi a-ku-su*  
*la-áš-ši-a ina pi-ia la-áš-kun*  
*lu-mal-li ka-a-su ina UGU-ḫi la-as-si*  
*la-la-a-a lu-tir-ra<sup>82</sup>*

Verily, establish a seah of bowl food and a one-seah flagon of sweet beer! Let me take and put in my mouth vegetables and soup, let me fill the cup and drink from it, let me restore my charms!

### 4.3 When the Banquet is a Festival: *tākultu*, *pandugānu*, and *qerētu*

In the events discussed in the previous sections, meals were integrated within a larger frame: they were part of rituals that included many other gestures and whose peculiarities were often different (actions performed around the divine chariot, special rites for one single god, divine marriages, and so on). There were, however, some instances in which the main focus of the whole celebration was the banquet itself, as it is inferable from the names that were given to such special occasions.

These situations, in which eating and drinking were fundamental, clearly were not in the guise of normal meals, but were rather conceived as

79 See Oppenheim 1977, pp. 191-192. In SAA 20, 10 (another report on royal rituals performed in the month Šabātu) we find three references to that act: ‘ana’ <sup>l</sup>[<sup>u</sup>SANGA] <sup>u</sup>láh-ḫi-ni NÍG.BA.MEŠ *i-ti-din*, «he (= the king) gave presents to [the priest] and to the steward» (line 8); [*ana* x x NÍG.B]A.MEŠ *i-ti-din*, «he gave [pres]ents to [...]» (line r. 2); NÍG.BA.MEŠ SUM, «he handed out presents» (line r. 11).

80 This episode is included at the end of the Book of Daniel (14, 1-22).

81 It is worthwhile to recall here the anthropological theory by Gell 1998, mentioned above.

82 SAA 9, 3, lines iii 33-37.

forcefully ritualized ones. Ritualization entails a clear distinction, through the action itself, between those acts that are recalled and imitated, and the ones that are performed on the singular, particular occasion: such repasts were thereby clearly set apart as different and more meaningful than the ones consumed in everyday life. Such a distinction could be expressed through different devices: the choice of special table companions, an abnormal quantity of food, or even the setting within a sacred space; moreover, these meals were characterized by a strict fixity and formality, determined by the texts mentioned frequently in the next pages.

The ritualized repast that it is most well known, thanks to the original sources and many recent publications and studies, is the *tākultu*: the literal meaning of this word was ‘provisions’ and, in a translated sense, ‘meal’. It was also used in secular contexts such as letters and royal inscriptions, to describe feasts or moments of common consumption of food by the king together with his officials and soldiers.<sup>83</sup> When applied to a religious festival, however, it referred to a very specific ritual, not really a banquet actually consumed by men or gods, but a food offering, symbolically significant but at the same time also very concrete and tied to the ideology of the Assyrian land and king. The main source for the knowledge of this ritual, the only one which explicitly mentions its name, is the text VAT 10126,<sup>84</sup> that ends with a prayer for a long life, a powerful weapon and a long reign invoked upon the ruler:

*a-na ta-di-ni*  
*šá ta-kúl-ti an-ni-ti*  
 ‘a’-na <sup>m</sup>AN.ŠÁR-IDIM-DINGIR.MEŠ  
 ‘ku’-ru-ub AN.ŠÁR<sup>85</sup>

The one who provides  
 this meal,  
 Aššur-etel-ilani,  
 bless, oh Aššur!

It is not a purpose of this research to discuss the possible identification of IIIR 66 and STT I 88 as exact parallels to this text, already argued by various scholars who oscillated between an interpretation of these two

83 See the discussion on this term in the Lexicon.

84 The text VAT 10126 (= KAR 214) was published together with its possible parallels and the other texts related to them by Frankena 1954; more recently, it has been newly edited in transliteration and translation by Meinhold 2009, pp. 413-425. In the forthcoming volume by Parpola, it will appear as SAA 20, 42. The term *tākultu* appears twice in this document: lines iv 7 and iv 25.

85 VAT 10126 (= SAA 20, 42), lines r. iv 24’-27’.

sources as more or less linked to the specific celebration of the *tākultu* or as witnesses of isolated, different rites and invocations.<sup>86</sup> VAT 10126 alone will be considered, instead, since it is the only certain source for the *tākultu* ritual, and it also significantly includes all the elements that are meaningful for the present work.

The text is surely Assyrian: its language shows traces of the Assyrian dialect, it has been found in Assyria and depicts a ritual to be performed in the temple of Aššur, in the capital city. As for its chronology, even though a few linguistic indications suggest dating its original drafting to the Middle-Assyrian period, it is very likely that its origin went further back in time, as the vessels found in the Aššur temple suggest.<sup>87</sup> The inscriptions written on these containers are extremely interesting since in spite of their conciseness, they provide some fundamental information about the context in which the ritual was performed in the second millennium. We get, in fact, a precise indication about its setting, since they all open with the indication «ša bīt Aššur»; in addition to this, one of them (IAK XXI 24), dated in the reign of Šalmaneser I, presented an explicit connection between the temple of Aššur and the king, who performed «his *tākultu*». Finally, from two older vessels inscribed by Adad-Nerari I come even more details: IAK XX 34 registers, in fact, the celebration of a *tākultu* for the coronation festivities of the king - while in IAK XX 33 the ruler affirms that he had celebrated it «for the third time». An evolution of the ritual is therefore traceable in these sources: from an event to be performed on special occasions such as enthronement or jubilees, the *tākultu* became in the Neo-Assyrian time (apparently) an appointment which could be repeated various time during the reign of the ruler. Be that as it may, ever since its first appearance this celebration was clearly meant to exhibit the special link existing between the god Aššur and his faithful king.

As for the structure of the text, the ritual opened (lines i 1-6) with a long invocation to the gods, who were invited to take part in the ceremony and summoned to attend a toast, as the insistent repetition of the imperative form *šitī* «drink!» attests. After this introduction, a long list of invocations and of divinized elements is recorded, starting with gods and architectural elements belonging to the city of Aššur (lines i 7-ii 48) and followed by physical and geographical elements of the land of Assyria (lines iii 2-37).

<sup>86</sup> On the different hypothesis, see Frankena 1954, pp. 60-73; Van Driel 1969, p. 161; Menzel 1981, I, pp. 149-151; Meinhold 2009, pp. 413-414. Cfr. also Pongratz-Leisten in Parpola, forthcoming.

<sup>87</sup> Porter 2000. The inscriptions on vessels were all presented in transliteration and translation by Ebeling, Meissner -Weidner 1926 (IAK), and one of them was published also in copy: see IAK XX 33 (= KAH II, 32); IAK XX 34; IAK XXI 24 and IAK XXI 25. For more recent publications of all these sources, see Grayson 1987 (RIMA 1), A.0.76.27-28 (Adad-Nerari); A.0.77.25-27 (Šalmaneser I).

Finally, a long prayer was pronounced (lines iii 48-iv 27), asking for the blessing of the gods upon the Assyrian ruler. Even though it is never explicitly mentioned, deities were grouped by their residence, that is according to the temples where their images were kept and worshipped. Interestingly, there is no reference to any family relationships among them, nor can we find any indication of a grouping according to divine families: instead only the 'residential' criterion seems to have been adopted.

The main purpose of the text was, then, to record the correct list of gods in their proper order, to avoid any possible mistake or omission. In Chart 2 all the deities mentioned in this ritual are detailed, in order of appearance and accompanied by the name of the shrine where they belonged:<sup>88</sup> it appears clear that the large majority were the ones of the Aššur temple, but all the main consecrated buildings of the religious Assyrian capital were involved in the performance. In addition, geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur were also mentioned,<sup>89</sup> in a universal assembly that took an even more cosmic character with the reference to time (day, month and year were invoked, as well), which thus extended the validity of this rite throughout the year. After the first six lines, where the exhortation to drink was repeated twelve times to the main gods of the Assyrian pantheon, the largest part of the tablet was filled with a simple, long list of names.

The ancient scribe gave a specific format to the text, adding horizontal lines that separated the divinities in groups; the criterion that he used is, however, not always clear to us, except for the last four sections.<sup>90</sup> The graphic device could also have referred to a pause between invocations, possibly filled with litanies and songs or with the presentation of offerings: interestingly enough only the words that were to be pronounced were recorded on the tablet, with no other indications to any gesture or action (contrary to what we found in all the other ritual texts analyzed in this work). VAT 10126 may be considered, thus, as a liturgy or *script* whose addressees were the cultural performers.

It is remarkable that the gods (not only the anthropomorphic supernal beings, but also images of kings, doors, rooms and courtyards of temples,

88 Only complete names of gods are listed in the chart.

89 In the order followed for the grouping of the deities, and the special focus given to the shrines of the capital city, this text shows many resemblances to the so-called *Götteradressbuch*, which also lists deities together with architectural elements of Aššur. The document has been recently published by George 1992, pp. 167-184.

90 Corresponding to lines ii 38-44 (architectural elements of the city of Assur), r. iii 3'-27' (geographical and architectural elements of the land of Assur), r. iii 28'-29' (timing) and r. iii 30'-32' (elements of the land of Assur).

architectural elements of the city of Aššur and natural elements)<sup>91</sup> were invoked and invited to drink, but there was no matching invitation to eat, too. However, that food accompanied the libations and toasts included in the *tākultu* ritual can be gathered from this passage at the end of the text:

*šá ta-kúl-ta ši-a-ti*  
*e-pu-šu NINDA.MEŠ u A.MEŠ*  
*a-na DINGIR.MEŠ SUM-nu-ni*  
*ar-ka ma-a'-da ra-ap-šá*  
*a-na i-tap-pu-li di-na-niš-šú<sup>92</sup>*

To him, who performs this *tākultu*-meal  
 and gives bread and water to the gods,  
 give (them) back to him long, copious  
 and wide!

The allusion to bread and water was, in fact, the typical ‘defective writing’ that indicated in literary texts too the consumption of a full meal. Besides what was asked for the ruler (a long reign, health and longevity, priesthood, sovereignty and power), some requests were presented also for those who attended the whole service: grain, silver, *bariku*-salt for their food and oil for their lamps.<sup>93</sup> This prayer proves the presence of an audience that attended the *tākultu*, surely priests and cultic personnel but probably also representatives of the social elite: they could in this way, witness the display of piety and magnanimity of their leader, who had the possibility and the resources to feed all the gods invoked, all the gods of Assyria.

A second event whose main focal point was a moment of communal food sharing was the *pandugāni*. There are no sources that explicitly describe the acts performed during this ceremony, and a general idea of the festival (which most certainly included plentiful offerings to the divinities, as well as meals and banquets) must be gained from Neo-Assyrian letters, decrees and administrative texts. The most useful information about the quantity and quality of the edible items and beverages presented in temples does not come from ritual texts, then, but from two decrees dating back to the

91 Garbini 1976, p. 385 deduced that the large space given in Near Eastern religious texts to the descriptions of architectural elements belonging to temples was due to the fact that the naming of spaces pertaining to sacred buildings immediately reminded the audience of all the rituals which were performed within them.

92 VAT 10126 (= SAA 20, 42), lines r. iv 7'-11'.

93 See VAT 10126 (= SAA 20, 42), lines r. iv 16'-22'.

reign of Adad-Nerari III:<sup>94</sup> bread, wheat, barley and flour, sesame oil, lentils, chick-peas and honey were mentioned there, and all these ingredients were subsequently processed to bake sweets and cakes, brew beer, and prepare more elaborate dishes.

Even if there were no references to it in these two particular documents, meat could not have been missing, given the nature and importance of the event: confirmation comes in fact from some slightly older (Middle-Assyrian) administrative texts, that mention the fattening of a fat-tailed sheep intended for the *pandugāni* ceremony.<sup>95</sup> The precise quantity and quality of the dishes prepared for the divine and human guests is not inferable from the sources at our disposal, neither is the duration of the festival nor the number of those who partook of the meals. It is clear, however, that this represented a major event that took place in the Assyrian capital, and that included the presence of the king as performer of the rites as well as provider and ultimate beneficiary of the food, together with the god Aššur, whose temple was the main setting of the celebrations.

Differently from the *tākultu*, for which we have no information that could anchor it to a possible specific date, it seems plausible from a few clues scattered in different texts, that the *pandugāni* was celebrated within the so-called 'Šabātu-Addāru festival cycle', and in particular from the 22nd to the 26th of Šabātu.<sup>96</sup> In these winter months, the king was free from his military commitments and could therefore attend religious festivals carried out in the capitals of his empire. According to Adad-Nerari's decrees, celebrations included the performance of the ruler's triumphal entry into the Aššur's temple, and a cultic banquet arranged by the king and eaten by the gods, most likely in the courtyard of that shrine. It seems, moreover, that this ceremony had a direct link with at least two other rites mentioned. The first, the *bātu*, was a nocturnal service during which a sacrificial meal was offered to the divinities (who consumed it by themselves, without the presence of men); and the second, the *puḥur ilāni*, mirrored the literary *topos* of the assembly of the gods, in which a favourable destiny was assigned to the king and to his land.

During the *pandugāni* and the *bātu* ceremonies, images of the deities were carried in procession through the city streets, possibly using the same white horses that appear in the decree as a king's donation.<sup>97</sup> Every citizen could then be present at the festival, by welcoming and walking

94 They date, more precisely, to the 6th Adar 809: see SAA 12, 69, in particular lines 7-17, and SAA 12, 70. On these texts, see also the observation made by Gaspa 2009-2010.

95 KAJ 190, 21; the text was re-edited by Postgate 1988, pp. 167-168. For a summary of the sources available for the study of the *pandugāni*, see also Deller 1985-1986, pp. 46-48.

96 See Gaspa 2009-2010. On the festival cycle celebrated in Šabātu-Addāru see Maul 2000.

97 SAA 12, 69, line 14.

with the parade though common people probably did not take part in the big banquet that was held in the courtyard of the temple once the procession had reached its final destination. This repast must have been reserved, in fact, to the elite: the king, the royal family and the high administrative and templar officers, and it preceded the decision-making assembly of the gods, just as happened in literary texts. That a banquet was included in the *pandugāni* ritual is clear also from the specialized workers mentioned in the decree: the confectioner, the cook, bakers and brewers.<sup>98</sup> They all received some specific ingredients, with which they were asked to prepare the main courses for the festival; such allocation occurred under the control of the treasurer<sup>99</sup> who was in charge also of the management of donations made by the king and the palace personnel.

The tight connection of the *pandugāni* with the person of the head of the state was expressed by the attribute *ša šarri*, that connected this festival to the person of the king.<sup>100</sup> A contemporary cultic commentary helps to identify a few more details that cast some further light on the event:<sup>101</sup> this document, in fact, described the 22nd of Addaru as the day «when the god goes to the Bet-Dugani» (line 8). The author of the text played, thus, on the phonetic similarity of the two terms, and Deller suggested that the Bit Dugani mentioned in this explanatory work referred to the temple kitchens, i.e. the place where the big banquet for the *pandugāni* was prepared.<sup>102</sup> More meals were then set up four days later, the 26th, described as the day in which the god «goes to the brewery» (line 11), and the king «wears a crown» (line 13). This was the *apex* of the whole festival, when the confirmation of the legitimacy of the Assyrian ruler was celebrated with a big banquet, in which mankind and gods took part together.

As a first conclusion, we can affirm that the *tākultu*, as well as the *pandugāni*, had therefore an indubitable profound significance for the Assyrian kingship, as the role of the ruler, the blessings and prayers invoked upon him and the recurrent explicit mention of his person attest. While these two cases can be attributed to one specific event that took place in a ritualized context, both well-anchored within the Assyrian cultic calendar, the term *qerētu* is used in reference to more general occasions instead, as the definitions presented in the dictionaries show.<sup>103</sup> It was often used in a wider sense for festivals and celebrations, also in non-religious contexts,

98 SAA 12, 69, lines 8, 10 and 12.

99 SAA 12, 69, line 15.

100 SAA 12, 69, line 7.

101 The commentary has been published in SAA 3, 40.

102 Deller 1985, pp. 362-364.

103 For a detailed analysis of the meaning of the term *qerētu*, see the Lexicon.

and nevertheless there is some evidence for the existence of a specific kind of ritual called *qerētu*.<sup>104</sup> This was not firmly integrated in the yearly schedule, and the date for its performance was set at the organizer's discretion, even though he who wanted to offer a repast for a god inside a sacred building obviously had to pay attention to some instructions given by the diviners, who consulted the hemerological texts and provided the proper date. Even the king had to respect this procedure:

*ina UGU e-pa-še ša qa-re-e-ti*  
*ša LUGAL be-lí iš-pur-an-ni*  
 GARZA il-qí pa-ar-ši  
*ina ITI an-ni-e ʔa-ba*  
*ʔa-ba qa-re-e-tú*  
*a-na e-pa-še*  
 UD.13.KÁM UD.15.KÁM  
 UD.17.KÁM le-pu-šú<sup>105</sup>

Concerning the arrangement of the banquet about which the king, my lord, wrote to me, if he wants to perform the cult it is favourable in this month; it is favourable to arrange the banquet. Let them arrange it on the 13th, 15th, or the 17th day.

Being *qerētu* the name used to refer to banquets in royal and literary sources, it is likely that the main feature of this festival was the celebration of a communal meal, whose list of guests and general course of events is never described in the texts. All the sources at our disposal show that there was one particular feature pertaining to this ritual performance that made it very different from the *tākultu*: this was always dedicated, in fact, to just one god. It could be performed in temples of different cities of the empire, as an economic tablet recording the delivery of a compulsory offering for the feast in Arbela attests: from this same text, we know that first quality barley was one of the foodstuffs required for this celebration.<sup>106</sup>

104 See the sources collected by Menzel 1981, pp. 21-23.

105 SAA 10, 70, lines 6-14.

106 The text, BT 117, is dated back to a year between 697 and 671 and was part of a group of administrative documents found in the temple of Mamu in Balawat: see the edition by Parker 1963.



Interestingly, the supervisor for the delivery was the palace scribe, and the day it was expected to be paid was the 2nd of Nisannu, i.e. the first day of the New Year celebrations, commemorated all over the Assyrian empire. Sennacherib, for example, wrote that in this same month, on the occasion of the *akītu* festival in the capital, «Aššur went to the festival banquet in a garden within the city».<sup>107</sup> 'Personal' *qerētu*-festivals held for specific divinities are attested for Tašmetu, Nabû, Nisaba and Ištar of Arbela,<sup>108</sup> while hemerologies (as suggested by the passage mentioned above) give indications for the favourable days on which a more generic *qarīt ili* could be performed.<sup>109</sup>

Apart from these great events, sponsored by the king and involving a large part of the temple personnel, with a great expenditure of sacrificial animals and every kind of food offerings, Neo-Assyrian letters attest also the existence of a type of *qerētu* performed on a smaller scale, by private citizens in temples. These were set up in courtyards, with the assistance of priests, and required the disbursement of bread, beer and at least one sheep. Such foodstuffs remained, at the end, inside the temples, and were distributed among the clergy. Private *qerētu* meals served very concrete purposes, and were arranged in order to prepare the organizers for the request they wanted to present to the gods – and on the other hand, the acceptance of food and drink by the gods somehow forced them to grant their wishes (unless, of course, some obstacles due to carelessness had occurred during the carrying out of the rite).

Two sources mentioning banquets arranged by private people refer to a married couple as organizers of the event; whereas one of these texts is very synthetic and refers mostly to garments (maybe donated as gifts after the meal),<sup>110</sup> the second one provides, instead, more data.<sup>111</sup> In this long letter, sent by a scholar to the king in the attempt to rehabilitate his name, the place and aim of the repast were recorded: the setting chosen was the Kidmuru temple (Ištar's abode in Kalhu), and the purpose was the request for health and a progeny.

**107** <sup>114</sup>BAR.SAG.SAG ša ZAG.MUG ina e-šá-a-ti ù saḥ-maš-a-ti | AN.ŠÁR ša qè-re-e-ti ina GIŠ?.SAR ša qa-bal-ti URU il-la-ku: see the text SAA 12, 86, lines 5-6.

**108** The information at our disposal comes from various types of documents: letters sent to the king to report the preparations and the execution of the feast (SAA 13, 130 and 147); an inscription on stone found in Nimrud (ND 4304); an hemerological text (KAR 178, line vi 5); a debit note from Aššur (VAT 8766 and 8767, envelope and tablet).

**109** See KAR 178, lines v 66 and vi 39: for the *editio princeps* of this text, see Labat 1939. This source has been newly studied and published by Livingstone 2013 under the name «Offering bread Hemerology» (pp. 103-159).

**110** SAA 7, 112.

**111** SAA 10, 294. This text has been commented and analyzed in depth also by Parpola 1987.

*ina é-kid-mur-ri e-ta-rab qa-re-e-tu e-ta-pa-ás*  
*MI ši-i ta-ad-dal-ḥa-an-ni 5 MU.AN.NA.MEŠ la-a*  
*mu-'a-a-tu la ba-la-tu ù DUMU-a-a la-ás-šú<sup>112</sup>*

I have visited the Kidmuru temple and arranged a banquet,  
 and yet my wife has embarrassed me; for five years she has been  
 neither dead nor alive, and I have no son.

Private banquets must have been, thus, strictly bound to concrete worries and fears of common men's daily life, mostly related to health, money and family. This hypothesis seems validated by two ritual texts which provide detailed instructions for the setting up of these events:<sup>113</sup> in the first one in particular, the main addressee of the meal is the goddess of healing Gula. The three main performers that appear 'on stage' and that act on behalf of the private person who sets up the whole ceremony are the «master of the banquet» EN-*qa-ri-te*, the «officiant» EN.GARZA, and a priest LÚ.SANGA. The actions described in these sources do not differ much from the ones recorded for other rituals: prostrations and kissing of the ground, libations, offerings, singing of lamentations, purification acts, and blessings.<sup>114</sup> What made these performances special and peculiar was, therefore, their overall context and the unique significance given to such events by those who paid for them and provided everything that was necessary to prepare them.

According to Bell, the main focus of these banqueting rituals was on the public exhibition of religious and cultural feelings, so people paid attention mostly to the expression of adherence to those basic values that kept the community together. For this reason, the scholar has classified such rituals as «cultural performances» or «social dramas».<sup>115</sup> On the basis of what has been presented above, however, we can add that in those cases in which ritual and banquet overlapped in the Neo-Assyrian religious experience, the «basic value that kept the community together» was mostly embodied in the person of the ruler. In all these events he was effectively at the centre of the stage, playing the leading role as provider, main per-

112 SAA 10, 294, lines r. 23-25.

113 See two texts published by Parpola forthcoming as «The Banquet of Gula» (SAA 20, 30) and «The Banquet of [DN]» (SAA 20, 31).

114 Cfr. in particular the blessing included at the beginning of the ritual text for the banquet of Gula, SAA 20, 30, lines 5'-8': [x x x m]a-as-ra-ḥu GEŠTIN ú-mal-la x[x x x x x x] | EN-qa-r]i-te ú-qa-r-rab ma-a ša šu-me NUMUN šu-u [x x x x x x] | [šá-la-m]u T.L.A.MU NUMUN lu ta-din-na-ka DUG<sub>4</sub>.GA i-ḥ[i'-x x x x x x] | [x x x] x ki-i an-ni-ma i-kar-rab i-šá-qi, «[The officiant] fills a *masraḥu* vessel with wine [..... The master of the ban]quet offers (it), saying: «It is (wine) of fame and offspring, [.....]. May she give you [well-bein]g, life, fame and offspring!»... [.....]. He thus blesses him and gives him to drink».

115 Bell 1997, pp. 120-128.

former, and highest-status guest of such meals, and it was upon him that the blessings of the gods were directed.

#### 4.4 Guests of the King: Inviting the Gods to a Meal

The construction of temples and monuments and the successive celebrations were a largely widespread topic of Mesopotamian literature, ever since its older, Sumerian attestations. Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions in particular provide us with rich and lively accounts of major public works promoted by the king in all the cities of the empire.<sup>116</sup> Building activities represented a well-known *topos* not only in historical texts such as annals or royal inscriptions, but also in literature, hymns and myths. These formal patterns conveyed, in fact, the fundamental message that the king was an intermediary between the human and divine spheres, and, as such, he had the duty of ensuring the sustenance of the gods and their abodes, as the frequent use of the epithet 'provider' (Sumerian *ú.a*, Akkadian *zāninum*) shows.

One of the clearest examples of the strong link between the concepts expressed in literary compositions and in texts produced within the royal court is the main building inscription by Gudea of Lagaš, reported in two cylinders that describe the restoration of the Eninnu, the residence of the god Ningirsu. *Cylinder A* deals with the assignment of the task of rebuilding the temple, deriving directly from the divine command, and it narrates the activities undertaken in order to fulfil the gods' will. *Cylinder B* in particular reports an account of the dedication rites and the celebrations that followed the end of the work, and then the scene is moved again to the supernal world, where the divinities assign a favourable destiny for the person who realized their project, and for the whole country.<sup>117</sup> The festivities described in this second text (lines xvii 18-xviii 16) lasted seven days, and were characterized by the attendance of both the citizens of Lagaš and the gods, who shared food, drinks and music.

Although we cannot find such a long and detailed description of dedication ceremonies in texts coming from the Near East in the following centuries, numerous inscriptions commemorate similar events. These reports were, in fact, a recurrent theme in royal inscriptions of every

<sup>116</sup> Gudea was not the only Sumerian king who fixed the successes of his building projects in his inscriptions: see, for example, also Ur Namma (Flückiger-Hawker 1999) and in particular Šulgi (Klein 1981 and 1990).

<sup>117</sup> Suter 2000.

epoch, up to the Neo-Assyrian and the Late Babylonian rulers,<sup>118</sup> and in literary sources dating back to later times as well, such as the sixth tablet of the *Enūma Eliš*. The king's actions were depicted as being shaped according to divine models, and, vice versa, the divine models described in the works of literature were modelled on the examples of social roles. Accepting these patterns involved both rights and duties for rulers and for gods as well: within the Mesopotamian religious concept in fact, reciprocity was a fundamental character of the relationship between human and divine realms.<sup>119</sup>

In Neo-Assyrian building inscriptions, which are short if compared to the Sumerian accounts, and integrated within longer historical texts such as the annals, the structure nevertheless remained the same: they were, in fact, based on four elements, which were always present. The sequence included: an explanation for the reason the ruler made the decision of building or restoring a temple or secular building (this might be a personal initiative or an assignment dictated by the gods); a description of the preparations for the work, with the amassing of high-quality precious materials and the summons of skilled workers to follow the project; an account of the building activities proper; dedication festivities and celebrations for the new structures, which included also the possibility of «giving them life» (in the case of completely new edifices) by populating them, moving people from various regions of the empire. A few inscriptions also added two more elements after these essential sections: a prayer or blessing for both the building and the builder, and possibly also curses addressed to those rulers who, in future, might let that same edifice fall into ruins.

Dedication ceremonies for temples and for secular buildings were similar, but not exactly alike: there was, in fact, a major difference in the nature of the celebrations. In the first case, the king walked the god inside the new or renewed dwelling place, sometimes even holding his/her hand while leading a procession:

*é-ḫi-li-an-na é pa-pa-ḫi ʳna-na-a GAŠAN-ia šá qé-reb é-an-na  
 šá LUGAL maḫ-ri i-pu-šu la-ba-riš il-lik-ma mi-qit-ti ir-ši  
 eṣ-re-ti-šu áš-te-e'-i ina SIG<sub>4</sub>.AL.ÛR.RA UDUN KÙ-tim ma-qit-ta-šu ak-ši-ir  
 ŠU<sup>II</sup> ʳna-na-a GAŠAN GAL-tum aṣ-bat-ma a-na qer-bi-šu  
 ú-še-rib-ma šu-bat da-ra-a-ti ú-šar-me  
 UDU.SISKUR.MEŠ taš-ri-iḫ-ti aq-qí uš-par-zi-iḫ ši-gar-šá<sup>120</sup>*

118 For a synthetic but exemplary survey of the building inscriptions in Near Eastern sources, with a comment on their distribution in time and space, see Hurowitz 1992.

119 See Pongratz-Leisten 2008, esp. p. 62.

120 RINAP 4, Esarhaddon 135, lines 11-15.

The Eḫiliana, the cella of the goddess Nanāya, my lady, which is inside Eanna, which a previous king had built, became old and dilapidated. I sought its ground-plan and repaired its dilapidated parts with baked bricks from a pure kiln. I grasped the hands of the goddess Nanāya, great lady, brought her inside, and caused her to take up residence there forever. I offered splendid offerings and made her doorbolt extremely fine.

The temple-dedication festival was called *tērubat bīti*, the «entrance into the house»,<sup>121</sup> and this act was the fulcrum of the whole event. In the case of dedication of palaces, armouries, and similar buildings, this emphasis on the gods entering and sitting in a specific place was not present: the fact instead that they were invited or called into the new royal residence was emphasized. The verb used to express such an invitation was usually *qerû*, the same from which the word for ‘banquet’, *qerētu*, derived.

Together with the divinities, the highest officers of the empire were also called to the new palaces, and often (but not always) the invitation was extended even to embassies from the regions under Assyrian control, and to the population of the city in which the residence had been built.<sup>122</sup> It was, thus, a joyous and crowded party. Such an idea of a massive participation was instead absent in the temple dedications, which were depicted in our sources as more private, intimate events in accordance also with the spaces where they took place: traditionally in fact, temples were areas whose access was severely restricted. On the other hand, everyone (gods included) was allowed to stay in the royal palaces for a timespan that might have been even several days long: just as Gudea claimed that he spent seven days celebrating the renovation of the Eninnu temple, Aššurnasirpal’s feast for the new capital Kalhu lasted ten days, and Esarhaddon stayed three days at the banquet held in the Ešarra courtyard.<sup>123</sup>

Another fundamental difference regarded who was allowed to stay in the new building once the dedication rites were over. In the case of a palace, after the end of the feast even the divinities were ‘shown out’, as it was explicitly stated in this inscription by Tiglath-pileser I:

É.GAL.MEŠ *ši-na-ti-na la qa-šu-da-ma a-na šu-bat* DINGIR-ti  
 [la] *ša-ak-na [...]* É.GAL-la *e-pu-šu* DINGIR.MEŠ-nu-šu *a-na lib-be*  
*il-lu-ku* UDU.SISKUR.MEŠ [ana D]INGIR.MEŠ-ni *i-na lib-bi-ma*  
*i-ša-kan k[i]-i pi-i* É.GAL.MEŠ-te-ma *ma-da-a-te* [LUG]AL.MEŠ *a-lik*  
*pa-ni-ia la ú-qa-ši-d[u]-ši-na-ma a-na šu-bat* DINGIR-ti *la iš-ku-nu*

121 See CAD T, s.v. *tērubtu*.

122 For a discussion on the political and ideological implications of these events, see Chapter 6.

123 For Esarhaddon’s inscription, see below (RINAP 4, Esarhaddon 57, lines vii 17-34).

[[...]]´É.GAL GIŠ *e-re-ni ša-a-ti* MU 1.KÁM É.[GAL <sup>d</sup>A]-šur EN ù  
 DINGIR.MEŠ GAL.MEŠ [...]x *da-ru-ú* UDU.SISKUR.MEŠ *a-na pa-ni-šu-nu*  
*i-[na-qu]-ú* ´É.GAL-lum *ši-i [la qa-š]u-da-at ´a-na´ [šubat ilū]-ti la*  
*ša-ak-na-at* LUGAL ´ù´ [...]´.MEŠ´-šu ´i-na lib-bi áš´-bu<sup>124</sup>

As those palaces were not consecrated or designated as divine residences, but when a prince/king built a palace, his gods would come inside (and) he would present therein sacrifices to the gods: as the numerous palaces, *which* the kings who preceded me did not consecrate or designate as divine residences, this cedar palace, first/one year, palace of the god Aššur, my lord, and the great gods [...] eternity, sacrifices were made before them (although) this palace was not consecrated or designated as a divine residence – the king and his [...] dwell therein.

And in Sargon's account of the building of his new capital Dur-Šarrukin, we read:

*ina* ITI *še-me-e* u<sub>4</sub>-*mu mit-ga-ri* <sup>d</sup>Aš-šur *a-bu* DINGIR.MEŠ EN GAL DINGIR.MEŠ  
 u IŠ.TAR.MEŠ *a-ši-bu-ut* KUR Aš-šur<sup>ki</sup> *qé-reb-ši-na aq-re-ma* [...]´  
<sup>d</sup>En-líl EN KUR.MEŠ *a-šib É-ḫur-sag-gal-kur-kur-ra* DINGIR.MEŠ ù <sup>d</sup>IŠ.TAR.MEŠ  
*a-ši-bu-ti* KUR Aš-šur<sup>ki</sup> *i-na tam-gi-ti ù za-mar tak-né-e*  
*i-tu-ru* URU-uš-šú-un *it-ti mal-ki ma-ti-tan* <sup>lu</sup>EN *pa-ḫa-ti* KUR-ia *ak-li*  
*šá-pi-ri* NUN.MEŠ <sup>lu</sup>šú-ut-SAG.MEŠ ù <sup>lu</sup>AB.BA.MEŠ KUR Aš-šur<sup>ki</sup>  
*ina qé-reb* ´É.GAL-ia *ú-šib-ma áš-ta-kan ni-gu-tú*<sup>125</sup>

In a propitious month, on a favourable day, I invited Aššur, the father of the gods, great Lord, together with the gods and goddesses that live in Assyria, into it. After Enlil, the lord of the lands, who lives in the Ehur-saggalkurkurra, the gods and goddesses who live in Assyria returned to their cities among jubilation and songs of praise, I sat down in my palace and celebrated a feast together with the rulers of all the lands, my provincial governors, the overseers, the commanders, the nobles, the eunuchs and the elders of the land of Aššur.

If the behaviour of the king showed no big difference in the course of the two kinds of event, the major difference between a temple and a palace dedication rite was, then, in the role of the gods. In both cases, they were

124 RIMA 2 Tiglath-pileser I A.0.87.4, lines 77-89.

125 Fuchs 1993, *Prunk* 167, lines 175-177. The last words of this passage echo another well-known celebratory banquet, the literary forerunner of these events: in the sixth tablet of the *Enūma eliš*, in fact, the celebration held by the gods to honour the inauguration of the Esagila is described as follows, «*ni-gu-tú iš-ku-nu qé-reb-šú*» (line 76).

the first to step inside the new edifice.<sup>126</sup> In the first case however, gods were brought into their new abodes, where they were going to stay. On the occasion of openings of royal residences instead, gods were 'only' honoured guests who joined the king's table for a limited period of time. A comparison between two different building inscriptions of the same Neo-Assyrian ruler clearly shows such variance. In his account recording the renovation of the Aššur temple in the capital city, Esarhaddon described how he seated the city gods on their eternal daises, presented lavish offerings and fumigations, and obtained, in exchange, the blessing of all the gods. After the religious rites, the king celebrated in the courtyard of the temple, together with his officers and the people of the city – men and gods ate, thus, separately in time and space:

AN.ŠAR LUGAL DINGIR.MEŠ *ep-še-te-ia dam-qa-a-te*  
*ke-niš ip-pa-lis-ma e-li-iš lib-ba-šú*  
*ka-bat-tuš im-mir ik-rib UD.MEŠ ŠÙ.MEŠ*  
*ik-ru-ba-ni-ma ba-nu-ú É*  
*šú-mi im-bi a-na-ku a-di LÚ.GAL.MEŠ-ia*  
 UN.MEŠ KUR-ia 3 u<sub>4</sub>-me  
*ina ki-sal é-šár-ra ni-gu-tu áš-kun*  
*lib-bi DINGIR-ti-šú GAL-ti ú-niḥ-ma*  
*ú-šap-še-eḥ kab-ta-as-su<sup>127</sup>*

The god Aššur, king of the gods, truly looked on my good deeds and his heart became joyful, his mood shined. He blessed me with a blessing of long days and named me as the builder of the temple. I, together with my nobles and the people of my land, held a celebration in the courtyard of Ešarra for three days. I appeased the heart of his great divinity and placated his mood.

For the dedication of the armoury in Nineveh, Esarhaddon invited the same gods, starting once again with Aššur; they came out from their temples to join the king's company, and received the sacrifices performed in the new building. The outcome was the same: the gods blessed both the kingdom

**126** See for example Sargon's inscription (Fuchs 1993, Stier, lines 97-99): *ul-tu ši-pir URU* ù É.GAL.MEŠ-ia *ú-qat-tu-ú* DINGIR.MEŠ GAL.MEŠ *a-ši-bu-ti* KUR Aš-šur<sup>ki</sup> *ina* <sup>[tit]</sup>DU<sub>6</sub> *qer-bi-ši-na* *aq-re-e-ma*, «After I finished the construction of the city and my palace, I invited the great gods that dwell in Aššur into them, in the month Tašritu». See also the similar inscription in Room XV, lines 54-56. The indication of the exact date when gods were invited inside the completed royal residence appear exclusively in this inscription, and it is never mentioned in any other parallel text inscribed on the bulls which were placed at the entrance of the palace. Therefore, it has been suggested that this is the only inscription which was carved after the event took place (see Russel 1999, p. 107).

**127** RINAP 4, Esarhaddon 57, lines vii 17-34.

and its ruler. Afterwards, the great feast that included the participation of dignitaries, officials and common people could start:

<sup>d</sup>aš-šur <sup>d</sup>EN <sup>d</sup>AG <sup>d</sup>15 šá NINA<sup>ki</sup> <sup>d</sup>15 šá URU.LÍMMU-DINGIR  
 DINGIR.MEŠ KUR aš-šur<sup>ki</sup> ka-li-šú-nu ina qer-bi-šá aq-re-ma  
 UDU.SISKUR.MEŠ taš-ri-iḫ-ti eb-bu-u-ti ma-ḥar-šú-un aq-qí-ma  
 ú-šam-ḥi-ra kàd-ra-a-a DINGIR.MEŠ šá-tu-nu  
 ina ku-un-ni lîb-bi-šú-nu ik-tar-ra-bu LUGAL-u-ti  
 LÚ.GAL.MEŠ ù UN.MEŠ.KUR-ia ka-li-šú-nu  
 ina <sup>giš</sup>BANŠUR ta-ši-la-a-ti ta-kul-ti u qé-re-e-ti  
 ina qer-bi-šá ú-še-šib-šú-nu-ti-ma ú-šá-li-ša nu-pa-ar-šú-un  
 GEŠTIN.MEŠ u ku-ru-un-nu am-ki-ra šur-ra-šú-un  
 Ì.SAG ì-gu-la-a muḥ-ḥa-šú-nu ú-šá-áš-qí<sup>128</sup>

I invited the gods Aššur, Bēl, Nabû, Ištar of Nineveh, and Ištar of Arbela, the gods of Assyria, all of them, into it. I made sumptuous pure offerings before them and presented them my gifts. Those gods, in their steadfast hearts, blessed my kingship. I seated all of the officials and people of my country in it at festive tables, ceremonial meals, and banquets, and I made their mood jubilant. I watered their insides with wine and *kurunnu*-wine. I had (my servants) drench their heads with fine oil and perfumed oil.

An interesting feature of the passage just quoted is the coexistence in the same sentence of three different terms that refer to a feast that included a communal meal: *tašiltu*, *tākultu* and *qerētu*. This fact demonstrates that each of these words pertained to one different occasion with its peculiarities, otherwise these terms would not have been used together.<sup>129</sup> The final purpose of these building activities was, as is repeated many times in the same inscriptions, the obtaining of a special benediction for the royal family and for the land and the whole Assyrian empire: this blessing was preceded by prayers and invocations, and finally rose spontaneously from the gods' lips.

In some cases, these inauguration festivals overlapped on purpose other rituals included in the usual religious calendar: thus, the celebration of the *quršu* of Mulissu at Aššur, within the context of the sacred marriage festivities, seems to have been part of the major celebrations connected with the abovementioned rebuilding of the Ešarra temple. In a similar way, the sacred marriage between Marduk and Zarpanitu took place right after the

128 RINAP 4, Esarhaddon 1, lines vi 44-53; Esarhaddon 2, lines vi 10-24.

129 For a discussion of the various nuances of meanings among them, see the Lexicon at the end of this work.



restoration of the Esagila by Aššurbanipal;<sup>130</sup> moreover, the festivities for the newly-completed *bīt akīti* in Nineveh coincided with the performance of an *akītu* festival conducted by the ruler himself:

AN.ŠÁR u 𐎠NIN.LÍL DINGIR.MEŠ *tik-le-ia*  
*mu-šam-ṣu-ú ma-la šá-bi-ia*  
*qé-reb-šá ú-še-rib-ma*  
*ú-še-pi-[š]á i-sin-ni É á-ki-it<sup>131</sup>*

I invited Aššur and Mullissu, the gods who are my help, who concede me full discretion, into it, and I celebrated the festival of the *bīt akīti*.

The purpose therefore was a public show of the king's fulfilment of his cultic duties, and the integration of these ceremonies into the sacred agenda gave the ruling class the opportunity of emphasizing the divine approval for the cultic activities supervised by the king.

Even if dedication rites share some similarities with the other religious performances described above, they had the advantage of leaving a tangible, substantial sign behind: palaces and temples remained in their place to remind everyone of the generosity of the king, and of the blessings that he and his family had received. The curses reported at the end of the building inscriptions against the future king who will not fulfil his cultic duties by taking care of the edifices raised by his predecessors, granted, furthermore, eternal survival to both builder and building, and this was naturally fundamental for the succession of royalty within the dynasty.

130 Pongratz-Leisten 2008.

131 Aššurbanipal, *Prism T*, lines v 50-vi 2: see Borger 1996, pp. 170 and 255.



## Commensality and Ceremonial Meals in the Neo-Assyrian Period

Stefania Ermidoro

### 5 Etiquette at the Dining Table Rules for a Banquet at Court

**Summary** 5.1 Instructions for a Royal Meal. – 5.2 Chronology. – 5.3 Equipment and Props. – 5.4 Stage and Setting. – 5.5 The Performers. – 5.6 Actions and Performances. – 5.7 Food and Drink.

#### 5.1 Instructions for a Royal Meal

A peculiar and revealing text at our disposal, the tablet K.8669, describes a king's official meal, eaten in the presence of the Great Men of the empire. Although its first publisher properly called it *Dienstanweisung* ('service instructions'),<sup>1</sup> later scholars often referred to this text as a 'ritual'; it is, however, more appropriate to define it as a 'protocol' or maybe, in a somehow provoking way, a '*libretto*' for a royal banquet. The denomination 'ritual' is still used in the following pages, when it is clear that it does not imply that the actions described have been analyzed in the light of an exclusively religious domain. The definition proposed by Dietler has been adopted instead, according to which rituals are «stylized sequences of actions that are performed in such a manner as to be symbolically marked off in some way to distinguish them from daily practice».<sup>2</sup> The actions described on the tablet must be considered within their social context: only by doing so, in the attempt to understand every cultural implication deriving from the social interactions between the different agents on the scene, will it be possible to comprehend the relevance of this source.<sup>3</sup>

Internal data do not provide any hint as to the exact occasion on which this ceremony was performed, but it is noticeable that the gestures de-

1 Müller 1937, p. 84.

2 Dietler 1999, p. 135, fn. 1.

3 For the importance of analyzing rituals in the light of their social context (with many practical examples), see Alexander, Giesen, Mast 2006 (cfr. esp. Alexander's article, p. 29: «Rituals are episodes of repeated and simplified cultural communication in which the direct partners to a social interaction, and those observing it, share a mutual belief in the descriptive and prescriptive validity of the communication's symbolic contents and accept the authenticity of one another's intentions. It is because of this shared understanding of intention and content, and in the intrinsic validity of the interaction, that rituals have their effect and affect»).

scribed are common to many other religious and civil festivities – therefore, a limiting, one-sided classification of K.8669 as ‘secular’ does not reflect the complexity and the various facets of the text.<sup>4</sup> It is very likely that meals were a basic element of the everyday palace ceremonial, even on the occasion of more ordinary circumstances. The moments of food consumption marked the daily schedule of all the members of the court, who were tied to a set of rules regulating the timing and procedures of each meal eaten with any of the royal family members.<sup>5</sup> Not only courtiers and nobles were involved in these moments, but also the countless number of servants and footmen who were in charge of cooking, serving, keeping the room clean and ensuring a pleasant atmosphere.

Even if an austere protocol such as the one described in K.8669 must have not represented the norm, it is clear that this text provides an excellent insight into the regulations that were followed by the Great Men at the king’s table.<sup>6</sup> We do not know, moreover, if the behaviour of the diners was as codified, respectful and decorous as the attitude of the servants during the whole meal.

It is evident that strict etiquette, aimed at showing respect to the honoured host, was observed before taking place at the table, but in the course of the banquet, while the attendants were particularly careful to make each guest feel at ease, a situation similar to the ones described in many literary texts was also likely. There, men became more and more relaxed thanks to the abundance of wine and alcoholic beverages and consequently tended to lose their good manners. The overall atmosphere depicted by K.8669 always seems to have remained formal, but we have no idea about the level of freedom of speech or the possible relaxation of behaviour that might have taken place as time went by.

These elements have been gathered by identifying the kind of feast de-

4 Van Driel 1969 was very clear in this sense: see for example pp. 159-160: «The occasion described by K.8669 seems wholly secular». Such a statement, in the light of the modern studies about rituals and ritualized acts (for which see also the first chapter of the present work), seems today too drastic and somehow simplistic.

5 Some hints on the daily banquets served at the royal table come from other kinds of texts, such as the administrative accounts discussed in the third chapter.

6 Only one similar description of a banquet eaten in the context of court life comes from the Hittite world, and it is integrated in what is called today the *Palace Chronicle*, a collection of anecdotes about royal officials and their deeds at the court of Ḫattušili I and Muršili I, which aimed at providing examples of competence and obedience through a series of descriptions of bad behaviour, instead. In this text there is also the description of a rich repast consumed in the presence of the king, with members of the royal family who held political tasks in the empire together with dignitaries and military officials. The passage describing the banquet, unfortunately in poor condition, had the purpose of celebrating cohesion which was finally reached among all those who were affiliated with the court. See the edition by Dardano 1997, and recently (and specifically on the banquet) the comment by de Martino 2012.

scribed in the text, analyzing this meal through a comparison with similar occasions known from contemporaneous sources, and with more general, anthropological observations. The point in the case described by K.8669 was not, apparently, to have the chance of interacting with the ruler during the meal: the king was in fact sitting separately from his guests, with the only company of his successor. The seating arrangement did not give anyone the opportunity for any communication with him (communication that, instead, could and did take place on the occasion of other meals), but we can imagine an exchange of information between dignitaries coming from different areas of the empire. From the king's point of view, this repast was not an occasion for dialogue, but rather a show. The fundamental corporeal nature of rituals such as the one described in our source should never be forgotten: these events were certainly recorded in texts and images, but their primary essence was always physical. They existed as embodied performances, events experienced by actors and observers in a specific place, for a well-determined purpose.<sup>7</sup>

This idea fits well with the setting in which the banquet is set up: it was, in fact, part of the court ceremonial which included various celebrative events, whose norms were known and followed by all the participants. The latter were, thus, at the same time partakers and recipients of the messages conveyed through the interaction between them and the king. Such a feast was internal to the court and reached a possible external observer only through some secondary means of communication, such as iconography and oral accounts.<sup>8</sup>

A royal court was restricted, but was not composed exclusively of the royal family. Essential for the survival and the development of the king's power was also the presence within the palace of a large group of nobles and advisers, who shared the spaces together with the Great Men, the courtiers and the other personnel of the palace *entourage*, while the women lived in their own quarters.<sup>9</sup> Since Assyria relied greatly on its army to create and confirm its power, the highest administrative offices had at the same time both a bureaucratic and military character; they were, moreover, usually associated with the governorship of provinces set all over the empire.

This group was characterized by quite ephemeral boundaries, but there was one parameter that never changed: to be part of the king's *entourage*, a person had to accept to sit at his dining table, and to eat his food. The court was completed, then, by the ones who waited for the leftovers of these first, privileged, higher-status *attachés*. People covering these

7 See Giesen in Alexander, Giesen, Mast 2006, esp. pp. 342-343.

8 For a clear discussion of the procedures which governed a court ceremonial, see (applied to the Achaemenid court) Brosius 2010.

9 See Garelli 1975, for a synthetic but comprehensive description.

posts, when summoned face to face with their direct leader, had the task of reporting any useful information coming from outside the walls of the royal residence. And no less importantly, by taking back to all the main cities and regions of the empire a description of the power, magnificence and generosity experienced in the palace, they nourished the consensus of every social class toward the ruler.

Historians have effectively described the purposes of a royal court according to five main points: to give precise directions for the every-day life of the king; to guarantee his safety; to make his power prestigious and project this image outside the court itself; to create strong bonds between the highest classes and the king's household; and to lay the foundations for the exercising of political and economic governance.<sup>10</sup> An occasion such as the feast described by K.8669 fits well this analysis of the functioning of the royal entourage, as shown in the following pages.

It is clear, then, that etiquette was strongly perceived at every level of society as an instrument of power, and as such it could also be consciously manipulated: the king could use it for his own advantage, or, on the contrary, could become a victim of it, if any clever noble used its system to gain more and more power.<sup>11</sup> The court ceremonial could become one of the tools used by the ruling elite to visually organize and maintain the distance between people belonging to different social classes, and to stabilize the balance within its very closed group.

A formal analysis of the text on the basis of the traditional, widespread binary distinction between 'descriptive' and 'prescriptive' ritual texts would place K.8669 in the second category: it was, in fact, intended «as a manual or code of ritual procedure».<sup>12</sup> Such distinction, however, originally conveyed a conceptual negative image of prescriptive rituals, described by Levine and Hallo as projections of pious performances affected by distortions, and basically non objective (unlike the descriptive ones, which are defined in the same lines as «dispassionate administrative accounts which record actual events, [...] affording us a much desired look at how the religious establishment was actually maintained»). Such a pessimistic look seems too extreme, though. It is true that the text shows a somehow fixed, impersonal nature and lists a long series of ritualized actions which are not explained nor 'justified', but this format derives from the purpose that the document served, namely to provide some standards of gestures and behaviour to be

10 Paravicini 1998.

11 See Grayson 1999, in particular pp. 263-266, where the author presents an interesting reflection on the Neo-Assyrian empire stemming from the theories of Elias. However, for an analysis and a critique of Elias' theory, see Duindam 2003.

12 The definition and description of these two kinds of ritual texts have been provided by Levine, Hallo 1967.

followed on a very special occasion. However, this fact does not affect its impartiality: on the contrary, through a careful analysis of the performances it prescribes, it is possible to detect both the pragmatic (explicit) and the theoretical (implicit) structures of the movement proposed.

The protocol appears, rather distinctly, as a *libretto*: a series of indications are given to different 'protagonists' who needed to know how to move, speak and act inside a well-defined, fully equipped set. The possibility to read a ritual text as a theatrical script, and the close relation between the gestural expressiveness of rituals and actions typical of a staged *pièce* have been subjects of study since the Eighties, when the Anthropology of Performance arose and grew as an independent field of research.<sup>13</sup> More recently, the awareness that religious acts (and the texts that govern them) can be understood also from this perspective, led concretely to the publication of volumes that analyzed, for example, the art of performance within Greek rites and in the Bible.<sup>14</sup>

According to Schechner, the difference between ritual and theatre lies in the context and function which the specific performance aims at, albeit it is clear that even if rituals are theatre-like, they never coincide with theatre itself. Firstly, because those who perform rituals do not impersonate someone else but always enact a role maintaining their personalities; and secondly, because the ability of the performers (even if 'stage skills' are appreciated) is not as important as the meaning conveyed through the actions themselves.<sup>15</sup> More recently, Bell highlighted how rituals and theatrical shows share a performative dimension, intended as a deliberate and conscious 'doing' of highly symbolic acts in the presence of an audience: without witnesses, they would in fact lose their significance. Moreover, such performances convey their messages on multiple sensorial levels, including, thus, images and sounds as well as tactile, olfactory and taste *stimuli*.<sup>16</sup> Herein lies the strength of a performance, and this is particularly valid for a banquet during which each sense organ is involved: more than doing something, then, those who partake are required to feel something.<sup>17</sup>

13 Some fundamental studies of the main exponents of the Anthropology of Performance can in fact be dated back to the beginning of the Eighties: see in particular Turner 1982, and Schechner 1985. For a synthetic but exhaustive history of this branch of knowledge see also Alexander, Mast's introduction to Alexander, Giesen, Mast 2006 (pp. 1-28).

14 In particular, some scholars noticed an 'innate theatricalism' in some archaic and classic Greek rituals – theatricalism was defined by Wiles as «paradigm for tragedy» (Wiles 2002, p. 38; see also pp. 26-47, «Ritual»). For the Biblical text, see Levy 2000.

15 Schechner 2006, pp. 191-192.

16 Bell 1997, pp. 159-164.

17 For a discussion on the various senses which were involved during Assyrian feasts and the various raw materials used in the court and on these occasions, see Thomason 2010.

In the theatre as on the occasion of a public ceremony of religious or civil nature, it is not possible to stage anything without rules, which can be called (depending on the occasion) conventions, liturgies, manners, or scripts. These guidelines carry out the fundamental mission of connecting each performance to past tradition, and to future performances too, assuring at the same time validity and continuity to the one that is being carried out. Apart from these rules, whose aim is to instruct all those involved (players, spectators, organisers) about what can and cannot be done, every performance, as well as every other social interaction, is guided also by a set of unwritten but well-known, social-dictated expectations and obligations.

K.8669 expresses precisely these kinds of guidelines, and clearly shows the points of connection between theatrical and religious performances: thus, it will be analyzed by deconstructing it in all its components, in order to gain a clear overall view of the ceremonial acts it describes.<sup>18</sup> The organization of the text is linear, and can be structured in three main moments: the entrance of guests and servants in the room, the carrying out of the banquet proper, and the exit and the final cleaning. Some more precise subdivisions can also be outlined, according to the following scheme:<sup>19</sup>

## I. Entrance of guests and servants in the room:

- I.1 Entrance of the king (i 1-3)
  - I.2 Entrance of the Great Men (i 4-13)
  - I.3 Entrance of the king's sons (i 14-20)
- [End of first column: 35 lost lines ca.]

## II. Banquet

### II.1 Preparations

- II.1.a Organization of the room (ii 1-4)
- II.1.b Handling of fire and burners (ii 5-15)
- II.1.c Cleansing: towels and water for hands (ii 16-21)
- II.1.d Instructions for cleaning (ii 22-28)

[End of second column: 35 lost lines ca.]

[Beginning of third column: 28 lost lines ca.]

### II.2 Meal

- II.2.a Distribution of dishes (iii 30'-33')
- II.2.b Burning of incense (iii 34'-36')
- II.2.c Handling of torches (iii 37'-42')
- II.2.d Burning of incense (iii 43'-44')
- II.2.e Pouring of beverages (iii 45'-46')

<sup>18</sup> A similar approach has been applied to the Biblical text, see for example Levy's analysis of the episode of Samuel's initiation (Levy 2000, pp. 13-37).

<sup>19</sup> The text will be included in Parpola, forthcoming, as SAA 20, 33.



## III. Going out and final cleaning

III.1 Announcement (iii 47'-49')

III.2 Exit of the guests (iii 49'-50')

III.3 Emptying of the room and cleaning (iii 50'-55')

A complete translation of the protocol, then, reads as follows:

(i 1) On the day of the meal, when the ki[ng] enters the dinner [together with the Great Men], [they place a table] and a chair for the king, in front of the door.

(4) As soon as the king is seated on his throne, the overseer of the palace enters, [kisses] the ground before [the king], and he gives report before the king. The overseer of the palace [goes out] and brings in the palace herald of the palace.

(7) The chief palace herald e[nters] and kisses the ground before the king. He stands with the stan[dard in front of the king]. The palace herald gives report. [The overseer of the palace goes out and] brings in the *sukkallu* first in rank.

(11) [The *sukkallu* first in rank] enters and [kisses the ground] in front of the king before the threshold. He stands in front of the king. [The palace herald and the] *sukkallu* first in rank go out.

(14) [As soon as they go] out, the king's son comes in. [...] He stiffens his right leg. [...] He places his [...] on the ground. He leans? [.....]. [...], and he occupies his place.

(19) [The other king's sons enter, and] they stand [in front of the king].

(20) [The.....] gives report.

(Break)

(ii 1) [.....] The chariot-driver [brings in 2 stands]: he places [one t]o the right of the king and one to the le[ft, near the chair]. A palace servant [scatters aromatics]. As soon as the aromatics are completely burnt, [the palace servant goes out,] [...] he brings in iron shovels, and removes the burnt [aromatics with it].

(ii 6) One of the palace servants [...] stands in front, for the service of Ṭebētu, with an [iron] shovel, a fire rake and iron tongs in his hand. If a charcoal or ember falls from (the top of) the brazier, he enters, picks it up and puts it back on top of the brazier. If the fire does not burn properly, he adjusts it. If the wood in the brazier is completely burnt, he goes out, brings in wood and places it on top of the brazier. And if the fire on the brazier is (too) strong, he goes out, brings in his colleague, and they scrape the fire. When the king orders (it), they add (wood on the brazier).

(ii 16) One footman stands in front, at service. He collects the dirty napkins and gives out clean ones. He collects the dirty hand towels, and gives out clean ones.

(ii 20) One palace servant stands before the pot of the hand-water: [if water] is lacking, he pours the water from the hand-water (pot).

(ii 22) [A palace servant] stands [on duty] with a broom and a box in his hands. If someone's container [is spilled], he brings in [a scoop?] and picks (it) up. [And if] someone's [...] falls down, [a palace servant] brings in [a broom? and] a box and collects (it). [...] he goes out straightaway. [...] in his hands, on duty.

(Break)

(Rev., i 30') [...],...-meat, [...-meat], *iānuqu*-[meat], hind legs, goose, [...-bird, turtle]edove, jerboas: this is the meal, as much as it is served.

(i 32') The high official and the chief cook stand [near] the incense-holders, which [are placed] before [the king]. [As soon as] the trays of the nobles have been distributed, they place all the incense for this meal on the incense-holders which are placed before the king.

(i 37') Beginning at sunset, at the torch time, they light torches and bring them into the palace. A palace servant stands on duty: as soon as a torch is completely burnt, he lights a spill? and brings it in. He collects the butts and takes them out.

(i 41') Palace servants stand among the tables of the king's sons and the Great Men, and they hold torches. As soon as the meal has been completely served, they burn many aromatics among the tables of the king's sons and the Great Men.

(i 45') They set out heavy cups. The overseer of the palace stands there and says: «Pour, cupbearer!»

(i 47') Palace servants stand with brooms in their hands, and one (of them) with a box in his hand, on duty. The chief cook announces: «The meal has been served!»

(i 49') The crown prince sets out, then the Great Men rise and remain standing. They remove the tables of the king's sons and of the Great Men. They remove the table of the prince and the table in front of the king. The palace servants [ente]r, sweep (the floor) with brooms, and leave.

(i 54') [...] the brooms in their hands. [...] the overseer] of the palace [.....] a wooden box [...]

(Rest broken or uninscribed)

## 5.2 Chronology

The text does not include a colophon, or any other internal, explicit indication that could provide a lead for the chronology of its redaction. Scholars assigned it alternatively to the Middle- and the Neo-Assyrian period, justifying their hypothesis on some script or dialectal grounds. This uncertainty is also reflected by the frequent fluctuation in the different volumes of the

Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, where the indication «MA royal rit.» appears together with «NA ritual», in the various attestations quoted there.

Parpola suggested that K.8669 represents a Neo-Assyrian copy of an original whose drafting must be placed in the second millennium: directing the attention to the line iii 40', he wrote «the form *ildu* also occurs in the Neo-Assyrian *naptunu* ritual [...] where its presence probably is due to the fact that the scribe was copying from a Midde-Assyrian original».<sup>20</sup>

A first clue which could help in dating the text comes from the fact that the office of the *nāgir ekalli* as one of the highest ranks of the social pyramid is first attested during the reign of Aššurnasirpal (in the first half of the ninth century).<sup>21</sup> this can be considered, then, a useful *terminus post quem* for the chronology. In the same period of time, an interesting phenomenon caught on within the Assyrian royalty, that is the use of appointing as heir one of the princes who was not the king's first-born child – thus changing the tradition that had ruled in the dynastic family for decades, and had caused more often than not traumatic consequences to the empire.

The first of these events occurred in the year 823, when Šamši-Adad V had to face a rebellion led by his elder brother, in order to sit on the throne that their father Šalmaneser III had assigned to him. Similar events occurred again in the ninth century with Adad-nerari III, and later, in the seventh century, with Esarhaddon and Aššurbanipal.<sup>22</sup> Such circumstances, the open revolts and the more hidden (and so even more dangerous) plots against the person of the king or his heir, caused a tightening of etiquette, with a rigid control on everyone who approached the ruler or the crown prince. Moreover, it became necessary to show clearly and indisputably the person of the favourite son and successor, an exhibition directed particularly to the highest political and military officers of the empire (i.e., those people who should grant a peaceful and non-traumatic succession).

These practices had always been present within the Assyrian court, where the legitimate heir had constantly occupied a privileged rung of the social hierarchy, but certainly the civil wars caused by problematic succession exacerbated the protocol.

Therefore, on the base of contents and internal indications, the most plausible dating for the etiquette described in the text (as far as we can deduce from the exemplar that we have) is the Neo-Assyrian time. Not only the presence of the *nāgir ekalli* in fact, as stated before, but also the lexicon suggests this chronology. To mention two examples: the distinction between the *šusuppu*-towel and the *TÚG ša qāti* (for which see the text, line ii 17) is attested only from the Neo-Assyrian period onward; the same for

<sup>20</sup> See Parpola 1983, p. 243, fn. 431.

<sup>21</sup> Mattila 2000, p. 162.

<sup>22</sup> See Fales 2001, pp. 50-53.

the word *maksūtu* (iii 32') to indicate a kind of stand. Also, the script and the layout of the text point to a redaction of this text in the second half of the first millennium, within the context of Aššurbanipal's library. However, since (as mentioned above) the access to the king's presence must have already been strictly regulated in previous times, it is also possible that our source has been affected by a long oral tradition, (and, consequently, probably also written) known by those scribes who put it down in writing: this tradition could then appear here and there within the lines.

Beside the absolute chronology, any attempt to date the specific occasion of the year in which this ceremonial was celebrated appears frustrating. The indication in the first line, «on the day of the meal», does not give any precise clue, since we have nowhere in Neo-Assyrian texts evidence of a special event with this name. The expression «*ūmu ša*» could be used, on the other hand, to point to any moment of a year or of a day, as the many attestations quoted in the dictionaries testify. So there remain two possibilities: either the text does not refer to a specific occasion but its purpose is to provide instructions for any royal banquet which includes the participation of the Great Men of the empire; or the annual or extraordinary event described did not need to be mentioned with its proper name, since this was known *a priori* by the attendants implicated in the various actions.

The first hypothesis seems less plausible, on the basis of the nature of the meal described: frequent meetings of the king with his officers, which could very likely include also the sharing of food, are attested by different sources such as letters and administrative texts. However, these events must have been less showy and more concrete, including a smaller amount and variety of food but a more plentiful exchange of reports and orders, through which the king could remain up-to-date and keep on administrating his empire. Moreover, the banquet described in K.8669 shares many similarities with texts that give details of diverse rituals, including actions such as kissing the ground in front of the authority and scattering aromatics into burners, and the use of devices like the braziers and the *sasuppu*-towels.

The text reflects, instead, one of the great banquets which took place at regular intervals in the Assyrian palaces. There are a few hints suggesting that this event was carried out in winter:

<sup>li</sup>šá-é.2-i 1-en T[A x x x]  
 a-na ma-šar-t[e š]á <sup>iti</sup>AB iz-za-az né-su-<sup>r</sup>pu' [AN.BAR]  
 mu-te-er-ru ma-šá-a-nu AN.BAR ina ŠU<sup>II</sup>-šú<sup>23</sup>

23 K.8669 (= SAA 20, 33), lines ii 6-8. My translation is different from the one proposed by Parpola in his forthcoming edition, which reads: «One *special* lackey keeps watch over an [iron] shovel and an iron rake and thongs in his hands». He comments the line ii 7 as follows: «ITI.AB (lit. «month Kanun») is a rebus for *kanūnu* “hearth” (spelled syllabically in ii 9ff)».

One of the palace servants [...] stands in front, for the service of ʾṭebētu, with an [iron] shovel, a fire rake and iron tongs in his hand.

The mention of the tenth month, in the seventh line of the second column, led Müller to the conclusion that this meal took place exclusively in ʾṭebētu. He was aware of the possibility of the ‘metaphorical’ reading of this same line as «Versorgung der Heizung» but he considered «highly improbable» the hypothesis of the mention of ʾṭebētu as a synecdoche for winter.<sup>24</sup> Parpola denied resolutely the idea of a connection with a specific month, stating that the signs III.AB were, in fact, a rebus spelling for the word *kinūnu*, and that the text had validity for every royal banquet.<sup>25</sup> According to the dictionaries, there are not, however, attestations of the writing III.AB for the metal brazier – that was instead always written syllabically or with the logograms KI.NE. This fact, together with the presence of the determinative III, brings us to the conclusion that what is intended here is really the month ʾṭebētu, which was actually re-named *Kanūnu* during the Neo-Assyrian time. Since this was a winter month (corresponding to our December-January), this explains the references to stoves frequently recurring in the text.

In ʾṭebētu/*Kanūnu*, from the evening of the 10th to the 12th day, a festival was held, which was named in the sources as «the days of the *kanūnu*».<sup>26</sup> Even though we do not know any source that explains in details what exactly happened during these celebrations, we can suppose that they included rites in which the lighting and burning of braziers were crucial. To suggest that the banquet described in K.8669 depicts a specific event associated exclusively with the *kanūnu*-festival would certainly be too hazardous, but there are no doubts that such a meal may fit very well into the kind of celebrations included in it and on other similar occasions.

### 5.3 Equipment and Props

In his analysis of some biblical episodes as theatrical texts, Levy underlines how «set design, costumes and props» are «other spatial elements used to transmit meaning».<sup>27</sup> The frequent references to various pieces of

24 See Müller 1937, pp. 84-85, with fn. 2.

25 Cfr. Parpola 2004a, p. 294, fn. 35.

26 For some observations on the *kanūnu*-festival, see Menzel 1981, p. 49 and Parpola 1983, p. 326. Some Neo-Assyrian letters refer to these occasions, but do not provide much information about the development of the celebration: these documents are published in SAA 10, 94, 95 and 106.

27 Levy 2000, p. 20.

furniture, vessels, fire and perfume tools, and other equipment in K.8669 demonstrate how, as a matter of fact, they should not be considered exclusively as functional objects. Instead, it must be stressed that they also provide useful hints on how the performers were to behave, which were their postures, and how the atmosphere was intended to be. The space is set up stepwise: at the beginning the room is apparently empty, and the servants bring in the table and the chair (or, more probably as we gather from the contemporary iconography, a stool) for the most important person, the king, who enters and takes place before everyone else.

*u<sub>4</sub>-mu ša nap-te-ni ša LU[GAL a-di LÚ.GAL.MEŠ]  
a-na nap-te-ni e-ra-bu-[ú-ni <sup>giš</sup>BANŠUR]  
<sup>giš</sup>né-mat-tu a-na LUGAL ina pu-ut KÁ 'i'-[šak-ku-nu]<sup>28</sup>*

On the day of the meal, when the ki[ng, together with the Great Men] enters for the meal, [they place] [a table] and a chair for the king, in front of the door.

Therefore, during the ‘parade’ of the Great Men and the sons, who entered one after the other offering greetings and homage, we must imagine the ruler seated alone, physically and ideally standing centre-stage in an otherwise empty room. The situation depicted by the text can be visualized through images dating from the third millennium onwards:<sup>29</sup> details of the furniture used come from the great palace reliefs as well as from smaller findings such as the fragment of a glazed vessel found in Nimrud, showing a person (very likely the ruler himself) sitting on a stool, his feet standing on a footstool, in front of a refined table.<sup>30</sup>

Archaeological sources indicate that chairs and tables were made of wood, and decorated with inlays of ivory and precious metal: an account of such items has been provided by Layard, who had the chance of seeing a complete throne-chair with footstool during the excavations in the NW Palace in Nimrud: «In the further corner of the chamber stood the royal throne. [...] With the exception of the legs, which appear to have been partly of ivory, it was of wood, cased or overlaid with bronze [...]. The metal was most elaborately engraved and embossed with symbolical figures and ornaments, like those embroidered on the robes of the early Nimrud king, such as winged deities struggling with griffins, mythic animals, men before the sacred tree, and the winged lion and bull. [...] The legs were adorned with lions’ paws resting on a pine-shaped ornament, like

28 K.8669 (= SAA 20, 33), lines i 1-3.

29 On the iconography of banquets, see the section 6.5, «Portraying a Royal Meal».

30 See Oates, Oates 2001, p. 232, fig. 144.

the thrones of the later Assyrian sculptures, and stood on a bronze base. A rod with loose rings, to which was once hung embroidered drapery, or some rich stuff, appears to have belonged to the back of the chair, or to a frame-work raised above or behind it. [...] In front of the throne was the foot-stool, also of wood overlaid with embossed metal, and adorned with the heads of rams or bulls. The feet ended in lion's paws and pine cones, like those of the throne».<sup>31</sup>

At this point, the next fitting brought on the scene is the standard that the palace herald carries in line i 8:

lúNIGÍR.GAL.KUR e[r-ra-ba]<sup>32</sup>  
 ina IGI LUGAL qa-q-qu-ru i-na-šiq TA giššu-ri-[in-ni]  
 [ina pu-ut LUGAL] i'-za-az lú600-É.GAL tē-e-mu ú-tar<sup>33</sup>

The chief palace herald e[nters]  
 and kisses the ground in front of the king. He stands with the stand[ard]  
 [in front of the king]. The palace herald makes report.

This emblem must not have been a religious one, otherwise the name of the god to whom it belonged would have been mentioned; it was more likely a royal standard whose function was, once again, to embody royalty itself and make it as visible and concrete as possible.<sup>34</sup> Even if it is not said explicitly, we can imagine that it stayed in the room throughout the whole meal, as a reminder to everyone of the kind of celebration that was taking place.

The room keeps on being filled step by step, at the end of the first column also by the action of the crown prince who «places» and «leans» some objects that unfortunately we cannot identify, since the text is broken.<sup>35</sup>

31 Layard 1853, pp. 198-200.

32 Edzard's reconstruction of the *lacuna* at the end of this line, «in MVAG 41/3, 60 I 7 ist [uṣṣâ] ergänzt» (1981, p. 285), is not likely: following the scheme of this quite linear protocol, it is almost sure that the palace herald goes out and calls his direct superior on the scene. He was in fact still not in the presence of the king, and therefore a verb denoting «entering» is more probable than one referring to «going out».

33 K.8669 (= SAA 20, 33), lines i 7-9.

34 Royal inscriptions from the Middle-Assyrian period onward mention a 'Courtyard of standards' in Aššur, associated with the royal palace: see Miglus 1989, pp. 123, 125, and in particular 127, fn. 77, with the bibliography there quoted. In this space royal emblems must have been displayed together with divine ones, and they were all regularly carried during military campaigns and used on the occasion of ratifications of judicial agreements. See Pongratz-Leisten 2011.

35 About the second verb, *emēdu*, we are not even sure that it refers to a physical object: this could in fact be used in idiomatic expressions to indicate both «to lay hands on», or also mental state such as «to be obstinate». See CAD E, s.v. *emēdu* 4.

Because of the rank of the person, we can suppose that it must have been something symbolically meaningful, such as another standard – rather than something functional such as a stool or a table. In the lacuna that covers the end of the first column and the beginning of the second, after the entrance of the other «guests», a few more indications to the servants were probably given, to instruct them to bring in the remaining furniture used to seat everyone.

We can imagine that these pieces were of a slightly lesser quality compared to the ones used by the king and the crown prince, likely smaller and less rich or decorated, but still appropriate for both the situation and the status of the diners. The disposition within the available space must have followed a well-known order, possibly in rows facing the ruler and his son, so that every guest had the chance of seeing them and could in their turn be seen.

The composition of the set continues with the perfume-burners, placed at first at the king's sides and then also between the tables of the Great Men together with braziers. Incense and other aromatics were burned throughout the meal thanks to the constant care of footmen who entered the room to supply them, with the purpose of scenting the air and covering the smell of the food, and probably also in order to keep away insects that could disturb the progress of the feast. These burners were made of bronze, and were mounted on tripods, as the contemporary iconography shows: they were used to heat the room and were ignited with more or less wood as the king ordered.

All the typical throne or reception rooms in Assyrian palaces show what the archaeologists call the «tram lines», i.e. two parallel rows of stone blocks used to carry heavy objects, including wheeled braziers: these consisted in refined iron burners, very suitable to the overall scene, which could thus also become part of the decorations of the room.<sup>36</sup> Footmen took care of these burners, moving them to where the ruler wanted and keeping the area around them clear by picking up charcoal and embers, and adjusting the wood with smaller iron instruments (shovel,<sup>37</sup> rake, tongs<sup>38</sup>) that did not, however, stay in the room but were brought in only when needed.

Food was served on trays placed probably on tables in front of each

<sup>36</sup> A metal brazier used in a palatial context, most probably of the same kind mentioned in K.8669, was found in a storage magazine in Fort Šalmaneser at Nimrud: see Fiorina, Bertazzoli, Bertolotto 1998. This brazier presented a peculiar decoration with turrets made of bronze, and for practicality reasons it had also iron and bronze wheels, which allowed easy transportation in the rooms that needed to be heated for such very special occasions.

<sup>37</sup> For an attempt to identify the tool called in this text *nēsepe parzilli*, see Pleiner, Bjorkman 1974, pp. 300-301.

<sup>38</sup> The translation 'tongs' for the *mutirru* is suggested in the light of both this text and the Middle-Assyrian inventory published by Köcher 1957-1958, p. 308, line iv 27



guest, and since the diners ate with their hands, everyone was provided with towels and napkins, probably placed on the same table and changed every time they were used.<sup>39</sup> A first ablution of hands was expected to take place even before the distribution of the food, and in fact the first change of towels is described at the end of the second column.

<sup>túg</sup>sa-su-up-pa-a-te

šá'-ú-ra-a-te i-maḥ-ḥar za-ku-a-te id-dan

TÚG šá-ŠU<sup>II</sup>.MEŠ sa'-ú-ra-a-te i-maḥ-ḥar za-ku-a-te id-dan

<sup>rú</sup>šá-É.2-i<sup>1</sup> 1-en ina IGI <sup>duḡ</sup>LA ša A.MEŠ ŠU<sup>II</sup>.MEŠ iz-za-az

[šum-ma x x] i-maṭ-ṭi A.MEŠ TA A.MEŠ ŠU<sup>II</sup> i-tab-ba-ak<sup>40</sup>

The dirty napkins,

he collects them and gives out clean ones.

He collects the dirty hand towels, and gives out clean ones.

One palace servant stands before the pot of the hand-water:

[if water] is lacking, he pours the water from

the hand-water (pot).

In the official rooms mentioned before, together with the 'tram-lines', archaeologists also found alabaster ablution slabs placed at the corner, with raised rims and rectangular drain holes with stone plugs; these installations were replaced in later times (after the time of Aššurnasirpal II) by a proper ablution room. Water for the hands, contained in a special vessel, must have been poured on one of these slabs, and clearly not directly on the floor. This fact also suggests that, at the moments described in the passage quoted, the diners were still standing or moving in the room, and had not yet taken their places. The situation changes in the third column, when everyone occupies his position and can finally enjoy the sophisticated menu offered by the king: at this time, light is provided by torches held by footmen standing among the tables.

ina IGI <sup>d</sup>UTU-ši ra-bi-e si-me-en <sup>giš</sup>ziq-tú <sup>giš</sup>zi-qa-a-te

ú-šá-an-mu-ru ina É.GAL ú-še-ru-bu <sup>lú</sup>šá-É.2-i

a-na ma-šar-te iz-za-az GIM <sup>giš</sup>zi-iq-tu gam-mu-rat giš-gi-ri

ú-šá-an-mar ú-še-rab il-da-a-te i-maḥ-ḥar ú-še-ša

**39** The custom of presenting the diners with two different kinds of towels remained in use in later courts, up until the Ottoman Empire, when one napkin was big and used to cover the whole chest of the person, and a second smaller, perfumed one was used for the hands and was placed on the table upon the cutlery. On these two towels and their use in Neo-Assyrian time, see also Deller, Watanabe 1980 and the observations in the Lexicon at the end of the present work.

**40** K.8669 (= SAA 20, 33), lines ii 17-21.

*ina bir-ti* <sup>giš</sup>BANŠUR.MEŠ *ša DUMU.MEŠ 20 ù ša LÚ.GAL.MEŠ*  
<sup>lú</sup>ŠÁ-É.2-i iz-za-a-zu <sup>giš</sup>zi-qa-a-te ú-kal-lu<sup>41</sup>

Beginning at sunset, at the torch time, they light torches and bring them into the palace. A palace servant stands on duty: as soon as a torch is completely burnt, he lights a spill<sup>7</sup> and brings it in. He collects the butts and brings them out. Among the tables of the king's sons and the nobles stand palace servants, and they hold torches.

All the vessels, dishes and glasses used on these festive occasions must obviously have been of high quality and made of precious materials, mostly metal items as described in the numerous accounts of the Neo-Assyrian kings' annals: such items, in silver, gold, tin and bronze, have been found in all the royal palaces, confirming, thus, the written evidence. But on the king's table not only functional vessels were present: in the Burnt Palace in Nimrud an interesting uncommon piece was found (unfortunately in poor condition), consisting of bronze wire 'branches' to which ivory birds and lapis lazuli fruit were attached. This has been interpreted by the archaeologists as a 'set piece' intended for the royal table: together with some richly elaborated ivory containers which might have been used for salt, it witnesses the Assyrian taste for the decoration even of smaller elements.<sup>42</sup>

Considerable amounts of fine glazed and painted pottery are reported and a few vessels were also self-referential, illustrating one or more persons drinking before a well-furnished table. Moreover, special shapes were used for the toast made to and with the king, such as the well-known ram-headed rhytons represented also in the wall reliefs.<sup>43</sup> The servants' equipment included, in addition, a few smaller instruments used to keep the room clean: whisks, boxes and scoops were used in case some food fell from the diners' tables.<sup>44</sup>

41 K.8669 (= SAA 20, 33), lines r. i 37'-42'.

42 See Oates, Oates 2001, 228, and fig. 59.

43 An example of a self-referential vessel coming from the palace in Nimrud can be found in Oates, Oates 2001, 232, fig. 144: despite its being only a fragment of a glazed vessel, this item shows interesting similarities with the iconography of some goblets belonging to the group of the bronzes of Luristan, dating to the ninth and tenth centuries, published by Calmeyer 1973. On the ram-headed rhytons, see Curtis 2000.

44 Two tools mentioned in line ii 22 are not clearly identifiable; they are named together also in lines r. i 47'-48', and must therefore be related to each other. The first one, the *sāru*, appears here and in lines r. i 53'-54': Müller (Müller 1937, pp. 78-79) proposed, in the light of a comparison with the iconographical sources, to identify with this word the whisk waved by servants during the meal to keep the diners cooler and drive insects away, and the two main dictionaries seem to follow this interpretation (see CAD S, s.v. *sāru*: 'whisk' and AHw, Bd. 2, s.v. *sāru*: 'Wedel'). However, comparing it with the indication at the end of the third

Finally, it is significant to point out a detail not explicitly mentioned in the text but which must be considered in order to gain a comprehensive sight of the scene: all the participants in this banquet must have been dressed in appropriate costumes, each indicating their role and showing the importance of the occasion they were taking part in. These clothes must have been different from the ones used in everyday life, and at the same time showed the status of the king, the crown prince, the other princes and the dignitaries, each one bearing those *insignia* that clearly pointed out his position within the social hierarchy.<sup>45</sup>

#### 5.4 Stage and Setting

Performances necessarily require a setting, a physical space where actors move and stage their symbolic acts. Such an environment is itself symbolically loaded with meaning, as is made clear by the fact that the movements of the various performers within the space are carefully recorded by the text, together with the spots where they must stand or take their places. Thus, the geography of this ritualized banquet mirrors the structure of power at court and this is made visible to everyone through these ‘scenographic’ devices.

Although not explicitly stated anywhere, the meal seems to take place in a closed room, very likely inside the royal palace. The lack of any reference to religious personnel, objects of worship, or sacred space indicates, in fact, a civil setting rather than a temple, otherwise the presence of a god could obviously not have been ignored. An Assyrian royal residence was actually composed of more than one building: besides the main palace, the proper dwelling place of the king, it included also the *bīt rēdūti* where the crown prince lived with his own court, and the private quarters destined to the queen and the other women connected to the royal family. As for the servants, some of them lived in the main buildings, close to the nobles they had to serve, while the others were housed instead in a minor residence (*ša bīti šanī*) or in the arsenal (*ekal mašārti*).

Prompted by textual and archaeological sources, we may suggest that this repast was held in a reception hall that must have been similar to rooms G or H in the North-West Palace at Nimrud.<sup>46</sup> The reference to the

column, and with the occurrences of this term in other rituals, we can suggest an identification with a more pragmatic tool, something like a broom or brush. The second object, the *kakkullu* or *qaqqullu*, is mentioned also in line ii 26, used for collecting what falls down on the floor during the meal. It must refer, thus, to a kind of container or box made out of wood.

45 On dresses used for these kinds of feasts, see Thomason 2010.

46 See Oates, Oates 2001, pp. 58-59 and fig. 33.

need for picking up the coals as they fall from the burning heaters would suggest, in fact, that the floor of the room was not paved with stones, and that it needed to be heated with movable braziers:

*šum-ma pe-'e-et-tu'*  
*lu-u gu-ma-ru TA UGU ka-nu-nu it-tu-qu-ut*  
*er-ra-ba i-mat-taḥ ina UGU ka-nu-ni i-kar-ra-ar*  
*šum-ma i-šá-a-tu la tar-ša-at i-tar-ra-aš<sup>47</sup>*

If a charcoal  
 or ember falls from the (top of the) brazier,  
 he enters, picks it up, and puts it back on top of the brazier.  
 If the fire does not burn properly, he adjusts it.

Another clue for this identification is, furthermore, the presence of a drain used to channel the water used by the diners to wash their hands before and during the meal as previously described.

To complete the scene, the walls of the room where the diners gathered were decorated with scenes depicting situations similar to the ones they were living. Portraits of guests seated in the company of the king enjoying the food and drink they were offered, and processions of servants distributing beverages and carrying every kind of delicacy have been found in all the major Neo-Assyrian palaces. These reliefs represented a meaningful, 'speaking' stage, which contributed to the overall ostentation of the circumstance.

Finally, since all the items and furniture used for the banquet (from seats and tables to the cleaning tools) were brought in and out by the servants when the need arose, it can be assumed that the place at issue was surrounded by a service area. This gave the servants enough leeway to move around and fulfil their duties, and also provided the space to store the required furnishings and tools. It is not possible to define precisely in which of the royal residences this meal could have taken place, and its contents do not tie it to any specific place, so it is presumable that the same feast could be 'moved' and performed wherever the king considered it appropriate.

Within this closed space, great attention was paid to the disposition of each person: the hierarchical status was made visible by means of a different location, both horizontally (disposition in fore- or background, in the centre or at one side of the room) and vertically (higher chair, different postures, and bows). The etiquette of this ceremony, thus, contributed to creating or underlining the collective consciousness of the social order.

The doorway, as a physical space and an architectural element, held

47 K.8669 (= SAA 20, 33), lines ii 8-11.

a powerful symbolical meaning: being concretely ‘at the borders’ between two spaces, a necessary transit and connection point, it often appears in ritual texts as a frame for various actions, and K.8669 makes no exception.<sup>48</sup> Turner and Schechner underlined the importance of thresholds in performances, since their spaces embody the concept of ‘liminality’ of rituals: such a spot is a ‘non-place’, a simple ‘go-between’ from one space to another, which is raised both actually and conceptually to the role of ‘site of action’. After the crossing of a *limen*, a new venerable room is reached, which implies a special behaviour and the commitment to a series of rules expected for the specific performance enacted.<sup>49</sup> In Mesopotamia, doors were the place where sacrificial animals were delivered, apotropaic figurines were deposited, offerings were presented to the gods, and where, in their turn, the gods themselves made sacrifices.<sup>50</sup> In temples and palaces, they represented a passageway, a connection between the normal, everyday ‘outside’ and the private, powerful ‘inside’ – a place in which only few favourites were admitted. Crossing a threshold was therefore considered a meaningful gesture, and also the houses of ‘normal’ people needed to be protected by reciting conjurations over their thresholds.<sup>51</sup>

## 5.5 The Performers

The ritual shows a remarkable civil nature, with the participation in the banquet of the highest officers of the empire, the LÚ.GAL.MEŠ (‘Great Men’), mentioned right from the very first line of the text. This restricted group of people included princes and holders of the highest offices of the realm: governors, eponyms, civil and military chiefs.<sup>52</sup> They went regularly to the capital city, on the occasion of special religious festivities or for celebrations connected with royalty: periodically the king needed to summon the highest officials around his person, in order to strengthen the emotional and pragmatic ties with them, ensure the continuation of his control over

48 For the significance of the doorway as an architectonic element and passage way, and for the importance of its guarding, see Radner 2010. For the use of the space in front of and within doors in ritual texts, see the observations by Sallaberger 2007, pp. 424-425, §3.4.

49 See Turner 1969, p. 95; Schechner 2006, pp. 66-70.

50 Cfr. Ambos 2009 and 2014 (esp. ch. 4, «Tür und Tor als Schauplatz ritueller Handlungen»).

51 See the examples provided by the *namburbî* texts published by Maul 1994 and the bibliography included in the two references mentioned above.

52 In the texts belonging to the Nimrud Wine Lists, discussed in the third chapter, the expression LÚ.GAL.MEŠ sums up at least 22 various provincial governors. In the Neo-Assyrian letters, the Great Men appear often as both senders or addressees, or even as subjects of reports sent to the king.

them, verify the conditions and the loyalty of the provinces of his empire, and create new economic and social links with those who came to meet him face to face.<sup>53</sup>

Even if their duties usually kept the Great Men far from the capital - as they stayed mostly in those provinces for which they were responsible, or at the head of the troops protecting the borders of the Empire, or on the road travelling to accomplish various tasks - their presence at court, at regular intervals, is attested to by the royal correspondence, and their participation in royal feasts and at the distribution of food by the king is certified by letters and administrative documents.

According to K.8669, only few people were admitted to this particular royal banquet: beside the ruler himself, the crown prince, and the other royal sons, only another three of the major officers of the empire are mentioned. It is true that a *lacuna* at the end of the first column prevents us from knowing who were the other protagonists of the first phase of the protocol, which included an elaborate system of homage and tribute rites; however, the end of the text clearly states that no others were present, at least on this occasion:

DUMU 20 *ú-nam-maš*  
 LÚ.GAL.MEŠ *i-tab-bi-ú iz-za-a-zu* <sup>gis</sup>BANŠUR.MEŠ *ša* DUMU.MEŠ 20  
*ù ša* LÚ.GAL.MEŠ *i-mat-tu-ḫu* <sup>gis</sup>BAN[ŠU]R *ša* DUMU LUGAL  
 ‘*ù*’ <sup>gis</sup>BANŠUR TA IGI LUGAL *ú-nam-mu-šu*<sup>54</sup>

The crown prince sets out,  
 then the Great Men rise and remain standing. They remove the tables  
 of the king’s sons and of the Great Men. They remove  
 the ta[b]le of the prince and the table in front of the king.

We cannot exclude that in different moments of the year, similar celebrations were performed for different audiences and with other ‘actors’. The purposes of a circumstance like the one recorded in this text could have been multiple: certainly, the acceptance of the invitation to sit at the king’s table, together with the carrying out of the various signs of respect and submission, involved a celebration of the ruler and the confirmation of his role at the head of the hierarchy. However, the figure of the crown prince seems to be equally meaningful.

His status is clearly above that of all the other participants’: he does not

53 We know that the king could, at different moments, demand a payback for his generosity: the clearest example is Sargon’s description of how, during his eighth campaign against Urartu, the governors stocked flour and wine to feed his troops, just as he fed his officers in ceremonies similar to the one described in K.8669.

54 K.8669 (= SAA 20, 33), lines r. i 49’-52’.

have to prostrate himself and kiss the ground in front of his father like all the other Great Men (he seems just to bow, instead),<sup>55</sup> and moreover, he sits in a different position, near the king, as we can deduce from the recurrent mentioning of «the tables of the king's sons and nobles»,<sup>56</sup> which are clearly separated from the ones of the king and the crown prince. We can, thus, consider this text as a renewed 'official introduction into society' of the future ruler, who was explicitly and visually associated with the present leader, obtaining in this way the confirmation of his investiture by all those men who might, in the future, become his own nearest collaborators.

Among the major offices traditionally considered at the highest level of the social pyramid of the Neo-Assyrian empire, the palace herald *nāgir ekalli*, the vizier *sukkallu* and the chief eunuch *rab ša-rēši* appear in the text – the first two are involved in the homage rites before the meal, the third appears instead already «on stage» in line r. i 33'. The treasurer *masennu*, the chief-cupbearer *rab šāqê*, the chief judge *sartinnu* and the general *turtānu*, who complete the roster of seven officers who have been defined as «the cabinet» of the king, are never explicitly mentioned.<sup>57</sup> Some scholars have speculated on their presence in the last lines of the first column, where they might have appeared showing their respect as their colleagues in the preceding lines; however, they might also be absent or simply included in the definition LÚ.GAL.MEŠ.

Following the sequence of our text (that, admittedly, does not necessarily reflect the social pyramid of the Neo-Assyrian empire in its complexity but shows only one, singular occasion which cannot be used for a full reconstruction of the overall hierarchy of the state), the first officer to appear on stage is the *nāgir ekalli*, whose role within the palace and the kingdom is particularly difficult to define.<sup>58</sup>

The second to come is the vizier, whose presence at the royal table can be deduced also from an administrative text according to which both the *sukkallu dannu* and the *šaniu* took part, together with the queen, the crown prince, the other sons of the king, and two other officers, in the «second meal of the pal[ace]»<sup>59</sup>. About the office of the *ša-rēši*, many words have been written describing his status and his role in the Assyrian society. This is not the place for undertaking a discussion about these still

55 See the lines i 14-15.

56 These references can be found in lines r. i 41', 43'-44', and 50'-51'.

57 For the definition «cabinet of the king», see Parpola 1995; see also Mattila 2000.

58 For a synthetic but exhaustive presentation of the role of the herald in the Ancient Near East, see Sassmannshausen 1995, and in particular on the *nāgir ekalli*, pp. 169-178.

59 SAA 7, 155, line 1: 2'-te' BUR ša É.[GAL?]. The text is broken, and the editors admit that other reconstruction, beside É.[GAL], are also possible: see Fales, Postgate 1992, p. 161.

unsolved issues,<sup>60</sup> however it is enough to point out here that during the Neo-Assyrian time he was not only a powerful official, a commander of the royal troops, but he also (and as such he appears in K.8669) coordinated the other *ša-rēši*-attendants working in the palace.

One of the most important characters of the whole ritualized action, to whom in this case even the highest officers just mentioned seem submitted, is the palace supervisor, *ša pān ekalli*. This office is attested in the Mesopotamian sources only from the Neo-Assyrian period onwards: he was responsible for the access to the king's (and, starting with the late reign of Esarhaddon, also to the crown prince's) person, and to his establishment as well. His authority in allowing admittance to the king's presence is attested also by some letters:

*a-na* LÚ.šá-IGI-É.GAL.MEŠ *tè-mu* <li>-*iš-kun-nu*  
*ki-ma* LÚ.AB.BA.MEŠ *ina* KI.TA *tam-le-e*  
*e-te-qu lu-ra-mu-u-ni pa-ni ša* LUGAL EN-*ia*  
*la-mur-ru* 'LUGAL' *lip-la-[sa-an-ni]*  
 DI-*mu ša* [LUGAL EN]-*ia ka-a-a-[ma-ni]-ú*  
*liš-pur-[x]-u-ni TA<sup>?</sup> man-ni-<sup>?</sup>ma IGI<sup>?</sup>.2-MEŠ-*ia**  
*ša-kan-na ša áš-pur-an-ni ina* IGI LUGAL  
*lu-še-ri-<sup>?</sup>bu<sup>?</sup>-[ni] la-da-bu-[ub]*<sup>61</sup>

Let an order be given to the palace-overseers: when the elders pass by beneath the terrace, let them allow me to see the face of the king, my lord, and may the k[ing] look at me. Let them constantly send me word on the health of [the king, my lord]. Upon whom are my eyes fixed? (In) that I have written, let them allow me to enter before the king and speak (with him).

In addition, as we can deduce from the text under examination, he also held the role of chief of the palace protocol, and acted as 'director' on the occasion of these great, spectacular events.

The chariot-driver, *mukil ašâte*,<sup>62</sup> appears at the beginning of the second column, bringing in two incense or perfume burners and placing them at the king's side. He disappears then, and we are not told if he sits with the other Great Men or if he leaves the room. It is plausible, however, that he

60 It is enough to mention here the article of Siddal 2007, in which all the major and most-recent studies about the *rab ša-rēši* are quoted.

61 SAA 13, 80, lines 14-r.4.

62 It is noteworthy that the office of the *mukil ašâte* appears as an *hapax* only in this text: the usual name in the Neo-Assyrian period for the chariot-driver was, in fact, *mukil appate*. The *pluralia tantum* used in K.8669, *ašātu*, is attested according to CAD only in the Middle-Babylonian, Nuzi, and Late Babylonian time.



ate his meal together with the dignitaries, since chariot-drivers held quite a high position in the social hierarchy: each one of the civic officials in fact, including the king, and every god living in the Assyrian temples, had a private chariot. Those who were in charge of driving them were also commonly entrusted with important missions by their civilian superiors, while in a religious context each god used his vehicle to move from one temple to the other on the occasion of processions and rituals.

Finally, two posts more strictly connected with the kitchen and the drinking appear in the text: the chef *rab-nuḫatimmu* and the cupbearer *šaḳû*. The former, in charge of cooking, appears only on the occasion of those great festivals when dishes of *haute cuisine* were offered to a huge number of people (he was not, then, a ‘normal’ cook). He seems always to have maintained his role as responsible for the supplying and control of the good functioning of the royal kitchen, but at the same time his status gradually arose within the social structure, and one *rab-nuḫatimmu* is also known as an eponym.<sup>63</sup> Cupbearers always held a practical role, being the ones in charge of serving drinks to gods and kings, and some of them were also assigned to the queen and the women apartments. The *šaḳû* appears often in texts together with the *nuḫatimmu*, with whom he shared the service at the royal dining table and the honour of being close to the most powerful men of the empire.<sup>64</sup>

Before concluding this section, it is interesting to register some conspicuous absences among the participants to the feasts. There is no female presence on the scene, either among the diners or as a servant. From a comparison with the court at Mari, we can assume that the queen and the women of the royal family used to eat their meals in a separate area of the palace assigned to their presence, and some administrative documents support this theory.<sup>65</sup> However, the queen appears together with the king’s sons and other high officials in the letter SAA 7, 155, mentioned above:

2<sup>?</sup>-te<sup>?</sup> BUR ʾša Éʾ.[GAL<sup>?</sup>]  
 1 MÍ.É Éʾ.[GAL<sup>?</sup>]  
 [1] DUMU.ʾLUGAL<sup>66</sup>

63 See the synthetic but exhaustive study by Bottéro 1980 and, on the *rab-nuḫatimmu* in particular, see p. 294.

64 Also, one cupbearer is known as eponym in the ninth century; see Glassner 1995.

65 SAA 7, 132: the text is broken, but it is possible to reconstruct a list of quantities of fruit and wine delivered by some dignitaries «to the queen», *a-na MÍ.E.GAL* (line r. ii' 1'). SAA 7, 153, line 6' is instead a record for the delivery of a cut of meat «for one month» (?), apparently intended only for the queen (1 UZU *ša* ITI *ša* MÍ.É.G[AL]).

66 SAA 7, 155, lines 1-3.

Second meal of the pa[lace]:  
 1, the queen;  
 [1], the crown prince.

The whole category of scholars is missing: there is no mention of any member of the offices which were so important for the Assyrian royalty such as astrologers, exorcists, scribes, and so on, although they were constantly present and particularly active at court. This fact points out once again the predominant civilian nature of the circumstances depicted.

Lastly, we must register the remarkable absence of any references to singers or musicians, who must have been present during every banquet, as many textual and iconographical attestations confirm. However, while for the scholars the lack of mention corresponds to an actual absence from the scene, in the other case we can imagine that musicians were actually present, but that the fulfilment of their duties was not relevant for the addressees of the text analyzed. Moreover, since this was not a strictly religious occasion, there was no need to state clearly which kind of song was to be performed during the various stages of the banquet (a necessity which arose, instead, in the case of ritual texts).<sup>67</sup>

## 5.6 Actions and Performances

Verbs have been described as the «driving force of a drama».<sup>68</sup> They are obviously relevant because they describe actions and refer to movements actually performed on the scene, but even their linguistic aspect is important, since a conditional, a shift to present, past or future, a negation give different nuances to the situation they represent. Their frequency and distribution within the document indicate the moments in which the action reaches the apex or, on the contrary, where it slows down and the overall tone becomes more reflexive.

In the first section of K.8669, verbs are rather repetitive, mostly expressing movements within the space where all the ceremony is set and actions reflecting the paying of respect to the ruler. The verbs indicating «entering» or «going out» are predominant, in particular *erēbu* (used in the G and in the Š stem) and *wašû*, with fewer indications of standing (*izuzzu*) and taking place (*wašābu* and *šabātu*). Beside these predicates, we can register a significantly smaller amount of verbs referring to honouring the ruler, which can basically be summarized into only two expressions: kissing

<sup>67</sup> See for example the songs mentioned in the ritual K.3445, discussed in the fourth chapter.

<sup>68</sup> Levy 2000, p. 31.

the ground and making a report. Only the crown prince differs from these expected patterns, and expresses his respect with a simple bow.

The few other verbs that we find in the first column describe acts which are functional to the carrying out of the meal, and refer to the setting of the frame for a correct performance: they concern, in fact, the placing of the tables and chairs and very likely of other tools (for which the verbs *šakānu* and *emēdu* are used). It is clear that the main subject and addressee for this first section was the palace overseer, who must have acted, as has been said before, as the director for the whole occasion. Being the first one to appear on the scene, right after the king, he must have given instructions not only to the other servants, but also to the high officers invited to the meal, about the timing and the proper movements to be observed when in the presence of the ruler.

The expressions concerning the manifestations of respect, as described in the text, seem somewhat stiff: not only the gestures, but also the words pronounced in front of everyone, expressed by «*tēma turru*», must have consisted in the repetition of formalized sentences.<sup>69</sup> The possibility of any spontaneity was excluded by the nature of the situation, and by the presence of witnesses, that made impossible any exchange of personal, secret information for which more private meetings must have been arranged.

The act of kissing the ground or the feet of a higher authority is attested both in iconographic and written sources as part of the court ceremonial, and represents a gesture of respect, homage, admiration, submission, demand for help or protection. It could have been performed by vassals, prisoners, subdued people but also by free men of a lower status, dignitaries or soldiers in front of their ruler.<sup>70</sup> An interesting parallel to our situation can be found in the coronation ritual:<sup>71</sup> after pronouncing their oath, all the Great Men taking part in the ceremonial must in fact perform a

69 The expression *tēma turru* might refer to both an administrative or military report presented in a written or oral form directly to the king; Müller (1937, 70) has advanced the hypothesis that it could refer to the uttering of some specific formulas requested by the etiquette and this specific ritual. My interpretation is, also according to the other quotations presented in the dictionaries (esp. CAD T, s.v. *tāru* 10, a2'), more strictly civil as regards to the protagonists of these actions, who were all officials and officers involved in the administration of the State.

70 Even if in the texts the act of kissing the feet or the ground is relatively widely attested from old times (with an equivalent expression in Sumerian, *ki-a su-ub* «to press the ground (with the mouth)», see Cooper 1980-1983, in particular §9, §16, §18), iconographical attestations appear only from the Neo-Assyrian time onward. See for example Schachner 2007, p. 189, and plates 10, 13, 49a and 59a. This act is recorded also in rituals and royal inscriptions.

71 The Assyrian coronation ritual has been published by Müller 1937. It will be included in Parpola, forthcoming, as SAA 20, 7.

*proskynesis*<sup>72</sup> in front of the new king, mirroring a scene depicted in literature in the *Enūma eliš* poem, lines V 85-88.<sup>73</sup> Scenes of an audition which included prostrating in front of an authority are described also in other literary texts, such as *Nergal and Ereškigal*, the *Poor Man of Nippur* and once again the *Enūma eliš*. The king was not only the beneficiary of this kind of homage, but could also in his turn perform it when approaching a direct 'superior', i.e. a god.

These attestations lead to the conclusion that the act of prostration was a typical gesture belonging to what has been called the Mesopotamian 'audience-concept', an expression which refers to the ideology behind the meeting that took place between someone who was in need of asking for something, and a higher authority.<sup>74</sup> The phases identified by Zgoll coincide with the ones of the text under exam: first the necessity of going through the mediation of a doorkeeper or protocol-chief, who was in charge of regulating the access to the person of the ruler. Then followed the entrance to the audience-room, in the middle of which there was the king. This moment included also the presentation of gifts and tributes (not explicitly mentioned in K.8669, but we know from other sources that no one went to visit the ruler empty-handed), and gestures of greetings as well: the raising of hands, bowing in the form of kneeling or prostrating, and kissing the ground or the king's feet. Only then, after standing up again, the person who was admitted to the audience could actually start speaking.

The second column opens again by describing the preparation of the scene, and in particular concerns the installation of the braziers. However, the situation has evidently changed: from this moment on to the end of the text, in fact, there are no other indications of any attitude or sign of respect performed by the guests. The predominant verbs, related to the servants, describe actions whose aim is to ensure the best performance of the banquet and the king's and diners' comfort and contentment.

The sense of a continuous movement is still present, with the expression of the attendants' going in and out (again with *erēbu* and *wašû*), and bringing in and out many smaller instruments, such as the ones needed to take care of the fire (we register a high frequency once more of the same two verbs *erēbu* and *wašû*, but in the Š-factitive stem). Among the other

72 The word, borrowed from the Greek vocabulary to denote the act of prostrating on the ground as an act of reverence, is usually more appropriately applied to the Median and Achaemenid courts, for which numerous examples are known through the classical sources: see Seidl 2006-2008. For an excursus on the *proskynesis* as part of the ceremonial in the first millennium (with a particular focus on the later, Achaemenid period) see Rollinger 2011.

73 [pa]h-ru-ma <sup>d</sup>i.gi.gi ka-li-šú-nu uš-kin-nu-uš | <sup>d</sup>l'a'-nun-na-ki ma-la ba-šu-u ú-na-áš-šá-qu ċĪRI.2.MEŠ-šú, «The Igigi-gods were summoned, they all bowed down. The Anunnaki, all of them, kissed his (Marduk's) feet».

74 Zgoll 2003.

predicates, only two describe ‘standing’ at service, ready to intervene in case of need (*izuzzu*), while the others indicate various actions such as scraping fire, pouring water, or collecting towels and food.

In contrast to the active, animated scenes depicted in the obverse, the reverse outlines a noticeably more static situation. Even if nowhere in the text is there a verb expressing the action of eating, this is actually the moment of the meal proper, and the footmen reduce their movements within the room except for the few necessary ones, including going out to take the torches, which are lighted far from the diners (probably to avoid them any discomfort deriving from the smoke). The verb most used in this section is *izuzzu*, and we have to imagine a scene in which the servants are arranged within the space where the banquet takes place, trying to be as ‘invisible’ as they can, to avoid interfering with the feast – but at the same time, also always ready to intervene on any occasion to control the lighting, scenting and heating in the room, and to ensure enough food and drink to everyone.

Finally, in the third column there is the record of the only two sentences in direct speech of the whole text. The first voice is the overseer of the palace, and introduces a toast: after the description of the trays presented to the guests, the servants set out «heavy cups» and the cupbearer is ordered to pour a beverage (whether beer or wine, we are not told):

GIM *nap-tu-nu ma-a'-da qar-ru-ub ina bir-ti* <sup>gis</sup>BAN[Š]UR.MEŠ  
 ša DUMU.MEŠ 20 ù ša LÚ.GAL.MEŠ ŠEM.MEŠ *ma-a'-du-u-te*  
*i-šar-ru-pu* <sup>duq</sup>GÚ.ZI.MEŠ *dan-na-a-te i-kar-ru-ru*  
<sup>lu</sup>šÁ-IGI-É.GAL *iz-za-az ši-qi* <sup>lu</sup>KAŠ.LUL *i-qab-bi*<sup>75</sup>

As soon as the meal has been completely served, they burn many aromatics among the tables of the king's sons and the Great Men. They set out heavy cups. The overseer of the palace stands there and says: «Pour, cupbearer!»

Since the text, except for the mention of torches, does not provide any clue about the passing of time and the actual duration of the meal, it is not possible to say whether the situation recalled by these few words indicates the act of drinking during the meal, or a toast drunk to give prominence to the end of the banquet, or else to the beginning, in the Greek, ‘symposiastic’ way, of a second phase after the food which included exclusively the consumption of alcohol. A comparison with other rituals and with literary texts, however, shows the second hypothesis is less plausible, since there are nowhere attestations of a ‘second phase’ of drinking separate

75 K.8669 (= SAA 20, 33), lines r. i 43'-46'.

from the eating phase – on the contrary, food and drink in Mesopotamia always go together.

The end of the meal comes quite abruptly, with the second announcement made, this time, by the official in charge of the kitchen:

lúGAL.MU ðè-e-[mu]  
ú-tar ma-a nap-tu-nu qar-ru-ub<sup>76</sup>

The chief cook announces:  
«The meal has been served!»

After these words, the diners get up, always in a regulated order, and leave the room starting from the crown prince, followed by the Great Ones. The king, who was the first to take his place, is also the last to go away. At this point, the few readable words left on the tablet suggest that the servants go back to their duties, putting all the movable furniture and instruments away and cleaning the space where the ceremony had taken place.

Finally, the progress of the ceremonial also deserves some observations: the timing of the sequence of actions and the service of food and drink seems strictly regulated, the intermissions between the various phases being formalized and set by the intervention of the palace supervisor or the various attendants. These formalities brought to a lengthening of the time: the mention of sunset, the «time of the torch» and the lighting of fires, in the third column, makes it clear that this meal started in the afternoon and extended until late in the evening.

## 5.7 Food and Drink

At the beginning of the third column, the menu of the meal must have been listed originally. Its presence is not intended to record permanently the edibles placed on the king's table during celebrative banquets. It was meant, instead, as a record of the delicacies *par excellence* that were prepared for these events, and the order of appearance of the various items was certainly influenced also by scribal habits.

The cultural and social importance of similar lists of edibles for high-status dinners has been underlined by Goody:<sup>77</sup> they are markers of prestige, and imply the complete separation between the consumers (the final beneficiaries of the dishes) and the preparers, between table and kitchen, but also between the servers (bearers) and the consumers (eaters). Writing

<sup>76</sup> K.8669 (= SAA 20, 33), lines r. i 48'-49'.

<sup>77</sup> Goody 2008, p. 82.

a menu is appropriate only for a special occasion, the non-domestic meal: its presence characterizes, thus, the whole situation as 'out of the ordinary'.

Concerning beverages, to accompany the food on the occasion described by K.8669 the usual drinks must naturally have been present, in the first place beer of various kinds and qualities. We know, however, that, as on all the important events, also the usually less-widespread wine was poured at the guests' request.

Unfortunately, the text is missing or broken and does not allow a reconstruction of the complete list of delicacies offered to the diners, but the few words still readable let Parpola recognize a close relation between the foodstuffs mentioned here, the *rēḫāti* lists of the Neo-Assyrian letters, and the Banquet Stele of Aššurnasirpal II.<sup>78</sup> In the remaining lines, various kinds of meat, goose, some birds, turtledoves and jerboas are in fact mentioned, in an order which is common to all these texts.<sup>79</sup>

This assumption lets us reconstruct the menu of the royal meal reported in the missing lines of the third column at least with oxen, sheep and similar meat, many qualities of bread and beer, various kinds of cereals, fruit and sweets prepared with figs, dates and honey. These constitute the 'minimum' of a royal meal, according also to the accounts of food directed to the royal table, which were scrupulously kept by the Neo-Assyrian administration.

Other delicacies could naturally be added to these, such as various kinds of vegetables, soups, fish, other peculiar kinds of meat and so on, at the host's discretion, but unfortunately from what remains of our text we can get no clue about it. It is, however, interesting to observe that the lines missing at the beginning of this column, about twenty-eight, left enough room for a very long list of delicacies.

78 Parpola 2004a, p. 294, fn. 36.

79 For a discussion on the delicacies set up on the royal dining table, see the observations made in the sixth chapter.





## Commensality and Ceremonial Meals in the Neo-Assyrian Period

Stefania Ermidoro

### 6 Sitting at the King's Table Royal Food and Drink

**Summary** 6.1 Food and Delicacies at the Royal Table. – 6.2 Aššurnasirpal II's Banquet at Kalhu: the Banquet Stele. – 6.3 «You shall eat safe food and drink safe water, and you shall be safe in your palace»: the King's Diet. – 6.4 Skilled Workers at a Banquet. – 6.5 Portraying a Royal Meal.

#### 6.1 Food and Delicacies at the Royal Table

In the previous chapters, it has been demonstrated that the king's table was a preferential place for making important decisions concerning the empire, exchanging political information, publicly displaying the wealth of Assyria, and distributing the surplus accumulated during months of accurate economic management. It was, moreover, an appropriate stage to exhibit both the immeasurable benevolence of the gods who provided lavish and exquisite food to the land, and the authority, strength and managerial skills of the Assyrian king. He was the only one capable of keeping vast territories under his control and forwarding their products to his capital city, in particular to his own and his protective gods' dining tables. But besides, and in addition to, all these features, Mesopotamian banquets clearly did not lack the basic role of each human meal, i.e. the nutritive aspect, which was further increased by the pleasure originating from tasty and composite dishes, abundant drinks, good company and various entertainments.

Our knowledge of the delicacies presented to the king and his guests derives from various sources, many of which discussed extensively before, i.e. literary texts, administrative records, lexical lists, royal inscriptions, as well as archaeological excavations and historical art evidence. The overall framework obtained by bringing together all these data confirms that in the ancient Near East, and particularly in the first millennium in Assyria, different techniques and potentially unlimited combinations of handling numerous ingredients were at work: we can deduce, therefore, that a proper cuisine was known, carried out and, above all, appreciated.

Three well-known Old-Babylonian tablets, that go under the collective name of Yale Culinary Tablets and have been published by Bottéro,<sup>1</sup> provide

1 Bottéro 1995.

a glimpse on the modality by which ingredients were processed and brought together. Although they cannot be considered ‘cookbooks’ proper, as will be discussed below, they record thirty-five sophisticated recipes, primarily for the preparation of meat dishes (vegetable-based stews are also included). Some of them also attest the taste for foreign and ethnic foods, since they are called after the land from which they originated or where they were usually cooked and eaten, as the expressions ‘Elamite stew’ or ‘Assyrian stew’ show.<sup>2</sup> The Yale Culinary tablets bear witness to the diet of a closed group of the population: we cannot say how many people belonged to it, but there were certainly only few individuals who had the means necessary for acquiring different cuts of meat and many other ingredients, that the majority of population could not afford, at least not every day.<sup>3</sup>

As for other aspects of Mesopotamian cultural experience, we are in fact quite well informed about the customs and habits of the upper class, precisely the one that produced all those written and iconographic documents that we can read and interpret today – but we do not have as much information which might help to reconstruct the lifestyle of the common man. In order to identify similarities and differences between these two worlds, it is therefore necessary to proceed with the few indications hidden in texts, with the help of the archaeological remains where the finding contexts are clear and known. It is not a purpose of this work to analyze philologically each type of edible item delivered to the table of Neo-Assyrian gods and kings, nor to provide an investigation into the processing techniques that led to the actual presentation of finished dishes to the prestigious guests. This kind of research in fact has been conducted satisfactorily by various scholars in recent years, and their results have been published in many studies.<sup>4</sup> Focus has been placed, instead, on the role that these foods played once they were ready to be eaten, from the viewpoint of their consumers.

The action of laying food on the table was in itself already a culturally significant moment, the last stage of a long process that started in the cultivated

2 See Bottéro 1995, text YOS 11 25: cfr. in particular pp. 29 (line 3: *aš-šu-ri-a-tum*) and 48 (line 45: *mu-ú e-la-mu-tum*). The original Elamite name of the second dish is also provided in the original source: *zu-ka-an-da šu-um-šu* «its name is *zukanda*» (YOS 11 25, line 46).

3 It is remarkable to note, in this context, how the palace of Ur was depicted in the poem of the *Laments for Sumer and Ur* as the place *par excellence* where exquisite food was eaten and, in particular, where meat was cooked. See lines 312-313: *ġiri-PA-a gud udu gu<sub>7</sub>-ra ú-šim-e ba-da-n ú | gir<sub>4</sub> mah-ba gud udu nu-ak-e ir nu-mu-un-ur<sub>5</sub>-ur<sub>5</sub>-e*: «The butcher’s knife that used to slay oxen and sheep lay hungry. Its mighty oven no longer cooked oxen and sheep, it no longer emitted the aroma of roasting meat» (from the etcsl website).

4 I will recall here two publications, the first focusing more on the development of cooking techniques in Mesopotamia and the second instead being a philological analysis of the various foodstuffs presented for the gods’ meals specifically in Neo-Assyrian time: Curtis 2001 and Gaspa 2012a.

fields, between farm animals and game, and in all those places where the first choice was made between what was edible and what instead was not.<sup>5</sup> While making this selection, Assyrians were certainly guided by centuries of Mesopotamian tradition and experience, although sources show innovations and changes in the usual menu in the course of time. These variations were due to diverse factors, such as the annexation of new geographical areas with their rich environmental heritages, or their undergoing a more direct control than before. So the encounter with foreign cultures also influenced the conquerors' habits, and contributed to the development of new cooking skills which led to a different treatment of already-known ingredients.<sup>6</sup>

The original phase of the process already implied the engagement of numerous utility men, farmers, fishers, breeders and everyone who handled the natural resources with all the different technological means at their disposal, trying to get the most from them. These people made the first important distinctions between what to keep and what not, and how many and exactly which products obtained through their hard work were to be sent to the palaces and temples of the capital cities. This was a choice that, as a matter of fact, was mostly imposed by the central administration which prescribed the time and quantities for such deliveries and supervised the journeys of those who had to move with their precious loads from the peripheries to the core of the State.

After the initial production, wherever it was handed in, the food needed to be stored so that it could be consumed whenever it was wanted or needed. In some cases, such as for beverages and dairy products, these resources were subjected to a first treatment: both storing and processing required the activity of new specialized workers and more practical knowledge, as well as appropriate places to perform these activities and store the final results. Then, whenever the proper moment approached, the final step that saw the passage of these resources from their original nature of simple, raw, isolated ingredients to the creation of complex and tasty dishes, was in the hands of cooks. In fact they carried out the last part of the activities on this food: cutting, cooking, mixing and seasoning it; in doing so, they acted according to the requests that had been made, the ingredients at their disposal, their own store of knowledge and the particular occasion for which they were getting ready.<sup>7</sup>

Every dish brought by the kitchen staff to the presence of the banqueters, and even each cup of wine that was ceremoniously poured by a cup-

5 For the social implications of food preparation and consumption, see the first chapter and the bibliography mentioned there.

6 This is the case, for example, of the 'Elamite soup' mentioned above.

7 For a synthetic but exhaustive description of these various phases, see Bottéro 1980; a slightly more recent account has been published by Ellison 1984. See also Curtis 2001.

bearer, were the physical symbols of the long process of fruition of the environment at the Assyrians' disposal, and carried in themselves each of the phases briefly mentioned above. The king and his guests were certainly aware, while tasting beef and enjoying salty and sweet bakery products, that the food could not have been there without the existence of a perfectly functioning administrative system, embodied in the person of the ruler. This system, moreover, was so well organized that it not only ensured every year that the land produced enough resources to nourish everyone (even allowing some to be stored for the eventuality of more difficult times) but it could also direct every place, man and expertise needed to reach the result of the warm, delicious food set up before them.<sup>8</sup>

At the dining table the king showed that he had the control over agriculture as well as over all the other farming activities. Cereals (in particular emmer and barley) represented the main crops, and they could be prepared and eaten whole in a number of dishes. Whole grains were, to mention only some examples, boiled in open vessels with as little water as possible until they became soft, and were then dried in the sun, to create burghul. Otherwise they could be cooked in more liquid, or only coarse-ground and prepared as semolina. Cereals could also be milled, to create various kinds of flour used to bake leavened and unleavened bread and sweet confections. In the first case, they often accompanied fowl, meat or fish, set on its top,<sup>9</sup> or they could be nicely fashioned using geometric or natural-shaped moulds, representing animals, elements of the human body and even whole narrative scenes.<sup>10</sup> When mixed with dried fruit (especially figs and dates) and other sugary substances, flour was used to create special bread and cakes: many of them are known to us thanks to the text (*kamānu*, *kukku*, *mirsu*). The existence of influences from populations outside Assyria is also remarkable: this is shown in particular by

8 On the concept of 'Assyrian ecumene' and the role of the king as supreme authority see Buccellati 2013a, pp. 269-301.

9 This practice is not mentioned in texts, but it is well recognizable from Neo-Assyrian iconographies, for which see here, below. This habit was inherited and repeated by later cultures: see for example the description in Aelian, *Varia Historia*, II 17, where a meal is mentioned in which the Persian king «ate greedily» a big portion of meat laid upon a big loaf of bread, τὰς χεῖρας ἐκτείνας τῇ μὲν δεξιᾷ τῶν μαχαίριων τῶν παρακειμένων ἐν ἔλαβε, τῇ δὲ ἑτέρᾳ τὸν μέγιστον τῶν ἄρτων προσειλκύσατο, καὶ ἐπιθείς ἐπ' αὐτὸν τῶν κρεῶν, εἶτα τέρμων ἤσθιεν ἀφειδῶς.

10 These variously-shaped moulds must have corresponded to the different names of bread found in textual sources, as the references to «hands» (or, better said, bread baked in the shape of hands) that were offered to the gods indicate. They were, in fact, used for deities as well as for kings: see for example the famous findings from the palace of Mari, where some fifty exemplars were found during the archaeological excavations inside the royal residence (Parrot 1959, pp. 33-57). On the qualities and shapes of bread, esp. in the Middle- and Neo-Assyrian time, see Gaspa 2012a, pp. 51-56.

the presence of Aramaic loanwords<sup>11</sup> and by the explicit mention of the possibility of preparing the *mutqītu*-sweet following the Assyrian or the Aramaean fashion.<sup>12</sup> Finally, cereals could be brewed, and by letting them ferment in different environmental conditions, with various additives and respecting precise times, according to techniques handed down over centuries, a wide variety of beers was produced.

Beside cereals, the fertile Assyrian fields produced many more of what, with an Akkadian term, was defined as *urqu*: ‘vegetables’ or ‘greens’, in general.<sup>13</sup> Cucurbitaceae (melons, cucumbers and pumpkins) and alliaceae (onions, cress, leek, garlic) were cultivated,<sup>14</sup> and served as complete courses in themselves, or as side dishes and seasonings: they could be used fresh or dried, whole or shredded. The most appreciated were, however, leguminosae such as peas and chickpeas, lentils, field peas and grass peas: they were extremely common and widespread in every kitchen of the empire, whether in palatial residences or lower class homes, and it has been frequently said and written by modern scholars that leguminosae constituted the main component of the common Mesopotamian man’s diet. However, this statement has recently been reconsidered, arguing that the foodstuffs at everyone’s disposal were really more varied than what had once been thought.<sup>15</sup>

The country under the control of such a skilful and pious leader thus provided abundant and excellent foodstuffs. In addition to this, the king decided to show his command over nature also by importing into his palace non-indigenous plants and trees, whose fruits he had observed and tasted in foreign countries on the occasion of military campaigns conducted far from the core of Assyria proper.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, thanks to his constant effort in growing both native and exotic flora, his guests had at their disposal dates, figs, pomegranates, apricots, apples, grapes, pears, plums, almonds, pistachios, hazelnuts and some other products for which it is not even always possible to provide a translation. One letter dated in the reign of

11 This is the case of the *garīštu/girīštu* sweet, whose name derived from the Aramaic *gryṣh, gryšt’*: see Sokoloff 2002, pp. 301-305.

12 The two versions are set next in an administrative record listing food commodities, SAA 7, 145, lines 7-8: 40 *mut-qi-i-tú aš-šur-i-tú* | 40: *ar-mi-i-tú*, «40 Assyrian *mutqītu*-sweets; 40 Aramean, ditto». On the coexistence of different culinary traditions in the Neo-Assyrian cuisine, see also Gaspa 2012b, pp. 199-204.

13 On fruit and vegetables in Mesopotamia, see Powell 2003.

14 See the two articles published by Stol, 1987a and 1987b, and Gaspa 2012a, p. 179.

15 See Bottéro 1980.

16 See RIMA 2, Ashurnasirpal II A.0.101.17, lines v 7-10 and A.0.101.30, lines 38-48. See also Gaspa 2012a, p. 180.

Sargon II<sup>17</sup> provides clues on the organization and the execution of the gathering of exotic fruit trees from foreign countries and their transportation to the capital city, where they were planted in the fabulous royal gardens surrounding the palace. The guests sitting at the king's dining table probably already knew the same orchards well, having in all likelihood come across them a few times before, during the journey to reach the palace of their noble host.<sup>18</sup>

Fruit was eaten fresh or dried, and usually processed to produce sweetening agents and to make jams or some sorts of mashed preserves. This was, for example, the case of the *budê*, a sweet product whose nature is not well known (possibly a semi-liquid prepared with a mixture of dates or other fruits and cereals), but which was always served on important occasions and of which two regional variants existed, one purely Assyrian and one «from Karkemiš». <sup>19</sup> The main sweetening agents were syrups made from fruit (especially dates) and honey: they were used for baking sweets and creating desserts, but were also added to alcoholic beverages, to flavour wine and beer.

Finally, in these rich gardens, among the domesticated vegetation, aromatic plants were also grown, and went directly to the kitchens and the cooks' hands, to be used to preserve meat and fish, and to add taste to many dishes. From written sources (for example from the ingredients listed in Aššurnasirpal's Banquet Stele) it is clear that Assyrians loved spicy, fragrant food. Among the *raqūtu sammūhtu*, «assorted herbs», <sup>20</sup> were counted for certain cumin, coriander, seeds of fenugreek, saffron, ginger, mint, and many others, for some of which it is still not possible to provide an exact identification with modern botanical species. Salt of different qualities was also appreciated and widely used in various ways. <sup>21</sup>

The Assyrian king was, in addition, the supervisor of the breeding performed on his lands, and many records accurately register data concerning mostly sheep and cattle - but also pigs, horses, and some species of fowl were bred. The quantity and quality of these animals and their punctual delivery to the central administration were under the constant control of the government, particularly since they were a sort of *status symbol*, food that not everyone could afford, enjoyed mainly by the higher classes

17 SAA 1, 226.

18 On the importance of such gardens for the Assyrian royal ideology, see Novák 2002, esp. pp. 445-452.

19 The two regional variants are attested in SAA 7, 208, line r. 3; 209, line r. 2; 210, line r. 5; 216, line r. 5; 217, line r. 3; 218, line r. 4.

20 The quotation is taken from RIMA 2, Ashurnasirpal II A.0.101.30, lines 119-120. See also Postgate 1987, esp. p. 96.

21 See Streck 2006-2008, on salt in Mesopotamia.

of the Assyrian population. Cattle, sheep and goats were carefully identified in texts according to their sex, age, provenance, and other physical elements, such as the quality of the wool of the sheep. Once delivered to the palace kitchens, they were handled by the specialized personnel who did the cutting and then proceeded with the preservation (mostly through desiccation and salting, but probably also by the immersion in oil or animal fat)<sup>22</sup> or directly with the cooking procedure, about which not many details are reported in the texts.<sup>23</sup>

Milk was obtained mainly from goats and cows, and in later times also from sheep: it was drunk pure or fermented, although it was seldom mentioned in texts recording royal meals – probably because it was mostly consumed by the rural population and the lower classes. It was also used for the preparation of more elaborate dishes, for soups, and to create gravies for meat courses, but its major use seems to have been in religious events, when it was poured as libations. From this substance, various dairy products were obtained, namely ghee, yoghurt and cheese, favoured by the central administration since they were easier to preserve and transport; these were, in their turn, used to prepare other recipes and sweets (ghee, for example, was one of the ingredients of the *mirsu*).<sup>24</sup>

The beloved of Aššur, being capable of attracting upon his person the benevolence of all the gods, also safeguarded the abundance of wild animals and game. He hunted them himself on the occasion of spectacular and heroic hunts (that were reported, afterwards, on the wall reliefs of his residence) or captured them in the provinces, in boundary areas between the cities and the outer zone characterized by rich, wooded vegetation, or by the steppe, or also by marshes along rivers and channels. Animals were also caught from the sky or from the seas and waterways, and thus birds and fish (and even a few crustaceans) were included on the elite's menu – with a clear prevalence of birds,<sup>25</sup> from which eggs were also ob-

22 This last habit is witnessed by a fragmentary letter, see SAA 10, 108, lines r. 10'-11'.

23 For an overview on the activities carried out on meat in the Assyrian royal kitchens, see Gaspa 2012a, pp. 109-122.

24 For a synthetic but exhaustive *excursus* on milk and dairy products in ancient Mesopotamia, see Stol 1993.

25 Even though Neo-Assyrian reliefs often depict rivers full of different sorts of fishes, and although the written sources of this same period attest how taxes and tributes were paid also with these animals, the numbers recorded on the occasion of royal repasts are instead not quite as large as those reported in texts dating to the third millennium. A philological analysis, moreover, shows an almost exclusive use of a general term (*nūnu*), with few exceptions (such as *anzū* and *iššūr nūni*) whose meaning is, however, not clear. Curtis 2001 suggested that this situation might reflect a difference in attitude between the environment of the third-millennium Sumerian cities, characterized predominantly by rivers, canals, lakes and marshes where fishing was thus a major activity, and a completely opposite situation, in which a vast area drew its supplies from every part of the empire and through a

tained. Among these non-domestic animals were included species that, although distant from today's perception that excludes some of them from the 'eatable' category, were considered instead as delicacies and presented to diners at big feasts: rodents (wild hares, rabbits and various mice) and some sorts of locusts.<sup>26</sup>

From many of the food sources mentioned above Assyrians obtained also vegetal and animal fats: the most widespread was sesame oil, but olive oil (probably imported) was used, too, and in the second category were included substances extracted from oxen, sheep, pigs, fish and birds.<sup>27</sup>

As can be gathered from this synthetic synopsis of the food at the king's disposal, by serving elaborate courses to his officials, vassals, family members, friends, hosts, allies and even opponents, the king implicitly but plainly presented himself as the landlord, warrior, farmer, breeder, hunter and manager *par excellence*. He was the only one who exerted power not only over the civilized, controlled world but also over the wild one (for example, in hunting), and as one who could even bend nature to his own will, making trees grow in an alien environment. This ideology is mirrored in the menus read about in the documents and seen depicted on the palace walls: the commingling of traditional, foreign and unusual recipes was certainly not underestimated by the highly educated people enjoying these big events. Thanks to the refined taste of their host and to such a wide variety, no one got bored with what he was presented to eat and drink, even when banquets were prolonged for days. Moreover, particular attention was paid to the appearance of the dishes, so that even bread would remind how every element of the universe could be nicely shaped, to contribute to the perfection of the general scene.<sup>28</sup> If the authors of the Yale Babylonian Tablets recommended that the cooked birds were to be «nicely arranged» (*sadāru*) on a dish (*mākaltu*),<sup>29</sup> in the first millennium a specific verb was used, to express the concept of «presenting the food nicely»: *bunnû*.<sup>30</sup>

varied spectrum of productive activities, among which fishing played only a minor part. Gaspa 2012a, p. 164, advanced instead the hypothesis that this shortage of data depends on the fact that more than on the tables of nobles, fish was mostly consumed by the lower stratum of the Assyrian population, who did not leave as many written documents as the elite.

26 On the consumption of mice in the Ancient Near East, see recently Graziani 2012; on locusts, see Radner 2004, Lanfranchi 2005.

27 See Ebeling 1957-1971 and Stol 2003-2005 with references.

28 See the example of the moulds for bread and other bakery products that have been mentioned above. In Aššur, a copper 'handled-pan' was found: this could have been used possibly to decorate *mirsu*-confections: see Ellison 1984, p. 91 and fn. 16.

29 YOS 11, 26, lines i 43 and ii 37.

30 See the examples quoted in CAD B, s.v. *banû* B, 4c.



Although rich, the everyday meal of the king must not always have been so crowded with people and main courses, and the textual and visual descriptions available today, even if fascinating and interesting, must mostly be considered as depictions of exceptional events. It is not possible to provide a daily menu of the Assyrian ruler, but a few administrative records and letters show how this included fewer dishes, sometimes even just one. For instance, in a missive sent to Esarhaddon describing actions performed by the substitute king and his spouse (who must behave and be treated officially just as the real ones), we find written:

*ina GEŠTIN NAG-ú ina A.MEŠ TU<sub>5</sub>  
ina Ì.MEŠ ŠÈŠ.MEŠ-ŠÚ MUŠEN.MEŠ am-mu-te  
ú-sa-ab-ši-il ú-sa-kil-šú-nu*<sup>31</sup>

They (i.e. the substitute king and queen) were treated with wine, washed with water and anointed with oil; I had those birds cooked and made them eat them.

Even accepting Parpola's interpretation of these birds as ominous ones, served to the substitute king in order to be sure that he would take on himself the possible evil coming from the omens that threatened Esarhaddon's safety,<sup>32</sup> is it remarkable that, in this repast, the two (who ate together?) apparently were not given anything else other than bird-meat to eat.

The simplest royal repasts, however, must have been much richer than the cuisine of poor people, who, even though they might have had access to various foodstuffs (and not just cereals and leguminosae, as mentioned above), must have had quite simple and repetitive meals. The difficulties for the poor to get a whole rich meal and the frustration that derived from such a condition is illustrated by a Sumerian proverb, that reads:

*ùkur ھا-ba-ug<sub>7</sub> nam-ba-da-til-i  
ninda ì-pàd mun nu-pàd mun ì-pàd  
ninda nu-pàd  
uzu ì-pàd gazi nu-pàd gazi ì-pàd uzu nu-pàd*<sup>33</sup>

Let the poor man die, let him not live. When he finds bread, he finds no salt.

31 SAA 10, 2, lines 10-12.

32 Parpola 1983, p. 36.

33 From the etcs1 website, *Proverbs. Collection 1, Segment A*, lines 71-73. (See the edition by Alster 1997, 16, no. 1.55). A similar concept is expressed by the poem of the *Poor Man of Nippur* that has been discussed in the second chapter; there, the protagonist has to sell everything he has in order to afford some meat.

When he finds salt, he finds no bread.  
 When he finds meat, he finds no condiments.  
 When he finds condiments, he finds no meat.

Archaeology may provide a glimpse of what the everyday meals in normal houses were like, although the identification of paleobotanical remains from the excavations is unfortunately not an easy task, nor is the interpretation of what has been found simple.<sup>34</sup>

## 6.2 Aššurnasirpal II's Banquet at Kalhu: the Banquet Stele

Ever since its discovery in 1951 by the British archaeological expedition working in Nimrud and led by Max Mallowan,<sup>35</sup> the Banquet Stele has attracted the attention of Near Eastern scholars for its uniqueness and its singular abundance of details.

Nimrud, the ancient Kalhu, had been occupied ever since the third millennium, and the first Assyrian king who chose it as his capital city was Šalmaneser I (1274-1245). It was abandoned shortly after, however, when his son and successor Tukulti-Ninurta I founded a new centre, Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta. Moreover, after this ruler's death in 1207, Assyria went through difficult times and many of its cities suffered neglect and abandonment, until the rebirth of the empire in the tenth century. Aššurnasirpal II (883-859) decided to re-establish Kalhu as the centre of his empire and thus began a massive project of renovation in the city.<sup>36</sup> Monumental and prestigious buildings, intended for both administrative and civil activities as well as for divine, religious purposes, were built anew under the direction of the ruler, who collected for this purpose the most precious and expensive raw materials from every land of the Assyrian reign. In the new Kalhu, then, a magnificent royal palace and many new temples were raised, channels were excavated in the city, deviating the water coming from the river Zab, and even exotic spaces were created, by importing trees and plants from the periphery of the empire. Aššurnasirpal left many accounts of his military deeds and building projects, but the inscription reporting the inauguration festivities of his capital city has no duplicates.

<sup>34</sup> An exception could be represented by the remains that have been found in Nimrud, and that have been tentatively interpreted as what was left from a cooked meal: see Ellis 1984, p. 95. Barley (possibly cracked), grapes (perhaps dried), and green vegetables have been identified: that may represent, in effect, a very plausible middle- or lower-class repast.

<sup>35</sup> See McCall in Curtis et al. 2008 (pp. 65-72: «Max Mallowan at Nimrud»).

<sup>36</sup> For an overview on the history of Nimrud, see Oates, Oates 2001 with references. For more recent and general studies, see the articles collected in Curtis et al. 2008.

The sandstone stele was found in its original position, in Room EA of the North-West Palace, to the east of the eastern doorway leading to the throne-room. At the top of its front face, the king is depicted with his royal insignia, standing while facing left, with divine symbols above his person, and completely surrounded by the text, that is inscribed on four columns (Fig. 1). The *terminus post quem* for the drafting of the text is the 879, since the opening lines, that record various military campaigns, describe events dated during the first five years of Aššurnasirpal's reign (884-879), and the king entered his new residence in 878. The inscription must have been displayed in the same room in which it was excavated, from the time of its placement, after 879, at least until the sack of the city around the year 705.<sup>37</sup>

Despite the name that has been given to it by modern scholars, it is striking that the stele does not depict a banquet at all. A direct comparison with the other texts analyzed in this work, in fact, makes it very clear that it constitutes, instead, a list of edibles very similar, for example, to the administrative records and accounts of foodstuffs mentioned in the third chapter of this study. The ingredients, both solid and liquid, appear simply listed without indications on how they were afterwards mixed together or handled or cooked, to prepare finished courses. There are, moreover, no hints as to the arrangement of the guests inside the space, nor is the physical place in which the banquet took place mentioned. It is clear that the general setting of the feast was Kalhu itself, but there are no indications of a more precise location. Given the very high numbers of diners, it is quite probable that the whole city became the stage for the celebrations, since the palace could not contain all the thousands of people invited to the event. Therefore the display mirrored the hierarchy of the Assyrian society through each one's physical position. The king must have been with his family and the higher internal and foreign officials inside the new palace, while the citizens, men and women from every part of Assyria, must have been placed in other buildings, courtyards and every other open space available in the city. The 'geography' of the banquet, therefore, reflected the vicinity of each individual person to the king by his vicinity to the royal residence.

It has been suggested that in the following centuries, on the occasion of inauguration festivities of later palaces, celebrations had a more modest nature. Sargon and Esarhaddon wrote in their annals that they had summoned to Dur-Šarrukin and to Nineveh 'only' the governors, administrators, nobles, eunuchs and the elders of Assyria, and consequently they both could affirm that they hosted all their guests inside their residences.<sup>38</sup>

37 For a recent synthesis that includes also a discussion on the archaeological and historical relevance of the stele and a suggestion on its chronology, see Marti 2011 (and the rich bibliography quoted by the author).

38 Lion, Michel 2003b, esp. p. 30. *Contra*, see Marti 2011.



Figure 1. The Banquet Stele (Wiseman 1952)

This hypothesis, however, is not supported by any certain proof. On the contrary, as it is discussed below, it seems very likely that all those who contributed to the construction of every new capital city enjoyed a great celebration once the work was finished, and the historical background of those inscriptions must also be considered, to gain a better comprehension of their differences. Aššurnasirpal's reign came after a long period of weakness and uncertainty, and the king decided therefore to stress in his stele those elements which exhibited the re-established might of his empire, and at the same time his benevolence and generosity towards a people that had been without a leader for decades. In the following centuries, instead, kings underlined other aspects of their kingdoms and personalities, focusing in particular on their political skills, which allowed the administration of a vast empire and that were based on the personal

relationship between the ruler and his governors.<sup>39</sup> This does not exclude, however, a massive participation of the whole Assyrian population, which remained in the background only for propaganda reasons.

Differently from the other textual accounts of banquets described in the previous pages, this particular text does not mention the personnel in charge of the cooking, handling and serving of the ingredients listed, nor are there instructions for the carrying out of the repast, or indication of the presence of musicians and other kinds of entertainment. This is due to the fact that, as has already been said, the document does not actually describe a banquet, but fixes the moments that immediately preceded and followed the repast proper. The difficulty of this text lies in its vocabulary: even though many improvements have been made from its first edition in 1952<sup>40</sup> to the identification of the animal and botanical species recorded, for a few terms the exact translation is still unknown, and for some others it is still only speculative.<sup>41</sup>

The text opens, as all the royal inscriptions, with the list of epithets of the king and a short presentation of his military achievements (lines 1-20). It continues with a description of the newly built palace in Kalhu, with abundant details on the materials used (coming from every region of the empire), of the provenance of the (deported) people settled in the new city,<sup>42</sup> of the various botanical species imported to create exotic and luxuriant orchards, and then of the temples and rituals established anew in the city, particularly giving details concerning Ninurta's abode, since he was the personal god of Aššurnasirpal himself (lines 20-77). After that the focus moves on to the account of the reconstruction of the Assyrian land in more general terms (lines 78-84) and then describes the royal deeds accomplished during a hunt, signifying thereby the king's control even over the animal world (84-101), while his control of vegetation was mentioned in the previous lines. Finally, after a short introduction, the stele enumerates in ca. forty lines the vast amounts of edibles used for the preparation of a big banquet given to celebrate the inauguration of the capital city and of its new royal palace in particular (lines 102-140): these were offered to thousands of guests, mentioned at the end of the inscription (lines 141-154).

39 On the differences among the first and the second phase of the Neo-Assyrian empire, see Liverani 2004b.

40 The *editio princeps* was provided by Wiseman 1952; the latest edition of the text is contained in RIMA 2, Ashurnasirpal II A.0.101.30.

41 See for example Finet 1992, who discusses many terms that appear in the stele.

42 On the importance of the presence of deported people in the new capital, and for a few remarks on their provenance, see the observations already made at the end of the paragraph 3.4. On the arising of an «Assyrian identity» among deportees, see also Parpola 2004b.

The list begins with the noblest and most expensive foodstuff: meat. Tens of animal species are enumerated following a precise order: at first domestic livestock, followed by game, birds, fish, small rodents and poultry. Among the domestic animals, hundreds of oxen appear at the top: they represent, in fact, the most prestigious meat of all. Afterwards, thousands of sheep, which were the fundamentals of the meat nourishment, are recorded: sheep are in fact the animals present also in this text with the highest numbers. Administrative documents coming from the Assyrian court show essentially the same order appearing also in the lists of food offerings presented to the gods in temples and on the occasion of major religious celebrations. Such a layout, that goes from the biggest and most expensive animals to the smallest and rarest ones, attested to the organization of the service areas of the palace where the various storage buildings had their own administration and bookkeeping.<sup>43</sup>

The enumeration of greens is even longer and more varied than the one concerning meat: it includes cereals (from which bread was baked: in the stele 10,000 loaves are mentioned), legumes, alliaceae, vegetables, fruits, spices and oil. As beverages, beer (not only the end product, but also the ingredients used to make it) and wine are included; water is not listed, probably because its presence on the table was considered obvious. It was the presence of alcohol, and in particular of wine, that marked in fact the difference between royal (and divine, as described in literary texts) and common people's tables; moreover, these banquets were characterized by a specific etiquette connected to the consumption of such substances that clearly separated them from everyday meals.<sup>44</sup> Finally, the mention in our source of some hundreds of vessels containing milk is quite remarkable, since its use was not so widespread, while its by-products (also abundantly present in the stele) were, instead.<sup>45</sup>

These lines, that might appear dry and repetitive, provide us instead

43 This hypothesis has been suggested by Lion, Michel 2003b, p. 27.

44 On the social role of alcohol in the construction of communities (and hierarchies) and the ritual-symbolic aspects of alcohol consumption within human societies, see Lentz 1999.

45 On the basis of the absence of the usual measurement units known from royal accounts but the round and even numbers mentioned in the stele, the order of appearance of the edibles and the lexicon used, Marti 2011, pp. 512-518, has suggested an administrative origin for this text. «Il s'agit d'une sorte de mémorandum de tout ce que les magasins royaux ont fourni pour le repas, qui a dû être enregistré sur des tablettes économiques [...] Nous n'avons qu'une liste de matériaux bruts et non préparés, sortant directement des magasins, mais qui ont dû être combinés ensemble, comme les épices avec les viandes. Il ne s'agit donc en aucun cas d'un menu» (quotation at pp. 512-513). However, there is no need to postulate an economic background for this text: the enumeration of items follows in fact the usual lists included in all the Assyrian royal inscriptions (compare, for example, Sargon's eighth campaign's list of the loot of Musasir). The order, in official inscriptions as well as in administrative documents, must be due to the value of the different edibles that were mentioned.

with useful information that helps in investigating the details of the banquet. For example, in line 110 the mention of the UDU.NIM, Akkadian *hurāpu*, that is a lamb born in springtime, helps in positioning the event at the end of summer: lambs were then, in fact, at the time when they were no longer suckled, their meat was still delicate and therefore particularly desirable. Also the fruit mentioned in the text suggest a similar dating of this banquet to that period of the year. It is not fundamental to stress, in this case, the possible absence of a few ingredients such as horse meat and pork, or locusts, or some specific vegetables, and it would be incorrect to consider this lack as an evidence for the existence of food taboos (as has been done, in particular for what concerns pork, which even though it is not listed in this particular source, was however regularly eaten in the first millennium, as much textual, mostly administrative, and archaeological evidence attests). Edibles must have depended, in fact, on many variables which included the availability linked to geographical and chronological factors, and very likely on the personal taste of the king, as well.

The various vessels and containers of foodstuffs are always mentioned in round numbers: 100, 1,000, 10,000 and similar.<sup>46</sup> This is a typical feature of Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions, in which long catalogues of captives, cities taken during a war, deportees or enemy killed in battle, tributes or booty brought back to the capital, always appear in surprisingly round and precise amounts. The only exception to this rule present on the stele is the number of guests that appears unusually uneven, a total of 69.574 banqueters. The question of the reliability and truthfulness of the numbers mentioned has been answered with completely opposite opinions. Finet considered it as trustworthy, even though they might possibly have been rounded up in the logic of a propagandistic style;<sup>47</sup> Lion and Michel, on the contrary, for the same reason considered them as a figment of imagination, because the text had been drafted with the sole purpose of glorifying the Assyrian king.<sup>48</sup>

Many scholars have tried, however, to determine the possible amount of a single ration of the various ingredients, calculating it by considering the quantities mentioned in the inscription, divided by the number of

46 No measurement units are used for the two symbols of civilization *par excellence*: bread and beer. The first was probably counted in loaves, and therefore needed no specific vessel; beer instead must have been abundant and contained in specific containers for liquids. Even though the amount mentioned for wine and beer is the same in the text, the ten thousand wineskins used for the former must have been inferior to the number of containers for beer, since the latter was a much more widespread drink, while wine was considered a more prestigious and exclusive beverage. On the use of numbers in Assyrian royal inscriptions, see De Odorico 1995.

47 Finet 1992, esp. p. 38. See also Marti 2011, pp. 513-518.

48 Lion, Michel 2003b, pp. 28-29.

guests and the ten days of duration of the event. The most likely situation seems to be the one pictured by Finet and Marti: the amounts of edibles mentioned must therefore be considered as plausible, and this fact makes this list one of the most interesting historical documents available for the reconstruction of a big royal Neo-Assyrian banquet.

Gods are the first guests to be invited to the repast, and they appear on the stele just before the record of those foodstuffs, that were however not intended for them: they had in fact already received their meals, before the 'earthly' banquet. Among the human invitees, mentioned in this case right after the edibles, a hierarchy can be distinguished: the most numerous group comes from «all the lands of the country», that is of Assyria, probably from the capital city Aššur and the other major centres of the empire. This particular number is the uneven one among the others quoted on the stele: 47,074 people, to be precise. This precision might derive from a census, regularly performed by the central administration, a necessary means to ensure control of the population and the good functioning of the whole empire since men and women are mentioned here, whereas in the other festive events usually only men appear as guests, and the female presence is limited to roles related to service and entertainment.<sup>49</sup>

The numbers that follow are again round and even, and include first the five thousand dignitaries and ambassadors of the small countries around Assyria, whose presence in the new capital city aimed at showing their loyalty. On one hand, they could in fact enjoy the benevolence of their host, his richness and the glory of his pomps, as well as the magnificence of his architecture; on the other however, by looking at the numerous pictorial representations of the king in his greatness, the results of his conquests and subsequent defeat of his enemies, they saw the consequences they would experience in case their countries decided to revolt against the Assyrian ruler. The scribe then ends his list with the sixteen thousand people resident in Kalhu: they come from cities that the king himself conquered during his military campaign in the north-western regions of Suhu, Kaprabu, Zamua, Bit-Zamani and Šubrû, Sirqu, Laqû, Hatti, Lubarna and Patinu.<sup>50</sup>

The new capital city represented the new centre of the empire, and therefore of the whole known world: its centre was, in turn, the palace,

49 The carrying out of census operations is witnessed by administrative texts such as the ones collected in the volume SAA 11, 200-219. The hypothesis that this banquet might represent a later version of the Old Babylonian *tēbibtum*, the census carried out in Mari whose procedure included the distribution of flour and beer (see Ponchia 2012, pp. 96-98), finds no validation in any contemporary text and must therefore be excluded. The census had been completed, thus, before the festive meal, and the numbers reported must be considered as the result of such previous operations.

50 The provenience of the new residents in Kalhu is accurately recorded beforehand, in lines 33-36.



and so the last to be mentioned are the one thousand and five hundred royal officers and functionaries active in the royal residence.

The banquet described (or better, outlined) on the stele embodied the kind of empowering feast specifically called by anthropologists ‘work feast’:<sup>51</sup> on these occasions, a group of people assembled for few days with the purpose of achieving a specific goal, after which they celebrated with the distribution and the consumption of food and drinks. Work feasts allowed the completion of big projects that would not have been possible without the mobilization of hundreds of contributors, and are, as in the case of the inauguration of Kalhu, *ad hoc* and very special events. All those who were invited to Aššurnasirpal’s banquet contributed to the positive outcome of the king’s project: some of them in a practical sense, by physically working at the construction of the numerous monumental buildings, and others (the governors and officers) by providing and administrating the raw materials originating from so many different lands.

Dishes obtained from the various ingredients and portions distributed to the guests were not equal either in quantity, or in quality – and for this reason, any attempt to calculate the amount of the daily quantities of food portioned out would result in pure speculation. Some edibles must have been reserved to the high social classes; wine, for example, must have been kept aside for the highest members of society, since it represented a prestigious status symbol. We do not know how these portions were distributed among the diners, but in this case too the most likely situation included two possible simultaneous happenings. The elite were probably closed in the palace, served by the royal attendants in a situation similar to the one described by the protocol for a royal banquet discussed in the fifth chapter of this work, while in a more chaotic and somehow spontaneous context there was an assembly of citizens, men and women who were not used to the complex etiquette staged by their rulers.

During the whole time of the celebrations, apparently every day there must have been ablutions, hand washing, and anointments: all actions functional to the banquet itself, since purification acts were always performed before eating for ritualized and hygienic reasons. Instead there is no indication of gifts presented to the guests at the end of the event, maybe because in this case, only a restricted group, those nearest to the ruler, received them – while the rest of the population was satisfied with just the food.

The overall impression conveyed by the Banquet Stele is of an exceptional exhibit of power and control: there is no other document that expresses so vividly and evidently the magnificence and richness of a state banquet in Assyria, as a tool for celebrating contemporaneously the unrivalled might of the king and the administrative organization under his control.

51 See Dietler, Herbich 2001.

### 6.3 «You shall eat safe food and drink safe water, and you shall be safe in your palace»: the King's Diet

At their dining tables Assyrian kings enjoyed foods coming from every land under their control, savouring an extremely variegated menu, rich in both quantity and quality. However, because of their role as political and religious leaders of a numerous population, they had to observe specific behavioural rules, including the ones that defined what, when, and how they were allowed to eat, and which ingredients were prohibited to them on certain days of the year, according to medical or cultic criteria, usually determined by the religious calendar.<sup>52</sup> This fact clearly had consequences also on the diet of the inner circle of the ruler's entourage, that adapted its meals according to the king's requirements.

Letters dating to the eighth and seventh centuries provide interesting details about the exchange of information between the king, who asked about the regimen he had to observe, and various scholars, astrologers and diviners who answered (and in a few cases even wrote to him before they were questioned). The answers came from data obtained by consulting 'reference books', or through the observation of natural phenomena, interpreted according to traditional knowledge (for example eclipses, the movement and position of stars, and so on).<sup>53</sup> Besides the kings themselves, afterwards this information also reached the cooks and the personnel working in the palace kitchens, who factually took care of putting it into practice and whose task was to adjust the daily menu accordingly.

We can deduce, therefore, that there was a direct channel of communication, connecting scholars to the royal kitchens every day. This was a necessary device to ensure that no mistakes were made, similar to the reasons for which cooks performing their tasks inside temples worked under the constant supervision of priests who controlled that the correct dishes were served to gods.<sup>54</sup> The main purpose was, as in the case of almost every action concerning the Assyrian king, to ensure his well-being and avoid every possible misfortune, be it physical (in

52 Assyrians knew the medical consequences of the consumption of specific foods, in connection with particular health conditions: for an overview on this topic, see the observations proposed by Fales 2012, and the bibliography there quoted. For the religious influences on diet, see Hallo 1985; van der Toorn 1985 (esp. pp. 33-36), Geller 1990, and the other bibliography mentioned here below. For recent, overviews on Mesopotamian food taboos and regulations see Geller 2011 and Ermidoro 2014.

53 Most of these documents are collected in the eighth volume of the series SAA, (Hunger 1992), but some other references are scattered throughout all the *corpus* of the Neo-Assyrian letters.

54 See the letter published in SAA 10, 96, discussed below.

case he ingested food noxious for his health) or moral (in case he attracted on his person the anger of some god, by eating something that was considered taboo for any reason).

As an extreme solution, scholars might also suggest complete fasting to the ruler, and it is likely that, on such occasions, no dining table could be set up in the royal residence at all, and friends, relatives or officials who were nearest to the king also had to fast, or ate simpler, smaller meals in private apartments. Doctors – or, better, exorcists and physicians of ancient Mesopotamia – well knew the consequences that some ingredients had on the human body: besides medical texts, ever since the third millennium onward, even simple wisdom literature and proverbs had provided evidence of the circulation of the knowledge gained from daily life:

níġ maḥ gu<sub>7</sub>-gu<sub>7</sub>-e ù nu-um-ši-ku-ku<sup>55</sup>  
He who eats too much cannot sleep.

lu<sub>2</sub> še-ġiš-ì gu<sub>7</sub>-a-gin<sub>7</sub> [bìd]-da-ni an-dúr<sup>56</sup>  
Like a man who eats sesame oil, his anus farts.

mu.im.ma sum.sar	šad-dag-da šu-[ma]
im.ma.an.kú.e	a-ku-ul-[ma]
mu.àm	šat-t[a]
šà.mu al.gír.gír.e	lib-bi iṣ-ša-r[ip-ma] <sup>57</sup>

Last year I ate garlic; this year my inside burns.

Specialists could thus provide useful information to the king, worried about his own health or about the condition of members of his family or staff. This kind of documentation increased in particular during the reign of Esarhaddon, a king who suffered from poor health for most of his life, and consequently surrounded himself by a great number of experts, who guided him every day in all those choices related to his wellness.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, he increased the attention paid to cultic activities, in order to guarantee for himself the benevolence of the gods, the only ones who could assign him a long life and a durable, healthy progeny.

55 From the etcs1 website, *Proverbs. Collection 1, Segment B*, line 69. (See also the edition by Alster 1997, 24, no. 1.103).

56 CBS 7867, edited by Alster 1997, 303.

57 K.4347+16161, iii 56-59. The text, a collection of bilingual Sumerian and Akkadian proverbs coming from the Aššurbanipal library was published by Lambert 1996, 239-250.

58 See Fales 1985.

The connection between a wholesome lifestyle and a safe existence is evident in a collection of oracles of encouragement pronounced for Esarhaddon, united in one tablet even though they collected words spoken by Ištar of Arbela on different days and through the *medium* of different prophets and prophetesses. In the last lines in particular, the goddess reassured his *protégé* with these words:

*ak-lu taq-nu ta-kal* A.MEŠ *taq-nu-ti*  
*ta-šá-at-ti ina šÀ-bi É.GAL-ka*  
*ta-taq-qu-un DUMU-ka DUMU.DUMU-ka*  
 LUGAL-u-tú *ina bur-ki šá* <sup>d</sup>MAŠ *ú-pa-aš*<sup>59</sup>

You shall eat safe food and drink safe water,  
 and you shall be safe in your palace.  
 Your son and grandson  
 shall rule as kings on the lap of Ninurta.

Significantly, among the letters sent by Assyrian and Babylonian scholars concerning various astrological, magical, medical and religious matters, the vast majority (201 of 248 datable texts, out of a total of 389 letters) date to Esarhaddon's reign, and in particular 170 to the last two years of his life (671-669 BCE).<sup>60</sup> This correspondence mirrored, therefore, the progressive worsening of his health conditions, which was also caused naturally by his own personality. Sometimes the ruler exaggerated in self-regulations, and that caused the reproach of the chief exorcist:

*a-ta-a šá-ni-ú ina UD-mi*  
*an-ni-e* <sup>gis</sup>BANŠUR *ina pa-an*  
 LUGAL *be-lí-ia la e-rab* [...] *[a-ka-lu šá ku]-sa-pi [šá-tu-u šá] 'ka'-ra-ni*  
*[ba-si-mur]-šu [TA IGI LUGAL i]-na-šar*  
*'mil'-[ku dam]-'qu' iḥ-ḥa-sa-sa*  
*ka-[ru-u] 'ik'-ki la a-[ka]-lu la šá-tu-u*  
*ṭè-e-mu ú-šá-šá mur-šu ú-rad* <sup>61</sup>

Why, today already for the second day, is the table  
 not brought to the king, my lord? [...] *[Eating of br]ead [and drinking of] wine*

59 SAA 9, 1, vi 21-30.

60 The texts have been collected and published in the tenth volume of the series SAA: see in particular SAA 10, p. xxix, Table II.

61 SAA 10, 196, lines 14-16 and r. 10-18

will soon remove the [illness of the king.]  
 Good advice is to be heeded:  
 restlessness, not eating and not drinking  
 disturbs the mind and adds to illness.<sup>62</sup>

‘Textbooks’ or wisdom texts consulted in order to know which foodstuffs were or were not licit on the various occasions, have been known ever since the Old-Babylonian times,<sup>63</sup> but they showed a significant increase in number and geographical diffusion in the first millennium; the exemplars known today are, in fact, mostly dated to the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian periods. Hemerologies and menologies included a very large number of rules, concerning every aspect of human life (eating, drinking, washing oneself), of social relations (getting married, taking oaths, buying or selling real estate), working activities (fishing, irrigating, seeding), religious customs (going to the temple, presenting offerings) and even suggesting how and when to move along (going to a well, crossing a river). It is very unlikely, therefore, that Mesopotamian men could know all these regulations by heart, and observe all of them, during all or even only a part of their life. It is more plausible, instead, that whoever had the intention of approaching a god, or taking a wife, or selling a field, or if someone had a baby, or was thinking of starting a working activity, asked diviners and astrologers for advice, to be sure that he was in such a state of physical and moral purity as to be able to legitimate his requests before the gods.<sup>64</sup>

Those who were close to the divine entities every day, who frequented daily sacred buildings, and took care of their maintenance and of the wellness of their divine dwellers, were instead constantly subordinate to purity rules, including also dietary laws. Priests had in fact to avoid all those ingredients that might cause inconvenience to the gods during the carrying out of their tasks, and they abstained from garlic, onions, cress, leeks, and everything that could have caused them halitosis, or any other negative effect (this diffidence continued in later generations, and is attested for

62 The chief exorcist made the same exhortation also on another occasion, when the king was suffering from a fever that made him weak and left him prostrate in bed: *mu-ru-us-su ú-ša de-’i-iq a-dan-niš ket-tu li-ik-te-ru mi-i-nu ša ta-bu-u-ni le-ku-lu*, «His illness will depart — he will be just fine. True, they should wait and eat what is appropriate» (SAA 10, 142, lines r. 6-10).

63 Two bilingual hemerologies, dating to the Old-Babylonian period and coming from Tell Haddad have been published by Cavigneau, Al-Rawi 1993b.

64 Alasdair Livingstone has recently provided a new, complete edition of all the hemerological texts known and available today, which show how multifaceted and comprehensive these were: see Livingstone 2013.

example in the Babylonian Talmud,<sup>65</sup> in the so-called South-Arabian ‘self-confessions’<sup>66</sup> and in a Muslim Hadith by Mohammed).<sup>67</sup>

In all likelihood, priests also avoided every substance that might alter their behaviour and their minds during the performance of their tasks, first of all alcoholic beverages. They were however free to enjoy alcohol once they were off-duty, since administrative texts show how they received shares of beer as did every other member of the temple personnel. In the case of the ruler, instead, prohibitions were mostly contingent on the individual situation, and connected to the ritualized actions he was called to perform: for example, on the occasion of *namburbî* rituals he was to abstain from fish, garlic and leeks for three days.<sup>68</sup> Keeping in mind this premise, it appears clear why in a text dating back to the eighth century, the Babylonian king Nabû-šumu-iškun was epitomized as an impious ruler for making the temple personnel of the Ezida eat leeks.<sup>69</sup>

Every mistake in the ruler’s conduct of life, even if unintentional, was interpreted as a sin against the gods and could have consequences on the king’s person, and subsequently on the whole country which was dependent on him. In order to avoid this, he could rely on his scholars and diviners, whose duty was to know the tradition and the correct behaviour for the various days, and interpret the signs sent by the gods (dreams, oracles, natural phenomena and so on) every time they wanted to express their disdain for something, so that the king’s actions could be modified and the gods pacified by offerings and rituals. It is not clear how these reports were brought to Nineveh from the various other cities where scholars lived and made their observations (Aššur, Uruk, Borsippa, Dilbat and Cutha are mentioned in the texts, but there must have been even more). As it has already been argued, however, this delicate phase needed to be performed quickly, so that the necessary measures against possibly dangerous omens could be carried out immediately. The

65 According to the Babylonian Talmud, onions and garlic must be avoided before the fourth hour (i.e. noon, see bBer 44b), and the Kethuboth text states that priests were disqualified from performing their duty in the Temple if they had offensive breath (bKet 75a).

66 See Ryckmans 1972.

67 From the fourth book of the Hadith Muslim collection, the Book of Prayers: «The Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) forbade eating of onions and leek. When we were overpowered by a desire (to eat) we ate them. Upon this he (the Holy Prophet) said: He who eats of this offensive plant must not approach our mosque, for the angels are harmed by the same things as men» (1145). (See also 1147, according to which onion, garlic and leek are forbidden «for the angels are harmed by the same things as the children of Adam»).

68 See the examples provided by Maul 1994.

69 See von Weiher 1984: BM 33428, lines i 17-18; a new edition is available today by Frame 1995, RIM.B.6.14.1. On this text, with a particular relation to the wider topic of ritual purity, see also van der Toorn 1989, particularly pp. 351-353.

kind of information that reached the king was reported as the following example shows:

*ina* UGU *qí-ba-a-ni ša* LUGAL *iš-pur-a-ni*  
*qí-ba-a-ni* LUGAL *li-šur ša i-šá-tú*  
*la-pit-u-ni* LUGAL *la e-kal*  
*ku-zip-pi ša ta-ri-ti*  
 LUGAL INA UGU-ŠÚ *i-na-áš-ši*<sup>70</sup>

Concerning the injunctions about which the king wrote to me, the king should observe the injunctions carefully:

«The king does not eat anything cooked,  
 the king wears the clothes of a nurse.»

Reference texts that had been consulted to reach the conclusions expressed in the letters were, therefore, quoted word by word: many reports sent to the king included passages from these original sources, and they often concerned food too, among many other regulations. Not all the occurrences corresponded to negative imperatives, but there were also exhortations to eat emmer bread, beef, mutton, and fowl, and to drink emmer beer.<sup>71</sup>

Among the almost four hundred letters mentioned above, edited in SAA 10, thirty-eight contain hemerological citations: this fact clearly attests to their practical use as a concrete guide concerning not only common people, but even the most important political matters. Further evidence comes from the archaeological excavations, since almost all the major Neo-Assyrian libraries that have been dug contained these texts: Kalhu, Sultantepe, Aššurbanipal's library in Nineveh, Aššur.<sup>72</sup> One hemerology in particular, the text known from its *incipit* as *inbu bēl arḫi*, «Fruit, lord of the month», was in all likelihood written for one Assyrian king in particular, perhaps Esarhaddon (on the basis of the temperamental and health traits that have already been mentioned): this interesting document reported

70 SAA 10, 275, lines 14-r. 5.

71 See for example SAA 8, 38, lines r. 1-2: NINDA ZÍZ.ÀM UZU GUD KÚ KAŠ ZÍZ.ÀM 'NAG' DINGIR LUGAL IDIM u NUN e-ma DUG<sub>4</sub>.GA-u ka-liš ma-gir, «He eats emmer bread and beef, he drinks emmer beer: when he speaks to god, king, mighty or noble, it is favourable for him»; SAA 8, 231, lines r.3-6: NINDA ZÍZ.ÀM KÚ KAŠ ZÍZ.ÀM NAG UZU GUD UDU MUŠEN KÚ SUM.SAR GA.RAŠ.SAR KU<sub>6</sub> NU KÚ ar-ka ŠA DÜG.GA li-ir-ku-us, «He may eat emmer bread, he may drink emmer beer; he may eat beef, mutton and fowl; he may not eat garlic, leek or fish; afterwards, he should... happiness».

72 See Livingstone 2007: the author also provides here a new classification for the hemerological texts, that is followed in his new edition of all these written sources (2013). On this kind of texts and their implication on the everyday-life of Mesopotamian men, see also the articles by this scholar listed in the Bibliography.

in fact a particularly complicated series of interdictions and behavioural rules.<sup>73</sup> Among many ‘usual’ food regulations that appeared extremely often (in determined months of the year, with almost daily frequency), one was peculiar and proposed a direct combination of food and clothes, probably because they were the most direct symbols of physical purity:

[UD.14.KÁM] šá dNIN.LÍL dU+GUR UD ŠE UD.ḪUL.GÁL SIPA  
UN.MEŠ [GAL].MEŠ UZU šá ina pe-[en-ti]  
[ba-á]š-lu NINDA tùm-ri ul KÚ TÚG pag-ri-šú ul  
‘KÚR-ár’ eb-bu-ti ul MU<sub>4</sub>. [MU<sub>4</sub>]<sup>74</sup>

[The 14th day], that of Ninlil and Nergal. A favourable day. An evil day. The shepherd of the numerous people will eat no meat that has been grilled on char[coal], no bread that has been baked on embers. He does not change his clothes; he does not put on clean ones.

The interdiction for the fourteenth day of the intercalary Nisan was not directed against any specific food but focused on the cooking technique instead, and in particular against the grilling or barbecuing of meat and bread. For this reason, it was fundamental that this information should reach the royal kitchens quickly, where cooks could prepare these ingredients according to recipes that did not include the use of coals. Interestingly, Neo-Assyrian tablets reporting the *inbu bēl arḫi* often also contained, on the reverse,<sup>75</sup> excerpts of the menology *iqqur ipuš* adapted to the person of the king. Here, then, the subject of the original text, ‘man’, was changed into ‘king’, ‘his house’ into ‘his palace’, and so on. Scholars could therefore create brief *compendia*, to use as a reference for the direct communications to send to the ruler.

#### 6.4 Skilled Workers at a Banquet

Some food could be consumed raw (in particular some vegetables and fruit), but most of the foodstuffs, meat *in primis*, needed to undergo some kind of cooking, in order to be considered eatable. Ingesting raw meat was in fact considered uncivilized, non-human, as the poem of the *Marriage of Martu*, with the disdainful description of the god, suggests.<sup>76</sup> Di-

73 For an edition of this text, see Livingstone 2013.

74 K. 2154+ (*inbu bēl arḫi*), 39-40.

75 For the *editio princeps* of this menology see Labat 1965.

76 See in particular lines. 134-136: ḫur-saĝ-ĝá tuš-e ki [diĝir-re-ne nu-zu-a] | lú uzu-dirig kur-da mu-un-ba-al-la dúb gam nu-zu-àm | uzu nu-šeĝ<sub>6</sub>-ĝá al-gu<sub>7</sub>-e, «He lives in the moun-



rect cooking was the primary and oldest technique, with the food directly placed over the fire; other indirect systems included cooking on burning ashes which were separated from the food by some vessel (mostly used for fish and bread), or in ovens, or also the immersion in water or other liquids (to produce decoction, infusion, broth, soup, and so on). All these basic preparations – and even the raw vegetables that apparently needed no particular intervention – were, lastly, enriched with additions whose purpose was to refine and adjust their taste: animal and vegetable fats, spices, salt, garlic, onion and leek, and more.<sup>77</sup> It is doubtless thus, that a Neo-Assyrian cuisine (in the modern meaning of such term) did exist.

On the base of the long lists of ingredients and dishes contained in many texts of this period, it is clear that cooking, and especially cooking for kings and gods, required the acquisition of specialized skills and therefore also a codification of the knowledge of products and techniques collected by specialists during years of practice.<sup>78</sup> Tradition could also have been transmitted orally, but although no cooking ‘handbooks’ from the Neo-Assyrian Palace or temple kitchens have been found yet, similar to Old Babylonian tablets with their interesting content, they must surely have existed in the past. More than cookery books proper, these texts were records of ingredients and operations needed for the creation of particular dishes: they left ample space for manoeuvre to the inventiveness and ability of the cook, who decided quantities, cooking times and balance between the various substances.<sup>79</sup>

The menus presented were in fact extremely articulated and included salty as well as sweet dishes,<sup>80</sup> and even the introduction of exotic, alien recipes that were imported as an element of originality and refinement and must have been known thanks to the contribution of foreign servants, working in the Neo-Assyrian palaces and brought within the royal staff as deportees and prisoners. As the Yale Culinary Tablets witness, in fact, the codified practice, the result of a tradition that was centuries old, was

tains and ignores the places of gods, digs up truffles in the foothills, does not know how to bend the knee, and eats raw flesh» (for the edition of the text, see Klein 1997b).

77 Bottéro 1980.

78 On the administrative offices who were concerned with foodstuffs in the Neo-Assyrian period, see in particular Groß, forthcoming. The author suggests an interesting distinction between «kitchen managers» who supervised food-related professions, «food managers» who were in charge of specific foodstuffs, and «grain manager» who took care of storage facilities for grain.

79 See Bottéro 1995, in particular his comments to the texts at pp. 3-8 and 145-153.

80 Apparently, in Mesopotamia salty and sweet dishes were presented at the same time on the table and the diners were free to mix the two tastes at will, without the distinction typical of modern Western cultures that have developed a two-moment kind of meal, placing salty dishes at the beginning as the main course, and sweet desserts at the end of the repast.

constantly enriched and implemented with new inventions. Moreover, this personnel needed some knowledge of what was and was not appropriate on the various days of the year, according to hemerologies and menologies, and they had to be capable of adapting the menu quickly according to the king's state of health.

It has already been said that the information gathered from the sources analyzed in this work pertains to the upper class of the Assyrian society. The cuisine of the lower classes, that is of the majority of the population, must have been much simpler, and likely handled by women, mothers and wives. In the kitchens of the big Assyrian palaces, however, the percentage of men at work was much higher than the percentage of women, especially when it came to the concrete job of cooking. This fact might be due to physical reasons, since the task of preparing dishes for hundreds when not thousands of people (the king, his family, the inner circle of his entourage and occasional other functionaries, and internal or foreign ruler's guests) must have been quite a burdensome one, and therefore needed remarkable physical strength.<sup>81</sup> Two instances in lists of female personnel attest to the existence of women working as bakers,<sup>82</sup> and another is mentioned as a cupbearer:<sup>83</sup> they probably served in the women's wing of the Palace, but their quite restricted number is confirmed by the fact that also male personnel was employed for the queen and her *entourage*.<sup>84</sup>

The term for cook was *muḫaldim* in Sumerian, *nuḫatimmu* in Akkadian, and applied to the person who was in charge of all the general activities performed in the kitchen, É.MUḪALDIM/*bīt nuḫatimmi*. In Neo-Assyrian palaces, many buildings for preservation and storage have been found, and yet archaeological excavations have not identified rooms or areas that may be recognized without doubt as kitchens. However, they must have existed (possibly outside the living area), and have even been considerably extensive, since cooks, cupbearers and other specialized kitchen workers on duty for the king were registered in great numbers:

2-me-20 LÚ.KAŠ.LUL  
4-me LÚ.MU.MEŠ

81 Goody 1992, p. 192. Sasson 2004, p. 192, fn. 41 has provided a list of female kitchen personnel active at Mari, which included pantry-maids, female bakers, cooks and preservation specialists. There is however not so much evidence in the Neo-Assyrian records at the scholars' disposal up to now, except for the ones mentioned here below.

82 SAA 7, 24, lines r. 8-9: *Mí.mu-raq-qí-tú 2 GÉME.MEŠ-šá*, «1 female spice-bread baker; her 2 maids»; and SAA 7, 26, line 3': 1 '*sa ni lu?*' *MÍ.NINDA.MEŠ*.

83 SAA 7, 26, line 2': *MÍ.KAŠ.LUL.MEŠ*, «female cupbearer».

84 See the example of SAA 7, 9, line i 24: <sup>m</sup>PA.TÚG-MAN-PAB LÚ.2-ú *ša* LÚ.KAŠ.LUL AMA.MAN, «Nušku-šarru-ušur, deputy of the queen mother's cupbearer».

4-*r* me LÚ'.SUM.NINDA.MEŠ<sup>85</sup>

220, the cupbearers;  
400, the cooks;  
400, the confectioners.

All these people were very likely organized in teams, under the control of a supervisor. There were teachers who prepared young beginners for this specific work (the act of teaching the art of cooking was expressed by the expression *nuḫatimmūta lummudu*),<sup>86</sup> and in later times also apprenticeship contracts are reported, one of which fixes the time for the complete learning period at sixteen up to seventeen months.<sup>87</sup> From a letter sent to Aššurbanipal we deduce that, in temples, cooks and bakers worked under the control of priests and were appointed by the king himself, and that the job passed from father to son. Moreover, the personnel working in kitchens inside temples were shaved, and this was the sign of their being officially members of the temple staff;<sup>88</sup> it is possible that the shaving, due in all likelihood to hygienic reasons, was in use also in royal palaces. The fact that cooks were beardless seems confirmed by another document, in which they are defined as eunuchs:

[<sup>m</sup>ARAD]-<sup>r</sup>d'15 lúKAŠ.LUL <sup>m</sup>GIŠ.MI-<sup>d</sup>UTU LÚ-*kar-ka-din*  
<sup>m</sup>EN-*de-ni-a-mur* lúMU [<sup>m</sup>] <sup>r</sup>pa'-*ta-mu-u* LÚ.SAG  
[PAB 4] LÚ.SAG.MEŠ-*ni* <sup>r</sup>an-*nu*'-*rig ina šU*.'2'  
LÚ-*kal-lap-ši-bir-tú* *ina É.GAL*  
*ú-se-bi-la-šú-nu* LUGAL EN <sup>r</sup>liš'-*al-šú-nu*  
<sup>lú</sup>ARAD.MEŠ-*ni ša* URU.DUL-*bur-si-bi šu-nu*<sup>89</sup>

I have just sent to the Palace with a *kallapu* messenger [a total of four] eunuchs: [Urda]-Issar, a cupbearer; Šilli-Šamaš, a confectioner; Beldeni-amur, a cook; and Patamû, a eunuch. Let the king my lord question them. They are subjects of the city of Til-Barsip.

Cooks might be free men, constant employees for the palace, or they could be hired for a limited period of time (a kind of 'catering service' that

85 SAA 7, 21, lines 9'-r. 1. See also its partial duplicate, SAA 7, 22, lines 5-r. 2.

86 See the examples mentioned in CAD L, p. 58, s.v. *lamādu* 7b.

87 For a list of contracts concerning the teaching of the cooking art, see the texts listed by Petschow 1980-1983, in particular p. 557, §1b.

88 This interesting letter, sent to the king by the astrologer Akkullānu, is published in SAA 10, 96.

89 SAA 1, 184, lines 8-r. 7.

must have been used for example in the cases of the big celebrations for the inauguration of palaces, which included thousands of guests). Others were, instead, slaves (as in the case of the text just quoted), or deportees. They were considered reliable enough to be called as witnesses in contracts,<sup>90</sup> and could also reach such a *status* as to have enough money to afford their own servants.<sup>91</sup> The trust they were given might, however, be misplaced, and they could be involved in conspiracies against the king (a real danger, since they handled daily a powerful and potentially very dangerous weapon, food):

*kit-tu-ú* [x] 'ši?' šá *ma-la* <sup>lu</sup>MU  
 šá LUGAL *be-lí-ía* 'ma-šu'-ú *a-na* UGU LUGAL-ú-tu  
*i-dab-bu-ub-<sup>2</sup>ma* KUR' šá LUGAL *la-šU*<sup>11</sup> 'LUGAL'  
 ú-šel-li u [lu-u] LÚ *sa-ki-<sup>2</sup>ki*<sup>92</sup>

Is it really possible that a man worth as much as a cook of the king, my lord, is conspiring against the kingdom and making the land of the king slip from the king's hands? [Or is] the man half-witted?

The chief-cook (*rab nuḫatimmi*), in particular, had the opportunity of climbing the social hierarchy to the highest level: one of them in fact became an eponym.<sup>93</sup> Even without reaching such an extreme limit, they still had their own personnel<sup>94</sup> and usually personally delivered livestock or other foodstuffs to various officials around the country. For example, a letter is known in which an astrologer wrote to the king, apologizing for the delay of his answer, due to the fact that he had to «drive to the palace those rams which the chief cook had brought forth for me».<sup>95</sup> Because of this particular task performed on behalf of the king, this officer also became involved in political matters, and was often asked to deliver messages from the capital to other Assyrian cities:<sup>96</sup>

90 See for example, for a contract of the purchase of land, SAA 6, 31, line r. 15: IGI <sup>md</sup>PA. BAD.PAB <sup>lu</sup>SAG <sup>lu</sup>MU ša É.GAL «Witness Nabû-duru-ušur, eunuch, cook of the palace». A cook appears as a witness also in SAA 6, 35, line r. 6 (name broken).

91 See for instance SAA 11, 201, line i 41; SAA 11, 203, line iii 7; and SAA 11, 213, line r. i 12.

92 SAA 19, 147, lines 14-17.

93 The text TFS 7 (= ND 7002) refers in fact to Sa'ilu, the <sup>lu</sup>GAL.MU, as *limmu* (see lines r. 8-9). On the chief cook and the particular duties of this office, see also Groß forthcoming.

94 For example, in SAA 6, 36, line 5, Zarutî, the «chariot driver of the chief cook» appears as witness for a silver loan.

95 SAA 10, 202, lines 8-9.

96 In addition to the example quoted, see also SAA 19, 39, lines 16-19: <sup>lu</sup>GAL.MU 'i'-sa-pa-ra a-na UGU 'URU?' [x]-'ni-x' [x] *ma-a* <sup>lu</sup>qe-'pu' [x x] 'x' [x x] *uk-ta-š'i*-'[du x x], «The chief cook

[ú-ma-a<sup>2</sup> 16]GAL.MU [iq-ṭi-bi-a]  
 [ma]-a TA ŠÀ.É.GAL iq-ṭi-bu-u-ni  
 ma-a a-na mki-na-a ṭè-e-mu šu-kun  
 ma-a šu-u ina pa-ni-ia i-sa-dir  
 i-da-tu-uk-ka il-la-ka<sup>97</sup>

[Now], the chief cook [is telling me]: «They have told me from the palace: ‘Order Kinâ to line up in my (= in the king’s) presence and follow you’.»

At the cooks’ side, other specialized men were at work inside the kitchens:<sup>98</sup> in particular, since wine held a special place on the occasions of ceremonial events taking place in the palace, some specific personnel were in charge of its preparation and distribution besides the cups needed for its consumption.<sup>99</sup> Wine matters were so important as to be addressed directly to the king: the lack of enough shelters where the king’s wine might be stocked was a subject of a letter sent to the capital city,<sup>100</sup> and the prolonged strike of the cupbearers in Aššur troubled the astrologers, because it caused problems to the daily cultic activities, since no libations were poured in front of the gods.<sup>101</sup> The portioning and pouring, in particular, was the duty of the cupbearer (*šāqû*), a profession that was not exclusively masculine since, as mentioned above, women are also known to have fulfilled this task (*šāqītu*)<sup>102</sup>. Similarly to what happened for the cooks, these men too could be called as witnesses for contracts,<sup>103</sup> and had maids at their service.<sup>104</sup>

Finally, it is significant that kitchen personnel too received their share of the booty and tributes brought by the king to the capital, and the amount received could be rather substantial:

wrote to me concerning the to[wn...], saying: ‘They have chase[d away] the delega[te...’...].»

97 SAA 16, 120, lines 11-r. 8.

98 See for example the text TFS 87, which records the presence of kitchen specialists in charge of different dishes (salted meat, *akussu*-soup, *billu*-mixture, and *ziqqurat*-cakes).

99 For the office of «wine master», who was in charge of the acquisition, storage and distribution of this beverage, see the observations by Groß forthcoming.

100 SAA 16, 117. The letter ends with the pressing request: GIŠ.GEŠTIN ša LUGAL ma-a’-da a-a-ka ni-iš-kun, «There is much wine of the king: where should we put it?» (lines r. 6-8).

101 See the letter SAA 10, 98.

102 SAA 7, 26, line 2’.

103 See for example SAA 6 12, line r. 3; SAA 6 13, line r. 1.

104 SAA 6, 28 line r. 4; SAA 6, 30 line r. 8, where «servants of the chief cupbearer» appear as witnesses, and SAA 6, 39, line r. 8; SAA 6, 40, line r. 15; SAA 6, 41, line r. 7, where the «chariot driver of the cupbearers» plays the same role.

1-me UDU *ma-da-te* 2 UDU 2 DUG.ŠAB lúGAL.MU  
 UDU DUG.ŠAB lúA.BA-šú:. -*ma* GAL.NÍG.ŠID  
 7(*bán*) LÀL 4 MA DUḪ.LÀL *bi-lat* URUDU.MEŠ  
 GAL.TÚG.UD 2 UDU 2 DUG.ŠAB *a-kul-la-šú*  
 '10' MA.NA URUDU 2 UDU 2 DUG.ŠAB GAL.Ì.MEŠ  
 KI.MIN-*ma* lúA.BA-šú '4?' NINDA?.MEŠ GIŠ.MA  
 '2?' AMAR? GIŠ.:. 10 *it-ḫu-su* NU.ÚR  
 UDU DUG.ŠAB GEŠTIN GAL.GIŠ-*za-ma-ri*  
 2(*bán*) gis<sup>is</sup>*duq-di* 2(*bán*) *bu-ṭu-na-te*  
 'LÚ.GAL'.SUM.NINDA DUG.ŠAB 'x'<sup>105</sup>

100 tribute sheep, 2 sheep, 2 bowls (of wine): chief cook. A sheep, a bowl (of wine): his scribe. Ditto: chief of accounts. 7 seahs of honey, 4 minas of wax, a talent of copper: chief fuller. 2 sheep, 2 bowls (of wine), his food, 10 minas of copper, 2 sheep, 2 bowls (of wine): oil master. The same: his scribe. 4 fig-loaves, 2... of figs, 10 (carrying)-sticks of pomegranates, a sheep, a bowl of wine: fruit master. 2 seahs of almonds, 2 seahs of terebinths: chief confectioner. A bowl (of wine): ditto.

The fact that in palaces and temples in Mesopotamia there really was *haute cuisine* is confirmed by the existence of an army of specialized workers who were active in the kitchens. The ones mentioned here do not include the vast number of personnel who took care of the activities performed before the food entered the palatial rooms, that were carried out when still on farms or in other appropriate buildings. In private houses instead, mothers and wives certainly tried to do their best with what they had at their disposal.

After the *chef* had completed his work, once the dishes were ready inside the royal kitchen, they were, then, brought to the tables of the ruler and his guests by numerous servants. Significantly, a great number of Old Babylonian recipes end with the indication *meḫer naglabi*, «to present to the knife»<sup>106</sup> – that meant «to be served», since the knife was the only piece of cutlery available to diners, who otherwise ate with their hands.

105 SAA 11, 36, lines i 9-i 32.

106 YOS 11, 25, lines 4, 10, 30, 39, 44, 49, 57, 61; YOS 11, 26, lines ii 19-20; iii 48; YOS 11, 27, line 17. See also YOS 11, 26, line i 50, where the equivalent expression *ana paššūri tašakkan*, «You place (the plate) on the table» is used. See Bottéro 1995, pp. 30-31.

## 6.5 Portraying a Royal Meal

Scenes depicting meals have been known ever since the third millennium, and this iconography knew a great popularity in particular from the Early Dynastic period onward.<sup>107</sup> Usually in these first images, found on seals and seal impressions, votive plaques, ivory and clay inlays, two figures are depicted sitting on chairs and facing each other, with a big vessel placed between them, from which two long straws originate, to allow them to sip the beer that this contains.<sup>108</sup> Alternatively, the two drink from a cup that they hold in their hands, and instead of the big vessel, a dining table loaded with food is placed in the centre.<sup>109</sup>

This scheme can present some variations: the two figures may or may not be clearly characterized as divinities and as a couple, sometimes only one person is depicted in the course of enjoying the meal, and a standing figure may be added in front of him or her, possibly representing a priest or a servant. In a few cases, the setting for the meal is also provided: a temple doorway or façade, some vegetation, a boat, or a chariot might in fact be represented near the eaters; a hunt<sup>110</sup> and the celebration of a victory, two themes that become fundamental in Neo-Assyrian iconography, are also attested. The latter in particular provided the occasion for the first representation of a proper banquet: if, in fact, probably because of the available space, most of the iconographies on seals and seal impressions referred to normal meals or to offering presentations (given the relatively 'private' setting that we can recognize in them), on the well-known Standard of Ur instead, a big event is recognizable with the participation of several diners, guests, musicians and attendees. This scene anticipates some of the features that reappear in later iconographies of feasts, *in primis* the connection between the images of war and the ones of the celebrations held for the victory.

As from the third millennium onward, scenes of meals and banquets spread all over the Mesopotamian area, with regional variations and peculiarities. A few gaps are noticeable between the seventeenth and fourteenth centuries and again shortly after the twelfth for around three

**107** For an accurate analysis of banquet scenes in the third millennium, Selz 1983. See also Collon 1992, who suggested to identify the first representation of a banquet already in a seal impression from Choga Mish dating to the late fourth millennium (see in particular p. 23, fig. 1).

**108** In later times, Greek historians still connected the habit of sipping an alcoholic drink with a straw exclusively to beer: Archilochus attributed it to Thracian or Phrygian men (fr. 42 W<sup>2</sup>), while Xenophon described this use for the Armenian land (*Anabasis* IV.5, 26-27).

**109** Examples of these iconographies are provided by Dentzer 1982, pls. 1-2, figg. 1-18.

**110** See for example Selz nos. 318-331, where animals are represented in the context of the repast.

centuries. These interruptions could be due to different iconographic interests, which led local artists to leave this theme aside temporarily. It was, however, never completely forgotten, and reappeared at first on Middle-Assyrian seals, and afterwards in Neo-Assyrian time, depicted on various frames.<sup>111</sup> The format reported on seals was more similar to the meals described above for the third millennium than to the representation of big banquets. The scene usually included only one diner (king or god), seated on a throne before a table or a vessel placed on a stand, surrounded and served by a variable number of servants, who held smaller vessels containing foods or drinks, or else a flag-shaped fan or a whisk, probably used to keep insects away.

Images on monumental reliefs, seal impressions and other smaller findings such as ivory pyxides, inlays and plaques discovered in the Neo-Assyrian capital cities, provide a great amount of detail about how the king consumed the meal together with his family and officers, what furniture, vessels and tools were used in connection with these repasts, and which foodstuffs were placed on the tables in front of the diners.<sup>112</sup> In order to gain a better comprehension, however, each scene of the palace reliefs must be analyzed within the context of its whole decorative composition project: the «plot» of the complete story that the king wanted to express on the walls of his residence must, therefore, be investigated.<sup>113</sup>

Even in the case of small items, each image was intended to convey a different message depending on the function of the object upon which it was depicted, often with self-referencing purposes. It is easier, admittedly, to identify the banqueting motif in bigger, monumental contexts, where sculptors had the opportunity of describing many details of the whole scene, than on smaller items such as seals and seal impressions. Here, space was very limited and often it is not clear whether the carved image represented a feast in a 'defective writing' (that is, with only one person seated in front of a table and sometimes one attendant serving him), or whether the subject was a traditional presentation scene, with the king offering sacrifices to the divinity. However, a few elements help us to answer this query: for example, the presence of another diner sitting in the traditional couple-pattern at the other side of the table, or one or more musicians playing instruments. Only these cases, for which the identification as festive repasts was almost certain, have been con-

111 See Collon 1992.

112 For an overview of images of cooking activities dating to the Neo-Assyrian period see Bachelot 2011-2012; as for banqueting images, Winter 2013 provides an interesting analysis of their profound meaning and introduces the meaningful expression «rétorique de l'abondance», to describe them.

113 Winter 2010, pp. 3-70.



sidered here as useful terms for comparison with the impressive wall-reliefs.<sup>114</sup>

Two interesting exceptions can be recalled here, in which the ancient artists succeeded in portraying in just a few centimetres all the fundamental components of a banquet. In an ivory plaque from Nimrud, probably used to decorate a piece of furniture, the king is depicted while, seated on his throne, he enjoys his meal together with his officials, placed in the traditional seating-arrangement before him. Attendants stand between them serving (the one in front of the ruler waving a whisk), two (maybe musicians?) are approaching the banqueters coming from behind the king, and one last servant appears to be busy with some drinking vessels placed outside the eating area proper (Fig. 2).

There is no doubt that the event depicted in this plaque was a banquet, as is the case of a small pyxis, also from Nimrud, also made of ivory and unfortunately burnt and in a bad state of conservation (Fig. 3). Its continuous carved decoration shows, in fact, a figure seated on a throne; a cross-legged table loaded with food is placed in front of him, and female servants and musicians are moving all around, in a dynamic setting that was clearly staged in the open, as shown by the palms and lotus trees appearing among the human figures.

In the relative scarcity of images coming from seals that can be ascribed with certainty to the banquet motif,<sup>115</sup> a few exceptions must be stressed, in which the main protagonists are, strangely enough, not men but animals.<sup>116</sup> In fact these images portray horses seated on chairs, drinking beer through a straw from a jar placed on a stand in front of them, according to the typical iconography known from the Early Dynastic Period onward,<sup>117</sup> while other horses, together with dogs, serve as attendants and musicians standing on their hind legs and playing stringed instruments (Fig. 4). These peculiar scenes, witnessing the Mesopotamian fascination with animals behaving like humans, mirror

**114** I do not agree, for example, with the identification as banquets of the eighth- and seventh-century seal impressions published by Collon 2000, pp. 179-192. The same observation is valid also for two more seal impressions, again defined as 'banquets' by their publisher, that appear however more similar to offering scenes: Collon 1987, p. 75 and figs. 338-339. Similarly, while commenting these images Winter 2010 has stated: «Still others show the king seated or standing with his bow poised on the ground, before an attendant with fly-whisk and long towel and often a table or pot-stand, which are likely to be ceremonial» (quotation from vol. 1, p. 125).

**115** For example, the image published by Homès-Fredericq 1989 as a «cylindre néo-assyrien inédit avec représentation de banquet», although extremely interesting, does not fit properly into the group of images of banquets that I have taken into consideration in my work since the figure on the seal is represented alone.

**116** Teissier 1984 (Marcopoli 209); Orthman 1975, 107a (ND 7107).

**117** For more examples of banqueting scenes performed by animals, dating back to older periods, see the examples reported by Collon 1987, p. 192, nos. 935-936.



Figure 2. Ivory plaque from Nimrud, Metropolitan Museum n. 59\_107.22. Metropolitan Museum of Art Website



Figure 3. Ivory pyxis from Nimrud, BM 118179 (Parrot 2007, p. 285, Fig. 217)

in every detail the same acts that were performed by men (musical instruments, furniture, behaviour of the protagonists) and contribute, therefore, to the reconstruction of the typical Near Eastern banquet motif.

As for monumental buildings, besides their practical functions they were explicitly raised to astonish, and they represented physical, meaningful symbols of the social and political status of those who built them. Palaces, temples and other majestic buildings were the concrete displays of the king's ability to organize the expenditure of a huge amount of labour, and to gather and appropriately redistribute raw materials, even prestigious and rare ones, coming from all over the known world. Their significance was increased, moreover, by the fact that they survived their builders, and functioned, thus, as a link between generations.<sup>118</sup> Two main themes that include representations of food can be identified in Assyrian palace reliefs. Firstly, processions and presentation scenes, where the emphasis is placed upon court officials, foreign vassals, and captives, moving in lines to reach

<sup>118</sup> See, on the functions of monumental buildings in ancient Mesopotamian society, Pollock 1999, pp. 174-175. For a general discussion on the Neo-Assyrian palaces, see also Winter 1993.

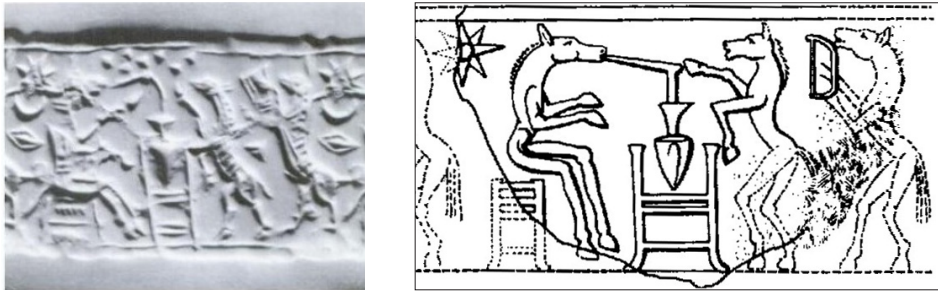


Figure 4. Seal impressions depicting animals at a banquet. Left: Marcopoli 209 (Teissier 1984). Right: ND 7107 (Orthmann 1975, 107a)

the central rooms, where tributes were ideologically (but also concretely!) brought into the presence of the ruler. Secondly, banqueting images which often also showed architectural or landscape elements that set them in a peaceful frame and included many other details.

According to the traditional iconography, then, the king sat alone or together with his queen, separate from other guests. On the White Obelisk, dated to the Middle Assyrian period,<sup>119</sup> he was depicted as sitting on a high throne, with his wife on a chair of smaller dimension – the other banqueters sit in their proximity, in the usual couple disposition (Fig. 5). Since the purpose of this monument was to describe the king's achievements in regaining control upon insubordinate and disobedient lands, the diners represented in these scenes must have been the very same military officers and soldiers who followed him in the various phases of the war, that were depicted on the other panels that roll up around the faces of the obelisk. That the king (as everyone else) consumed his meal seated on a throne, stool or chair is clear also from images found on the Balawat bronze doors, reporting episodes from the reigns of Šalmaneser III and Aššurnasirpal II until the year 849.<sup>120</sup> These compositions included a remarkable number of guests, but the main focus of the scene was always placed on the hierarchy between the personages represented. No-one could be the king's equal, and he always occupied the highest place, followed by his queen and then by all the others, 'democratically' seated in couples and on the same level.

A few larger representations found on palace reliefs help in reconstructing the phases of the king's meal,<sup>121</sup> that basically corresponded to the ones detectable from the written sources that have been discussed in the

<sup>119</sup> The attribution of the White Obelisk to a specific Assyrian king is still debated, but the most accepted opinion attributes it to Aššurnasirpal I (1050-1031): see Reade 1975.

<sup>120</sup> On the ideology and the iconography of the Balawat gates, see Schachner 2007.

<sup>121</sup> See Albenda 1986, in particular pp. 80-82.

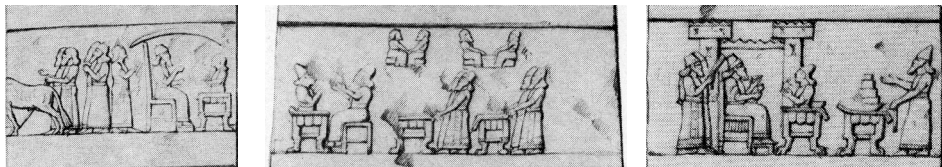
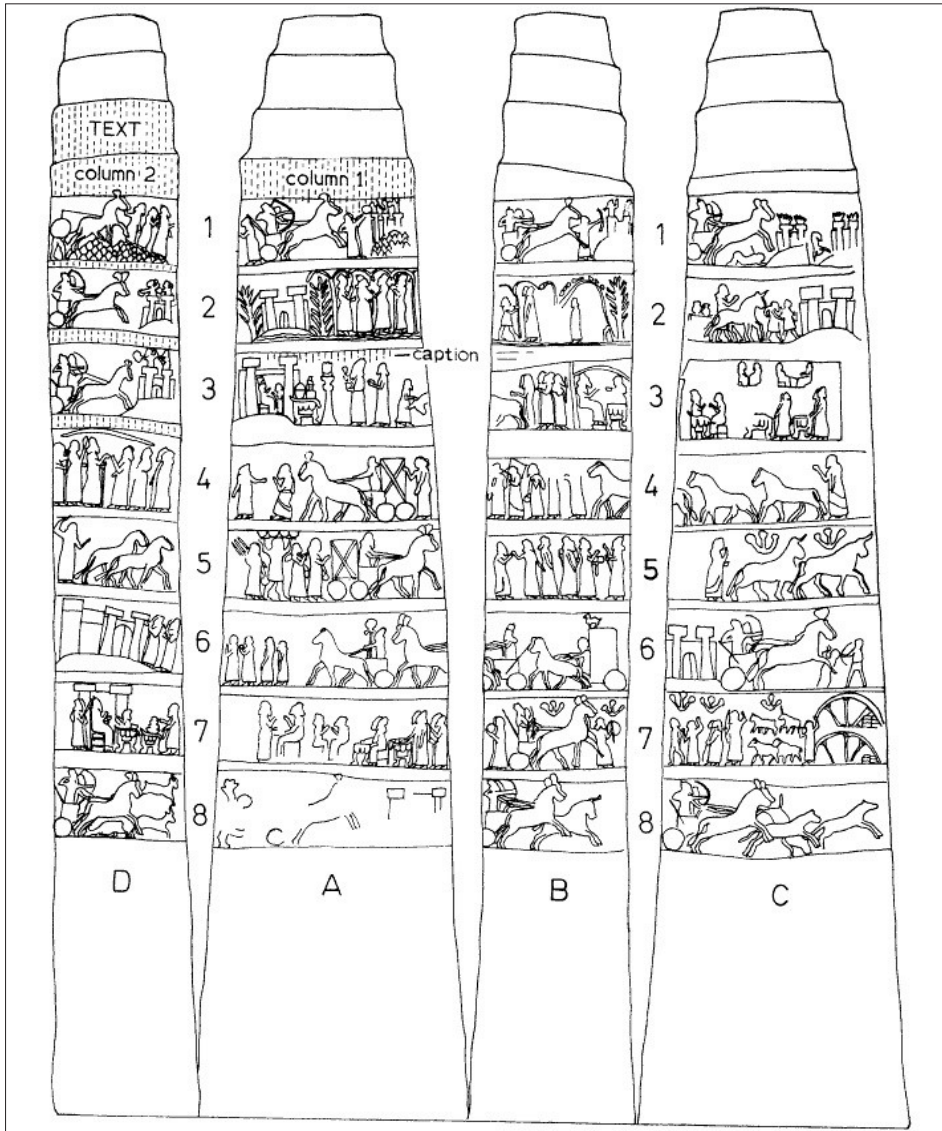


Figure 5. White Obelisk: drawing and details of panels of B3, C3, and D7. Drawing and photo (Reade 1975)

previous chapters. Sometimes, they even added details, as in the case of the table cloth that is only rarely mentioned in ritual texts (exclusively in *namburbî* rituals, where it is reported with the expression *paṭīra ana IGI Šamaš tasahḥap*) and which often appears, instead, in contemporary images from Khorsabad and Nineveh<sup>122</sup> (Fig. 6). Once food was set on the table, diners ate it using their hands, and the dining table placed between the two or more partakers was placed in the centre, so that it was reachable by everyone without standing up. A clear image of this, although it does not come from a banquet-scene but from a simpler common meal shared by Elamite and Chaldean prisoners inside an Assyrian camp, comes from the rooms S' and V'/T' of the North Palace in Nineveh. Here, the protagonists are depicted while taking their portions from a big vessel placed in the middle of the group (Fig. 7).<sup>123</sup>

In Room 7 at Khorsabad, the upper register of the decoration that moved around all the four walls of this space depicted scenes of banqueting, and in particular, activities in which various people either enjoyed a feast, or attended to the needs of those who were banqueting. Although most of these reliefs were partially or completely destroyed at the moment of their excavation, their identification is clear, and the images had a triumphal, celebrative tone when read together with the ones of the lower register, where a profitable hunt was represented.<sup>124</sup> Many Assyrian courtiers took part in the feast carved in the continuous frieze, but the meal did not include women and, apparently, neither the king nor his heir, since all the protagonists were represented on the same level, without that 'disequilibrium' between the diners' seats underlined above. The format followed a six-person-group pattern: four were seated and in the course of eating and drinking, arranged as usual in pairs and facing each other across a high table upon which foodstuffs and vessels were placed; behind each couple stood an attendant who often waved a whisk (Fig. 8).

The whole setting can be reconstructed, despite the poor condition of the reliefs, thanks to the comparison with similar images displayed in the upper register of the southwest-northwest walls in Room 2, where

122 Maul 1994, p. 49 and fn. 30.

123 Similarly, see Fales, Rigo 2014, p. 17 (with figg. 20 and 55). For a study on rations distributed to deportees in this period and supervised by the king himself through his closest officers, see Fales 2006 with references.

124 See Albenda 1986, plates 84-90. These reliefs were excavated by Place (in the years 1852-1854), who intended to send them to Paris; unfortunately, the ship which carried them sunk during its navigation on the Tigris, the 23rd May 1855. Therefore, we know them only from the drawings which Botta had made during the first excavations in 1842-1844; new fragments were found by the Chicago expedition which was active at Khorsabad years later, 1929-1932. See Albenda 1986, pp. 29-30 and Russel 1999, pp. 112-113. For an analysis of the Khorsabad series of reliefs see also Winter 2013, pp. 296-302.

they found their place above scenes of the war that had been conducted by the king in the East. In this case, then, following the traditional motif, the joyous feast was held to celebrate a military achievement, and the diners (once again depicted alone, without the presence of their leader) must have been the same officials and soldiers that were seen fulfilling their tasks in battle in the other panels in the same room.<sup>125</sup> All the men portrayed in Sargon's palace certainly belonged to the Assyrian elite: they show in fact perfect manners, seated on fine pieces of furniture – chairs have cone feet, and bull's heads decorate the front and the back of each seat, while the tables have bull's or lion's paw-and-cone feet. Each individual holds a lion-headed cup in his hand, a very delicate kind of vessel that was used only on solemn occasions,<sup>126</sup> and some of the men depicted in Room 2 have also a mace in the other hand, to identify them as soldiers. Attendants move toward a huge cauldron placed behind the banqueters, at the end of the room, and draw the beverage that they then bring back to the diners (Fig. 9). The proximity of themes related to hunting or fighting (and, in other palaces, also to scenes of audience, homage and tributes paid to the Assyrian king) clearly aimed at exhibiting an image of the ruler as strong and victorious, and showed at the same time his carefulness and kindness toward his people – who were invited to take part in his joy, at the same banquets fixed on stone, as perennial remembrance.

Iconography can be useful also in reconstructing the menu and the presentation of the dishes brought to the king. In particular, procession and tribute scenes are extremely interesting and might help to identify which types of meat and meat cuts, vegetables, or bread were considered prestigious enough to be eaten by the king together with the upper classes of his population. Restricting here the discussion only to bakery products, it appears evident how many connections can be made in this field between written and figurative sources.<sup>127</sup> In the relief of Corridor 51 of Sennacherib's South-West Palace in Nineveh, for example, various servants appear with heavy trays loaded, among other edibles, with loaves of bread, small cakes and other pastries, shaped in rectangles and piled one on top of the other.<sup>128</sup> Differently, in the famous banquet scene from the North-West Palace of the same city, the bakery products carried in on

125 See Albenda 1986, plates 109-130.

126 This kind of rhyton was mentioned also in the Nimrud Wine Lists (see Chapter 3) and in rituals, as well: see for example K.3455 (= SAA 20, 16), lines 21'-22': <sup>16</sup>A.BA É DINGIR <sup>16</sup>SANGA ša <sup>d</sup>[aš-šur] | <sup>16</sup>si-i-ru ina SAG.DU UR.MAḪ KAŠ.MEŠ i-šá-[q]i-ú, «The temple scribe and the šangû of Aššur give the širu beer to dr[in]k from a lion-headed (rhyton)». Cfr. also the Lexicon.

127 More examples for each class of foodstuffs can be found in Gaspa 2012a, under the entry for each sort of food; see also the bibliography quoted by the author.

128 A reproduction of this scene can be found in Kataja, Whiting 1995, p. xxxii; see also Winter 2013, pp. 302-305.

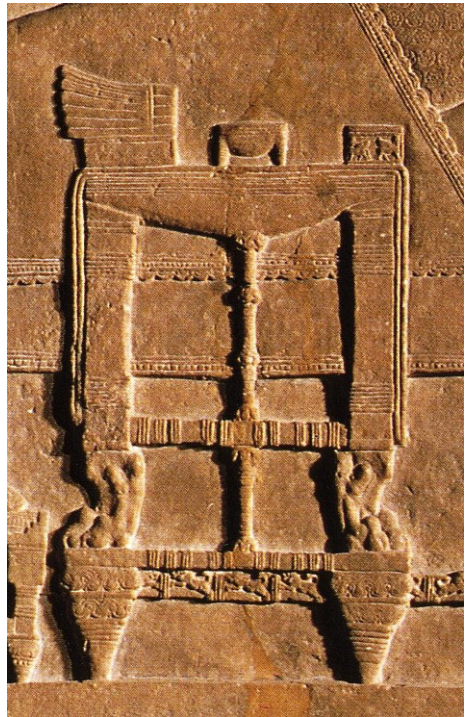
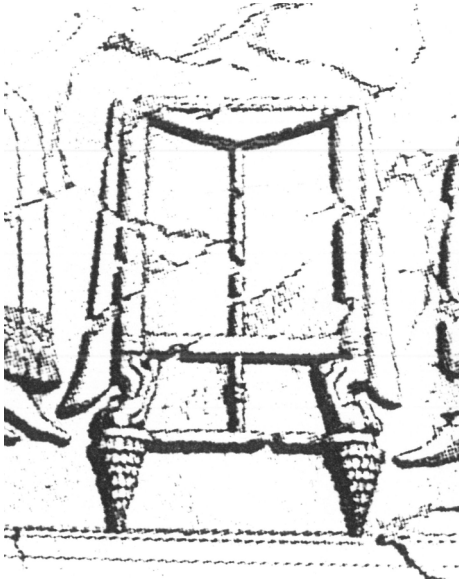


Figure 6. Details of table-cloth from Sargon's Palace in Khorsabad (left) and Aššurbanipal's banqueting scene (right)

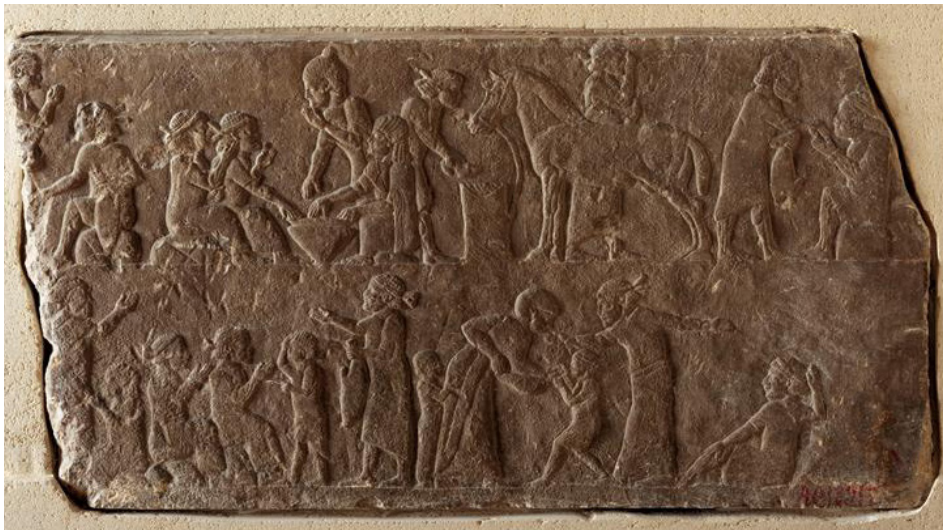


Figure 7. Elamite prisoners eating their meal inside an Assyrian camp, AO 19913 (Brown 2014, p. 531, Fig. 6)

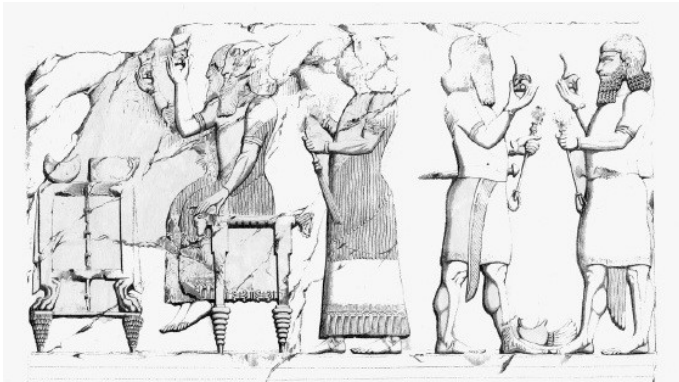


Figure 8. Banqueting scenes from Sargon's Palace at Dur-Šarrukin (Albenda 1986, Pl. 88 and 121)

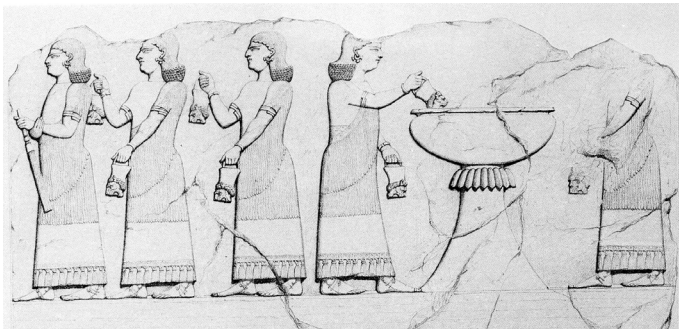


Figure 9. Servants drawing beverage from a big cauldron (Dur-Šarrukin) (Albenda 1986, Pl. 123)



trays are hemispherical, thus indicating that they were leavened. A peculiar bakery product is also attested to from Neo-Assyrian reliefs: on the already mentioned White Obelisk, in fact, there is the clear reproduction of a cake shaped as a *ziqqurat*, and named after it. Its use in a religious context is confirmed by a first scene in which it appears on top of an offering table set in front of the Ištar temple, with the king as the main donor. This cake then significantly appears in the banquet scene, which can thus be interpreted as the consumption of the *rēḥāti*, i.e. of what remained of the offerings presented to the gods, by the royal couple together with the highest members of the Assyrian army and the other nobles and «civilians» who followed the king during his campaigns.<sup>129</sup>

Although food appeared frequently in palaces also in iconographies portrayed on smaller objects, the typical gesture of someone sitting at a banquet was not the eating itself, but the moment of drinking. Kings, queens and courtiers were always represented in the act of raising cups of wine or beer, held in their hands: no similar scenes are known in which someone was, for example, breaking the bread or taking a bite of food. Given the high level reached by Near Eastern artists in this historical period, this fact must have been due to a specific ideological choice, and surely not to the inability of the carvers.

There was not, in Assyria, a symposiastic moment so heavily politically-connoted as the one that is known for Classical Greece. Thus it would be wrong to consider these scenes as *symposia* – this is confirmed also by the coexistence of too many anomalies: the presence of women, a too-differentiated spectrum of guests, various and abundant food, all elements that were absent in Greek after-dinner drinking moments. It is true, however, that on an iconographic level, the consumption of alcohol in Neo-Assyrian time became a powerful image of sovereignty itself, as the numerous motifs of the king depicted in the act of drinking also outside meal contexts confirm.<sup>130</sup> It is remarkable that the only known exception in which someone is portrayed in the act of bringing food to his mouth is the image of Elamite prisoners presented in Fig. 7: this was, however, an uncommon case that confirms our hypothesis. The people are in fact clearly characterized as losers and subjugated, sitting on the ground, barefoot and disorderly, taking morsels from the central vessel, and everything points to the precariousness and to the inferiority of these prisoners, far away from the elegance and composure of the Assyrian officers, who proudly raise their cups to drink a toast to their king.

Some more remarks can be made, for example about the entertainment

129 On the *ziqqurat* cake, see recently Gaspa 2012b.

130 For example, the famous scene representing the king in the room G of the North-West palace in Nimrud (Fig. 10).

offered to the diners during the course of the meal: as literary sources describe, and administrative texts confirm, musicians were always present during a banquet, with string, wind and percussion instruments.<sup>131</sup> Representations of music performed during a banquet are known from the ninth to the seventh century: in the ivory pyxis from Nimrud discussed above (Fig. 3), musicians are depicted while playing double pipes, a tambourine and a lyre. They stand amidst trees and behind a personage seated on a throne, wear long robes of different craftsmanship (the one in the centre has a plain one, while the other two are decorated: this may be an indication of their origins), and are barefooted. The last of the group shows a peculiar iconography, that has no parallels in the corpus analyzed: his face is, in fact, depicted frontally, and his eyes stare 'outside' the fiction of the frieze, directly at the person who takes this object in his hand.

In Sargon's Palace at Khorsabad, two musicians appear, together with a third person (likely another member of the group), whose feet are the only surviving part. The two figures are very similar and present a peculiar hairstyle, with very short hair ending with ringlets and short, pointed beards; they wear a short tunic, earrings, and are barefooted. The instruments they play are two lyres of various dimensions, fastened to their bodies with strings at the neck and the chest.

Finally, in the big scene of Aššurbanipal's banquet, eight musicians appear: six on the right and the remaining two on the left of the royal couple. Like women and eunuchs, they have the same clothes as all the other attendants: long, simple robes, sandals, bracelets and earrings, and have the typical Assyrian hairstyle, as all the others. These musicians play flutes, harps, lyres and other stringed instruments which they carry on their shoulders. Contrary to other scenes, where these professionals are recognizable from various details as strangers, the musicians playing for Aššurbanipal are definitely Assyrian.<sup>132</sup>

The particular, well-known scene just mentioned, in which the king banquets lying on a couch, with his queen Libbali-šarrat seated in front of him and surrounded by the palace personnel, represents an innovation in Assyrian iconography (Fig. 11). Couches that were like the one that appears here have been seen on older and contemporary reliefs, but never

**131** See the passages from literary texts quoted in the second chapter, and the evidence of musicians and singers receiving their share of wine and foodstuffs in Chart 1. For music played during Hittite repasts, see de Martino 2012, pp. 142-143. Other kinds of entertainment might have been also present, as a few texts from Mari mentioning acrobats performing for Zimri-Lim and his guests during a banquet witness (see Duponchel 1997, p. 225: «3 qa of oil, for the *mersum*, when the acrobats performed before the king»). These, however, have left no traces in the contemporary iconography.

**132** The foreign provenance of musicians and singers is confirmed by the Nimrud Wine Lists, where they are said to be Babylonian, Assyrian and Hittite: see Kinnier Wilson 1972, pp. 76-78.



Figure 10. Aššurnasirpal's North-West Palace, Room G (Matthiae 1996, p. 15)

explicitly depicted in connection with the act of eating. For example, in a scene dating to Tiglath-Pileser III a servant prepares a similar bed inside a tent during a military campaign, but this image is definitely separated from the meal time – the king is in fact enjoying his repast inside another pavillion nearby, in the usual position, sitting on a chair in front of a movable table (Fig. 12).<sup>133</sup>

Dentzer has suggested, however, that the bed or couch could have been intended for the consumption of a meal in a relief from Nineveh, whose setting is once again a camp. In this case a warrior is represented while entering a tent, with a servant who welcomes him with a big vessel. There are no other seats inside this space, and an amphora and a big heater stand at the two sides of a bed. In a tent nearby, that could have been used as kitchen, a butcher cuts meat.<sup>134</sup> These reliefs, almost contemporary to Aššurbanipal's, might witness the shift from the seated to the lying position of banqueters: the change can be dated, thus, to the seventh century and be explained through external cultural influences, coming particularly from the Syro-Levantine region.<sup>135</sup> In one scene on the Balawat gate ap-

133 Dentzer 1982, fig. 77.

134 Dentzer 1982, fig.79.

135 It is noteworthy to remember here, one century before the sculpting of this relief,

pears for the first time the iconography of someone lying on this piece of furniture: until that moment, beds had always been represented empty. The protagonist of that image was not an Assyrian king, but a prince of the reign of Hamath that, from a terrace, capitulated in front of the army of his opponent. He is depicted with his chest raised, while moving his right hand<sup>136</sup> – a posture that probably alluded to his age and health condition and was in no way connected with a meal.

Aššurbanipal's scene is narrative, almost anecdotal in its nature, with cross references to previous episodes, described in the annals and in other images spread all over the inside of the royal residence. The carver gave great relevance to the banqueting couple in the centre, differentiated by its isolation and by the excellence and abundance of the details fixed on the stones, but all the registers that were part of the whole scene were crowded with people, plants, animals, architectural and vegetable elements.<sup>137</sup> The purpose of this representation was clearly to exhibit the military and political strength of the king: his weapons were near him, placed on a smaller table on his left, and the horse (whose fore-hooves appeared on the right of the surviving plate) recalled hunting and war scenes and was another emblem of royalty.<sup>138</sup>

The anecdotal nature was underlined by the head of the defeated Elamite king Teumman hanging from a nearby tree. This iconography recalled to everyone's mind the whole story of the bloody war that Aššurbanipal was forced to conduct against his enemy, who had challenged him with insolent words, reported in a literary work conceived and written inside the circle of the Assyrian court:

*il-la-ka i-qab-bi ma-a 'la' [a-ṣal-lal]  
[a-du] É DU-u-ni ina qab-si NINA<sup>ki</sup> a-kal-[u-ni]<sup>139</sup>*

He marched on, saying: «I will not [sleep until]  
I have come and din[ed] in the centre of Nineveh!»

the condemnation expressed in the Bible by the prophet Amos for the custom of eating and feasting on ivory couches (Amos 6, 4-7, dated to the mid-eighth century). From the same Syro-Levantine area came also the prestigious furniture and ivory beds that can be recognized, as part of tributes, on Neo-Assyrian reliefs.

**136** Dentzer 1982, fig. 81.

**137** For a synthetic but exhaustive description of the whole scene, with many bibliographical references and images, see Reade 2005, esp. pp. 25-27.

**138** The presence of the horses during meals is attested to also in later epochs in the Near East: in the *Cyropaedia*, for example, it is said that Cyrus made sure that animals were also fed at the same time as their owners (Cyr. 4.5.4).

**139** SAA 3, 31, lines 12'-13'.



Figure 11. Aššurbanipal's Banquet, North Palace, Nineveh (Matthiae 1996, p. 81)

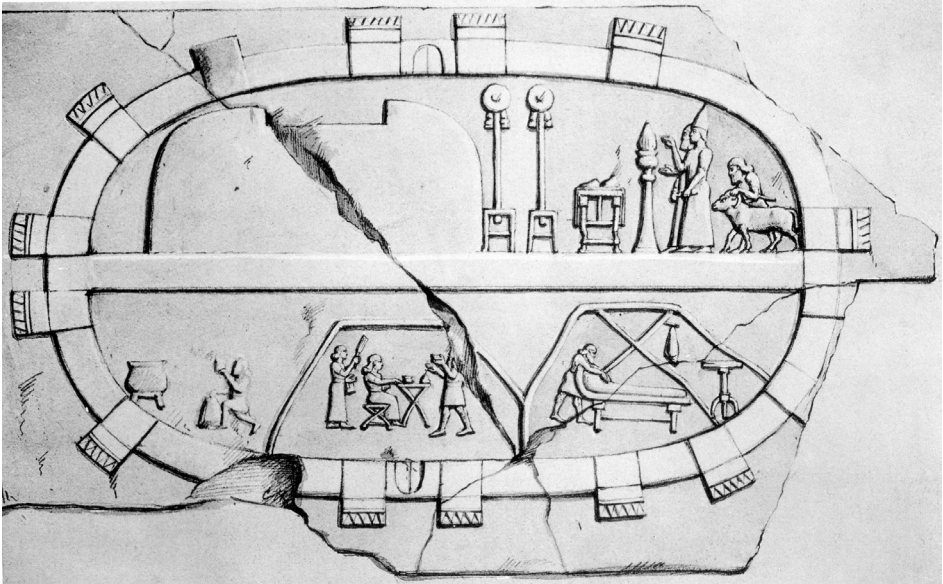


Figure 12. The king eating a meal inside a camp (Barnett, Falkner 1962, Pl. LX)

Teumman's wish was, thus, sarcastically and unmercifully granted by Aššurbanipal, who let him 'assist' at his lavish repast, albeit as a dead spectator instead of as a living partaker. Moreover, two Elamite kings are represented on a slab on the left; as explained in a caption that appears above them, they had been forced to prepare the food for the Assyrian conqueror and his wife. Notwithstanding these details, that may look un-

pleasant to modern eyes, the overall scene appears peaceful, relaxed and joyful. The king is drinking from a cup with a lotus flower in his left hand; he lies on an elaborately ornamented bed of Phoenician style, on whose legs are figurines of lions, and two rectangular panels show the motif of the 'Woman at the window';<sup>140</sup> young servants bring food and wine, children and maidens play music. The apparently contrasting themes of war and peace, already seen in the third-millennium Standard of Ur, reappear here at their highest and most refined level.

It must be remembered, finally, that this relief, which certainly made a strong impression on those who saw it, was however visible only to a relatively small audience, formed by the inner circle of the king's male family members, friends and officers: it was placed, in fact, in one of the upper rooms, in a private area of the royal residence.

Thus, the king decided who could have access to these iconographies and when, by placing them in areas of his palace that were exposed to different audiences. Texts and images dating to the Neo-Assyrian period confirm, in fact, that a wide and variegated public could have been permanently or temporary allowed to see at least some of the reliefs placed in the public areas of palatial and religious buildings. These people, who constituted the actual audience of such images, were not always the originally intended one, and different levels of understanding depended on the degree of culture and integration within the society of each person looking (with astonishment, we should imagine) at the reliefs.<sup>141</sup>

A ruler could, moreover, voluntarily decide to omit the banquet motif from the scenes represented in his new palace. This seems to be the case of Sennacherib's 'Palace Without Rivals' in Nineveh, where processions of tributaries, hunting scenes and feasts appear to be completely absent, although they had held an important role inside the residences of his two predecessors, Aššurnasirpal II and Sargon II.<sup>142</sup> This was probably a consequence of the personalities of the rulers, who decided to convey different messages with a powerful vehicle: iconography.

**140** Possibly, such beds can be identified with the *nēmettu* of the contemporary texts: images of this same couch can be found on reliefs representing booty gathered during military campaigns.

**141** See Russell 1991, pp. 223-240, where the scholar brings together iconographic and textual sources to identify the *status* and the number of those who represented various types of audience for these monumental buildings and reliefs.

**142** Although procession and presentation scenes are numerous in the building, proper banqueting-scenes appear to have been absent in the palace of Aššurnasirpal, too. The scene in its room G, often defined by modern scholars as 'banquet', actually shows no element for such an identification: the king is in fact seated alone, with no table laid with food, and no servants bringing dishes or musicians are represented with him. This scene must be considered, therefore, a libation or a ritualized performance and not a festive meal. On the subjects omitted in Sennacherib's iconographic apparatus, see Russell 1991, p. 187.

### 7 Conclusions

On its most literal and basic level, ‘commensality’ is about eating and drinking together: it implies the presence of a given number of individuals who share food while sitting around the same table. However, it has been proved that such act is never purely biological: on the contrary, it is a cultural phenomenon rooted in a multi-faceted, expressive, social ground.

Commensality definitely creates and strengthens personal relationships among table-mates. Whereas daily meals eaten in ordinary contexts concern small groups of members of the same kin, with a quite stable number of participants and a certain repetitiveness in the quantity and quality of the food presented on the table, bigger festive events are explicitly set apart and marked as highly symbolical and significant moments. Ever since the first human communities settled in the Near East, and even more in the stratified and hierarchic societies which developed from the third millennium onward, banqueting proved to be an activity capable of communicating different messages on multiple levels at the same time, and so it soon became a privileged tool in the hand of the political elite.<sup>1</sup>

Assyrians certainly did develop a particular consciousness of food as a vehicle for cultural and social messages: members of the administration and of the ruling class put a great effort in managing the production, collection and redistribution systems of every kind of edible item, specialized labour was created to handle them, accounts of meals were used in the king’s propaganda and consciously integrated in the communications media, and they even named some of their bigger and most significant religious festivals with terms whose meaning was, literally, ‘meal’. The purpose of this study is to prove how a philological analysis, integrated with historical data and pursued with a clear anthropological perspective, may improve our knowledge of the ancient societies and lead us to remarkable new conclusions, in full compliance with the original sources. Hence, banqueting has revealed itself as a flexible activity, which could be adapted to a variety of settings and circumstances in order to fulfil

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<sup>1</sup> On the study of commensality in highly-structured communities, see Hastorf 2012, p. 214: «Even in societies with institutionalized structures of authority, political power is constantly challenged and negotiated, and so the role of the commensal politics of feasting is just as complex and multifaceted in forging societal relations. These are the fluid situations we have to deal with in our archaeological examples as we seek to trace how meals reflect and create societies in the past».

multiple requirements. And yet, despite the presence of many variables, a festive meal must also comply with traditional customs and rules which determined the general framework and ensured the legitimacy and significance of the act itself.

The rapid renaissance and the subsequent, striking expansion of the Assyrian State from the early ninth to the end of the seventh century, led to the formation of a distinctive imperial ideology which bore the cultural baggage of the previous generations but reinterpreted it by assimilating suggestions and influences coming from new territories, whose populations had their own original customs and participated in this 'new world' with their knowledge and beliefs. Liverani was the first scholar who defined the Assyrian ideology as a «systemization of unbalance» (*sic*)<sup>2</sup>; recent studies have proved that this period was characterized by friction between two antithetical forces. The first one, exploitative, aimed at gaining the most from a subdued population on an economical and political level; the second, of an inclusive nature, intended to create a cohesive political entity of citizens who shared the same identity living in the vast «land of Aššur».<sup>3</sup>

In the main political centres, where all the variegated components were collected and interpreted by the cultural and social elite, an innovative royal ideology was thus created, which included the conscious use of every possible means of communication and the reinterpretation of long-living traditional themes or the creation of completely new ones. The ultimate purpose of such a large-scale operation was to originate and spread one coherent image of a universal empire, with the Assyrian king as a firm and constant element at the point of convergence of many different expressions of sovereignty.

The new capital cities, built or restored by the rulers, presented themselves as the centre of the world, whose midpoint was, in its turn, the royal palace: significantly, almost every single Neo-Assyrian king decided to create his own centre, moving the capital from one city to another and raising therein a new, unique seat of power. Palaces were the physical arena for great public displays, the reception of ambassadors, festive celebrations, and lavish banquets, as well – but at the same time, they represented the setting for more private meetings, family reunions, and private assemblies of the king with his most intimate friends. These occasions often saw their protagonists sitting around a dining table.

For this reason, the impressive inauguration banquets held for the Neo-Assyrian palaces discussed in the previous pages did not celebrate only the physical royal buildings, but were an occasion to exhibit a whole, complex

2 Liverani 1979, p. 219.

3 See Parker 2011 (esp. pp. 359-367) with references.



ideology conceived and performed inside those walls. Such ideology then found its way out of the palaces, thanks to the interaction of the representatives of local communities and political elite of regions scattered all over the gigantic Assyrian empire. They assembled around the king for a short period of time, and then were asked to take to their homelands an account of what they had seen and learned during their stay in the centre of the world. Each element of such a complex ideological system, including banquets, materialised what has been called «rhetoric of abundance», while texts and art played a crucial role in the spreading of ideas that assured the maintenance of the *status quo*.<sup>4</sup>

Foodstuffs, we know, are powerful vehicles of identity issues: culture and society shape culinary techniques and tastes, and thus contribute to the establishment and the spreading of the sense of belonging to the same community. It has been demonstrated how Assyrian men of the first millennium enjoyed dishes deriving from exotic and alien culinary traditions while remaining, at the same time, always proud of those basic rules of feeding that regarded both ingredients and table manners, and that distinguished them from people of different ages and geographical regions.

Furthermore, food reflects social events. To mention one clear example, the spread of Aramaean dishes attested by our sources, showing the introduction into the cuisine of new preparations, or the renewal of traditional ones according to an Aramaean fashion, testify to the overall cultural process that was in progress all over the empire, which included the diffusion and adoption of the Aramaic language and alphabet, and the progressive 'Aramaization' that was finding its way into the Assyrian culture.<sup>5</sup> The co-existence of different regionalisms and fashions in Neo-Assyrian cuisine is also confirmed by the coexistence of cooks and other specialized workers of various origins, operating side by side in the royal kitchens.<sup>6</sup>

Older and later cultures have often been recalled in the course of the present work, as terms of comparison and as components of that longer

4 Winter 2013; see in particular p. 309, «Ma ce qu'il importe de souligner est que la commensalité officielle –le banquet du monarque (au moins pour l'époque néo-assyrienne) qu'elle soit exposée par le texte ou l'image, est la manifestation d'une idéologie, au même titre que tous les autres événements retenus par les textes et les images officiels. Les banquets royal doit alors être compris, en suivant Althusser, comme un produit de l'appareil d'Etat – politique autant que cérémoniel – communiquant à la fois sur les différences de statut, la générosité du rois, le pouvoir, et l'abondance».

5 Several dishes have an Aramaean name or present an Aramaean version: to mention a couple of examples, the *mutqitu* could be characterised as *aššūrītu* or *armītu*; the *budē* could be prepared according to the Assyrian recipe or following the one originating from Karkemiš, instead. Furthermore, a few ingredients or preparations attested in the sources of this period bear a foreign name, such as the *garīštu* (or *girīštu*), the *ḫulūtu*, the *marmēna* and the *saplišḫu*.

6 On the 'Aramaization' of the Assyrian cuisine, see Gaspa 2012b, esp. pp. 199-204.

and more articulate discourse that is the history of food in ancient times. If, as has been demonstrated, banquets are concrete phenomena which depend on what has preceded them, and influence what will come next, it is therefore unavoidable to consider them in a wider context. Still more it is meaningful to do so for such a long-living culture as the Neo-Assyrian one, which presented itself as the outcome of a continuous tradition, and transmitted its character to the later Persian and Median societies thanks to a direct influence, exercised through political control, and indirectly too, by means of a cultural preponderance that affected the peripheral regions.<sup>7</sup>

A determinant discriminating factor between a simple meal and a banquet was certainly the luxury of the food presented on the dining table. Such luxury, as we have seen, might have found its expression in the quality of the edibles (choosing the ones that were the rarest, the most difficult to procure or the most-labour intensive to produce or to prepare), or else it may have affected their quantity ('more of the same', as a sign of richness: this particularly regarded meat, with an unusual presence of animal protein at the festive tables).<sup>8</sup>

Banquets fulfilled the fundamental task of bringing together a small or large group of persons, whose identity was accurately selected on each individual occasion: once these guests were gathered together, it was then possible to send them messages which may have been directed and manipulated by the authority. The king felt the need to show himself, from time to time, to part or to the whole population, in order to make his power physically present among them, and to make somehow more personal what otherwise may have been conceived as a superimposed central, administrative machine. The nature of feasts was such that they became the perfect occasions to exhibit the personal side of sovereignty, being characterized by two distinct but complementary poles. On one side, there were the more serious aspects, which included political conversations, strict etiquette and the social and decisional aspects; on the other side instead, there were the more festive and recreational sides, which included music, beer, dancing and very likely relaxation and laughter too.

Interestingly, each typology of banquet that has been identified for the Mesopotamian society of the first millennium can be explained according to, and finds a direct correspondence in, the classifications of communal meals that have been discussed in depth throughout many anthropological studies.<sup>9</sup>

7 See Dandamayev 1997; Parpola 2010.

8 On the idea of food as a luxury, see van der Veen 2003.

9 The classifications and definitions shown below are all explained and discussed in the various papers collected by Dietler, Hayden 2001; see also the vast secondary bibliography mentioned by the authors contributing to this publication.

Scholars have identified instances in which feasts may be reciprocal, and are endowed with no competitive feelings but aim, instead, at confirming and maintaining social relations which already exist. Among all the cases analyzed in this research, there was only one such case, namely the one when banquets coincided with an assembly (be it divine or human) and promoted cooperation inside the social group. Therefore these were solidarity feasts, in which each participant gave his contribution to the discussion and took part actively and equally in the celebrations: they may have had significant outcomes and repercussions on the community, but in any case they left no debts behind, nor repayment duties. All the other kinds of repasts discussed witness, instead, uneven interactions among people or social classes, even though in doing so, they show different natures according to the different goals that were sought after.

Divine meals consumed daily in various shrines of the ancient Near East fall into the category of the so-called solicitation feasts. These are unidirectional exchanges in which the beneficiaries (in our case, the gods) belong to a higher social level than those who serve and offer (men), and the former receive food and drinks without the explicit imposition of any repayment duty, given the difference in rank between participants. They serve, therefore, to underline difference in status, to show respect and acceptance of the *status quo*, but also to lay the foundations of a reciprocal relation and for compensations that, even if not compulsory, are still longed-for.

The typical patron-role feast is exemplified in ancient Mesopotamia by the literary motif of the travelling gods. Known ever since the Sumerian composition dating back to the third millennium, this was evoked centuries later by the pattern of the travelling kings who, in the Neo-Assyrian time, crossed every region of their vast empire on the occasion of religious festivals to accompany the gods, or during military campaigns that brought them into contact with minor rulers and vassals. In these cases, men made a formalized use of festive repasts in order to restate and legitimate asymmetrical relations of social power. Those who played the role of guests were aware that by accepting to sit at those dining tables, they were also symbolically accepting their subordinate status; on the other side, he who was at the top of the hierarchy was aware that his role, as a constant and generous host for the rest of the community, created expectations and became an integrant element of his formal political role.

Finally, one of the most frequent themes in Neo-Assyrian written sources concerning banquets, i.e. the use of sharing meals to celebrate great accomplishments such as a military or political success, the conclusion of a large project, or the ratification of a significant change in status, is clearly classifiable as an empowering feast. In this case, shared repasts were tools for testing and confirming the productive organization, not just for the creation of structures of social relationships.

This last category in particular, can be compared to a similar phenomenon that has attracted the attention of anthropologists and scholars because of its peculiar nature: that is the *potlatch*, a kind of competitive feast performed by the indigenous populations of the Pacific Northwest Coast of Canada and United States until the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Traditionally, there were different gradations of *potlatches*, from the small celebration for the passage from one phase to another of the stages of life, to more elaborate ones which accompanied marriages, the building of monumental edifices, or also events which regarded the central authority (death of a leader, succession ceremonies, oaths, and so on). In the course of such many-faceted banqueting events (usually performed in the winter season), guests received a huge amount of food, attended an extravagant exposition of luxury goods and, by means of speeches and evocative dances, received the proof of the wealth and power of their host. The latter demonstrated his prominence through an ostentatious giving away of goods – and by accepting these edibles and gifts, the invitees formally witnessed and approved the organizer’s claim to be their economic and social leader.

Moreover, another interesting element of *potlatches*, which also resembles Mesopotamian feasts, is their ritualized character, and in particular the coexistence in the same event of religious performances, such as sacrifices and offerings to the gods. The more the host could give away to his divine and human guests, the stronger was his claim to a high social status. A *potlatch* was a multilevel activity that served important sociopolitical functions, and it was, in addition, an important mechanism for the dispersal of material goods since each invitee, after the feast, went back to his or her own place contributing to the spread of wealth in different geographical areas that were under the same authority.

The language of food and banquets can, thus, cross time and space and still convey the same message. A big, lavish meal represents a moment of ritualized public action integrated within a continuous process of political manipulation, and it may serve as a sounding board of the support that a leader may build around his person, by various means, producing at the same time an economic and symbolical capital.

The question has been raised ever since the Introduction to this work and many times throughout its development, of the possibility of identifying similarities and differences between ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ banquets. The main conclusion that clearly emerges from a careful reading of the original sources at the modern scholars’ disposal, however, is that such a distinction did not exist in the Neo-Assyrian perception. Human

<sup>10</sup> *Potlatches* are still performed today, but they have acquired a much more limited nature than the ones that were in use in previous centuries: on this kind of feast, see Bell 1997, 120-128, and Perodie 2001 (with the bibliography there mentioned).

and divine worlds were indissolubly interrelated, and continuously exercised an influence on one another; Mesopotamian men could not imagine one experience without the other.<sup>11</sup>

Even banquets held within a ceremonial context and, physically, in sacred spaces presented thus a marked civic character and showed frequent references to royalty. To mention the most obvious examples, I will recall here the *pandugani ša šarri* held in Aššur's temple, the *šākussu ša šarri* of the sacred marriage (that was celebrated for the health of the king's heir and sons), and the *tākultu* which ensured and exhibited the deities' favour for all Assyria and especially for its ruler. On the other hand, civil events such as the inauguration of a building or the binding of an oath or even government assemblies between the king and his officials could not be conceived of without the presence of the gods, who supervised and gave their approval to the event.

Each festival was a holiday, a temporary interruption from everyday life and an opportunity to encounter people one did not meet on a day-to-day basis. Feasts involved almost everyone within the cities where they were held, and in their immediate proximities, too: a huge group of people, belonging to various social classes and expert in different working activities, had the duty of taking care of every aspect of the various phases and therefore spent side by side not only the days of the rites, but also the ones that immediately preceded and followed them.

Festivals celebrated in Mesopotamia, to whichever typology they may have belonged, turned out to be impressive public demonstrations of emotions (grief, pride, love, gratitude, joy, etc.): feelings were, thus, transposed on a collective, national level. The emotional tension was high, not only inside people but also among them, and the behaviour of each one influenced those around him, by whom he was influenced, in his turn. Each emotion is connected, in fact, to a specific repertoire of gestures (that we may find described in written sources, or depicted as images on reliefs, as we have seen), and physical expressions and manifestations of feelings may also be manipulated, to obtain a specific effect on society. Moreover, since such collective and ritualized events were also used as means to transacting empowerment (to negotiate transitions between social classes, exercise authority, decide on peace or war, validate judgments, keep men in contact with foreigners or with supernal entities, and so on), they were strongly implied in competitions, and it turns out clearly from the present analysis how they might have been used to exhibit someone's social status and political power.

In the course of this study, a similarity between ritual and theatre has also been suggested: this finds its foundation in the observation that in

<sup>11</sup> See for example Porter 2005, p. 117.

both these instances, it is the performative dimension in itself, i.e. the conscious and intentional carrying out of highly symbolical and meaningful actions in front of an audience, the ultimate substance of what constitutes their real essence.

Two absences in the sources analyzed should be noticed, which may or may not necessarily correspond to a lack also in the social customs of the period. They emerge from a comparison with older texts, and appear significant considering the large space that such previous documents gave to these events. Firstly, in the third millennium, economic transactions and purchase agreements were sealed by a banquet which included the participation of all those who were involved in the contract:<sup>12</sup> administrative texts dating back to the Neo-Assyrian time do not indicate if such a habit was still in use, and we therefore have no hints that may help us in coming to a conclusion on this matter. Similarly, if we are well informed on meals which brought together men and their ancestors in earlier times, when the *kispu* was a well-attested and widespread ceremony staged once a month on the last day of the lunar calendar, we have no knowledge about similar events in the first millennium.<sup>13</sup> A *kispu* was certainly still celebrated, and appears in reports and letters sent to kings;<sup>14</sup> however, it is not possible to determine if it had evolved in a simple cultural offering, or if it maintained its original nature of communal repast. These two examples may indicate a change in the idea that men had on the practical function of common meals: in the Neo-Assyrian time, they obviously served different purposes to the ones that were considered important centuries before, and which had an impact on social customs, as we may infer from the sources available to us.

Like a language, then, the food-system contains and carries the culture of those who exercise it, and it is a witness to the tradition and to the identity of a determined group. It represents therefore an extraordinary vehicle of self-representation and of cultural exchange at the same time: as a possible point of convergence between human groups, the food code may be accepted or rejected, considered with an open mind or observed

<sup>12</sup> The most well-known example is described in the Maništušu obelisk, published by Gelb, Steinkeller, Whiting 1991, pp. 116-140: in this text there is the reference to 190 inhabitants of Dûr-Sin (face A, x 18-21), 94 citizens of Girtab (face B, xv 6-9), 600 men of Marda (face C, xix 18-28) and 80 citizens of Kiš (face D, vii 2-5) who, after the economic transaction, «ate bread» (*ninda i.kú*), i.e. took part in the feast that celebrated the conclusion of the sale. In one case, the one regarding the citizens of Marda, a few more details about the setting and the duration of the feast (two days) are also given.

<sup>13</sup> The etymology of the term *kispu*, which derives from the verb *kasāpu* «to break off a piece of bread», immediately suggests a connection with the eating and sharing of food. On the third millennium *kispum*, see Tsukimoto 1985; Cohen 2005.

<sup>14</sup> See for example SAA 7, 50 (lines i 13, ii 1, iii 12); SAA 10, 9 and 233, and SAA 16, 52, line r. 1.

with uncertainty or disapproval. According to one of the main exponents of the discipline that investigates the history of food, each culture, just like every tradition or identity, is a dynamic and instable historical product, engendered by complex phenomena of transfers, intersections, and contaminations.<sup>15</sup>

The culture of food (just as culture, in general) becomes richer and more interesting the more intense and recurrent are its contacts with other cultures. Accepting these premises, we can but conclude that the Assyrian cuisine, with its multicultural and multifaceted nature, represents an intriguing field of study and contributes greatly to the reconstruction of the Neo-Assyrian social and evenemential history as well.

15 Montanari 2004.





## Commensality and Ceremonial Meals in the Neo-Assyrian Period

Stefania Ermidoro

### 8 Lexicon for Neo-Assyrian Banquets

**Summary** 8.1 Meals and Banquets. – 8.2 Psychological Conditions and Social Status. – 8.3 Equipment. – 8.4 Actions.

The lexicon presented here aims at investigating a few keywords and fundamental terms that appear in the written sources dating back to the first millennium, which have been discussed throughout the course of the present work. It presents, thus, the basic philological elements of that ‘grammar’ of Neo-Assyrian banquets that has been reconstructed in the previous pages, by means of a historical and cultural analysis.

It is not meant as an index, and therefore it has been developed following a discursive method, which aims at highlighting the relationship between words and also emphasizes the intrinsic values of the lexemes discussed: for this reason, it is not arranged in alphabetical order, as it is traditionally the case for indices and glossaries. The most significant terms encountered in the previous pages are, instead, grouped according to their connotative values and divided into four main groups: words conveying the concept of ‘meal’; those indicating the physical, psychological and social status of diners; the terms for tools and props used at a banquet; and finally the actions performed in the context of a festive repast.

Moreover, each word has been presented in its widest context, investigating the circumstances in which it could appear: the purpose of a semantic analysis like the one proposed here is to provide full comprehension of the cultural values of the terms examined.

The study of lexemes in the light of a historical and anthropological study cannot overlook, in fact, that it is the interaction between a single word and the overall structure of a sentence that conveys the meaning: individual terms, in themselves, have ‘no sense’. As a quick look at the main dictionaries shows, in fact, in Akkadian (as in all the other spoken and written languages known), it happens only rarely that a lexeme conveys one, exclusive meaning: most of the words are, instead, polysemic. Thus, in order to comprehend their precise sense they must be investigated in relation to the others that belong to the same conceptual area, and be considered within their linguistic, but also cultural context.<sup>1</sup> References

1 For a synthetic but exhaustive analysis on this topic, see Crystal 2006.

to the various chapters of this research appear often, since the complete passages in which each particular lexeme appears are not repeated here, but can be found, instead, in the previous pages, where some of the terms might also have already been partly discussed.

Semantic fields are considered in the present lexicon: by this expression, I mean a set of related words which refers to one specific segment of reality. Lexemes belonging to one semantic field are not synonymous, but they are all used to express different instances of the same general phenomenon. This kind of inquiry helps to delineate the semantic values of the terms presented according to their use in the Neo-Assyrian period (which does not necessarily coincide with the sense attributed to them in earlier or later periods). As a result, this philological analysis will provide a few more details which cast light on the way banquets were carried out during the time of our interest.

## 8.1 Meals and Banquets

In the first millennium, various different words were used to convey the ideas of ‘meal, repast, banquet’, which referred to the different degrees of the pomp and circumstance connected to the basic concept of eating together.<sup>2</sup> The two most widespread terms were *naptanu*<sup>3</sup> and *qerētu*,<sup>4</sup> variously written and vocalized also as *naptunu*,<sup>5</sup> *naptenu*,<sup>6</sup> *qarītu*,<sup>7</sup> and *qarētu*.<sup>8</sup> The use of these two terms has often been a cause of confusion among modern scholars, who came to different and sometimes totally opposite conclusions with regard to the difference between the two, and in particular on their religious or secular connotative values.

Pettinato, for example, considered *qerētu* as a peculiar ceremony em-

2 See, as a synthesis on the Mesopotamian terms for ‘meal’, Glassner 1987-1990.

3 RIMA 3, Shalmaneser 102.14, line 70 and Shalmaneser 102.16, line 41 (*nap-tan*); KAR 146, line iv 9 (= SAA 20, 19, line r. ii 9’), (*nap-ta-an-šú*). The term is always written logographically in administrative texts: see the banquet accounts in SAA 7 (in particular, nos. 148, 149, 151, 153, 154) and NWL 6, line r. 44 (BUR).

4 RIMA 3, Shalmaneser 102.5, line vi 4 and Shalmaneser 102.16, line 62’ (*qé-re-ti*); RINAP 4, Esarhaddon 1, line vi 50 and Esarhaddon 2, line vi 19 (*qé-re-e-ti*).

5 K.10209, line r. 22’ (= SAA 20, 18, line 55); K.8669 (= SAA 20, 33), lines r. i 31’, iii 43’, iii 49’; BM 121206 (= SAA 20, 52), line r. iii 18’ (*nap-tu-nu*).

6 K.8669 (= SAA 20, 33), lines i 1, i 2, r. i 35’; KAR 146, line iv 7’ (= SAA 20, 19, line r. ii 7’) (*nap-te-né*); NWL 33, line ii 1 (*nap-te-ni*).

7 SAA 7, 112, line 8’ (*qa-ri-i-a-ti*); KAR 178 («Offering Bread Hemerology»), lines v 66, vi 39 (*qa-ri-it*).

8 SAA 10, 294, line r. 23 (*qa-re-e-tu*).

bodied in a banquet or festive meal, that could be performed both in the human or the divine realm, and whose main feature was its nature as an extraordinary event and not as a recurrent ceremony.<sup>9</sup> Parpola attributed to this same term a wide spectrum of meanings, starting from a general 'invitation', to 'drinking party' and in a few cases also to 'religious service, banquet offered to the gods'.<sup>10</sup>

Even more confusing are the references to *naptanu* in modern literature. A review of the most recent publications that refer to the same Neo-Assyrian texts analyzed in the present work shows, in fact, that this term has been considered as referring to 'a big formal meal' applied in particular to the feeding of the gods,<sup>11</sup> or indicating an official meal of religious or civic administrators<sup>12</sup> or else meaning a ceremonial repast carried out exclusively by gods or by the king,<sup>13</sup> a «wholly secular» event.<sup>14</sup> Kinnier Wilson suggested another different meaning for this term, supposing that in household rationing schemes it indicated the master's mess, and as a consequence also a close group of persons, specifically the most senior group of the royal household.<sup>15</sup>

The *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* proposes an etymology of *naptanu* as deriving from the concept of food allotment (consisting of cereals, beer and meat) delivered to military and civil personnel or served to rulers and divinities, that developed into a Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian sense as «meal served to the gods and (as leftovers from the god's meal) to kings» and therefore came to denote, as a literary term, a lavish meal

9 Pettinato 2000, p. 66.

10 Parpola 1983, p. 81.

11 Weidner 1935-1936, p. 10 translated this term as «kultische Opfermähler»; see also Lambert 1993, p. 194.

12 «Das offizielle Mahl, sei es der Tempelbeamten, sei es der Staatsbeamten»: see Peiser 1898, p. 254.

13 Müller 1937, p. 67: «das Wort entstammt der gewählten Sprache und wird, soweit ich sehe, nur von einem Mahl für die Götter oder den König (samt seinen Großen) gebraucht». Müller suggested that the usual word for meal in Neo-Assyrians times was *tākultu*, see p. 67 fn. 1. For the reading of the term *naptanu* in a civic perspective, see also Frankena 1954, p. 55.

14 Van Driel 1969, pp. 159-160.

15 See Kinnier Wilson 1972, pp. 33-34: «Basically of course *naptanu* signifies 'a meal' and the special sense of 'mess' may be thought to arise from an extension of meaning to 'persons of the meal'. But, in fact, there appears to have been only one *naptanu* in any one household. It was the master's table». Another peculiar meaning, which must be considered valid however only for the Mari archive, was suggested by Sasson 2004, p. 181, fn. 4: «By itself, the word *naptanum* can also mean sacrifice». See Durand 1988, p. 15.

or banquet.<sup>16</sup> According to the two main Akkadian vocabularies, *naptanu* was used to indicate both the meal itself and the time reserved to its carrying out: this term, thus, not only referred to the action itself, but it also implied the sense of a specific timing.<sup>17</sup>

The etymology of the term *qerētu* is quite different: if *naptanu* derives from the verb *patānu* whose basic sense is 'to eat', the second word in fact was originally written in Sumerian as *kaš.dé.a* (literally, «poured beer»), and in Akkadian was rendered with a *parast* form from *qerû*, «to invite». So it was not just a moment which included a shared meal but its main features were the presence of abundant alcoholic beverages and many invitees; for this reason, the translation proposed by the *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch*, «Gastmahl», appears particularly appropriate.

Even though it is likely that these two terms had been subject to a shift in meaning during the centuries of their use (they are, in fact, both attested from the Old Akkadian period onward, until the late first millennium), an analysis of the contexts in which they appear in our sources helps in understanding their basic semantic values, and gives a first important result. In the Neo-Assyrian period, *naptanu* certainly referred to a meal which involved the exclusive participation of men, while *qerētu* pointed to an event characterized by the presence of at least one god. Formality and ritualization were an indispensable for this second event, but they might have been present in a *naptanu* as well, although not necessarily.

The confusion arising from the various above-mentioned explanations proposed until now came from the attempt to classify the situations to which these two terms referred as strictly 'religious' or 'secular'. However, it has been demonstrated in the course of the present work that such binary separation constitutes a projection of modern categories onto the ancient world, but it was not valid for the Near Eastern society.

When we look at the guests gathered around the dining table for the meal, the situation appears clear: in administrative texts that refer to royal banquets consumed by the king together with his officials, the term *qerētu* never appears. The focus of these sources was, in fact, purely 'human' and their goal was to list the edibles expended and distributed for the repast, which was therefore named with the 'basic' term. In ritual texts, the word *naptanu* appears only twice: in KAR 146 the use of the enclitic pronoun explicitly defines it as a meal eaten by the king alone (line r. 9': *nap-ta-an-šú*, «his meal»), while in K.10209 it is clear from the context that the repast is set up for the ruler who, then, «rejoices» (lines r. 22'-23'). Finally,

16 See CAD N., s.v. *naptanu*. See also CAD P, s.v. *patānu* A, «to consume, eat a meal»: from this same root derived also other terms referring to food and meal: see in the vocabularies the terms *iptennu* and *pitennu*.

17 The CAD provides in fact the translations «Food allotment, meal, banquet; time of the evening meal, evening», and the AHW has «Mahl(zeit)».

*naptanu* is the only term that appears in the tablet K.8669, describing in detail the scene of the Assyrian king's ceremonial repast consumed with his family and closest entourage.

Among royal inscriptions, the case of Šalmaneser III is particularly outstanding. The king, in fact, voluntarily used in his annals the two lexemes in different contexts: *qerētu* appeared when he assembled the citizens of Babylon and Sippar, to establish «protection and freedom» for them in the presence of the gods during a ritualized celebration which included offerings, sacrifices, and big celebrations all around these two cities.<sup>18</sup> The word *naptanu* was used, instead, in the events that took place at the sources of the Tigris, a repast that, as has been discussed before,<sup>19</sup> was staged on the road, during a military campaign, and served the purpose of celebrating an extraordinary human achievement while strengthening the connection between the ruler (who had made it possible) and his troops.

A confirmation also comes from literary texts, in which *qerētu* appears in the decision-making moments, when the meal coincided with the big divine assemblies and led to decisive outcomes for the organizers of the event,<sup>20</sup> while *naptanu* is used with reference to more private meals organized by the king or by the common man.<sup>21</sup>

Other Akkadian terms for 'meal' and 'banquet' derived from the principal verb denoting «to eat», *akālu*. Religious connotations are usually attributed by scholars to the most widespread of them, *tākultu*, because of the ritual that bears the same name and was a pious repast set up for the gods in the temple of Aššur, organized by the king and during which a prayer for the Assyrian empire was pronounced. This term however, which appeared for the first time in Old Akkadian texts,<sup>22</sup> has many different connotative values and appears also in non-strictly religious occasions: for example, in Sargon's eighth campaign it is used to refer to a meal offered by a Mannaean vassal to the Assyrian army as a symbol of submission.<sup>23</sup> Its Sumerian equivalent, *ki.kaš.gar* («the place where beer is placed»), also indicates, for the event defined by the term *tākultu*, a connection with the

18 RIMA 3, Šalmaneser III A.0.102.5, lines vi 4-5 (with its parallel A.0.102.16, lines 60'-62').

19 RIMA 3, Šalmaneser A.0.102.14, lines 70-72 (see also Šalmaneser A.0.102.16, lines 40-44 and 50'-65').

20 The term appears in *Enūma Eliš* III, line 133, VI lines 71, 75; and in *Nergal and Ereškigal*, Amarna version, line I i.

21 Two instances are recalled in the dialogue between *Tamarisk and Palm* and one refers to the meal that the *Poor Man of Nippur* intended to celebrate.

22 Gelb 1957, p. 25.

23 See Mayer 2013, TCL 3, line 53: ZID.DA.MEŠ GEŠTIN.MEŠ *a-na ta-kul-ti um-ma-ni-ia ka-re-e iš-pu-uk-ma*, «he had stocked piles of flour and wine to feed my army».

pouring of alcohol, and yet this occasion must have been different from the *qerētu*. The two words could in fact appear together, written one after the other in a *climax* that went from the tables, to the supplies and finally to the banquet proper.<sup>24</sup>

The attestations from the Middle-Assyrian written sources, and the ones just mentioned dating back to the first millennium, suggest a sense similar to the one already grasped by Von Soden (who proposed in his dictionary the translation «Vorräte»):<sup>25</sup> *tākultu* identified, therefore, a supply of edibles stocked in order to set up a banquet. In this perspective, the ritual that bears this name also acquires a new nature and can be considered as a ritualized meal in which the rich provisions, assembled during the year by the Assyrian administration, were symbolically returned to the gods, and used to set up a lavish banquet that was, then, shared by men, too.

From the same verbal root derived a more unusual word, *šākultu*, that was mostly used in Middle-Assyrian time and appears only once in the sources analyzed, in a text describing the sacred marriage of Nabû and Tašmetum, where it is accompanied by the specific attribute «of the king».<sup>26</sup> In this case, there are not enough data to guarantee identification of the ultimate meaning attributed to this particular lexeme in the first millennium, but its use in previous administrative sources and the fact that in the letter mentioned above each participant had to provide his own ration of food, indicate once again an original sense of ‘food’ more than of ‘meal’, as is in fact reported in both the dictionaries.

The meaning ‘banquet’ for *pandugānu*<sup>27</sup> is never explicit in the administrative sources in which the term appears: it is inferred, however, by the long lists of edible items recorded in two royal decrees in connection with kitchen specialists, and by administrative texts dating back to the second millennium that register foodstuffs and in particular meat.<sup>28</sup> The term *pandugānu* certainly has neither a Sumerian nor an Akkadian origin, but was probably imported, instead, from the Hurrian language;<sup>29</sup> the definition presented in the German dictionary, «ein Kultmahl?» is only partially correct, since the Old- and Middle- Assyrian references also attest its use

24 *ina* <sup>gis</sup>BANŠUR *ta-ši-la-a-ti ta-kul-ti u qé-re-e-ti ina qer-bi-šá ú-še-šib-šú-nu-ti-ma: RINAP 4, Esarhaddon 1, lines vi 50-51 and Esarhaddon 2, lines vi 19-20.*

25 See the AHW dictionary, s.v. *tākultu*, 2.

26 *šākussu ša šarri*, cfr. SAA 13, 70, line 9.

27 Interestingly, the decree SAA 12, 69 presents two ways of spelling the same word, inside one text: *pa-an-du-ga-ni* in lines 7 and 17, and *IGI-du-ga-ni* in lines 15, 16, r. 1.

28 Weidner 1966.

29 See Haas, Wilhelm 1972, pp. 9-10.

to denote secular royal meals.<sup>30</sup> Even in the decrees analyzed in the fourth chapter, there are no indications that the *pandugāni ša šarri* took place in consecrated or religious buildings, but all the evidence points to a royal meal instead, consumed probably inside the king's palace. This lexeme should belong, therefore, to a more civic and 'earthly' sphere of meaning.

Finally, we register in royal inscriptions the interesting case of a term whose basic meaning was 'festiveness, splendour', but that could also be applied in translated meaning to express a celebrative banquet: *tašiltu*.<sup>31</sup> Used in literary compositions to characterize temples and to describe festivals, it appears in the annals of Aššurnasirpal II, Šalmaneser III and Esarhaddon, to depict a festive meal held to celebrate the success of a project undertaken by the ruler: a military one in the first two cases, building and architectural for the third. 'Joy, delight' was therefore clearly intended as a synecdoche for 'banquet', and in particular for the celebratory kind of festivals: the presence of joyous feelings as an essential component of these events is confirmed also by the next semantic field presented, the one that concerns the physical and psychological status of those who attended a shared meal.

## 8.2 Psychological Conditions and Social Status

An analysis of all the expressions that refer to the emotional conditions of diners and banqueters in the sources at our disposal attests a high number of terms referring to the basic denotative value of 'happiness'. The most attested are the ones derived from the verb *ḥadû* «to rejoice, to be pleased»: this was in fact declined as a verb,<sup>32</sup> or in various forms of substantives: *ḥadû*,<sup>33</sup> *ḥidātu*<sup>34</sup> and *ḥudūtu*.<sup>35</sup>

The archetypes of these expressions are to be found in literary texts, where gods were depicted in the course of their banquets as being «full of joy»,<sup>36</sup> and in which displays of merriment took different forms: deities

30 See Deller 1985-1986, p. 47; and AHw, s.v. *padduga(n)nu(m)*, *pandugānu*.

31 RIMA 2, Ashurnasirpal II A.0.101.1, lines iii 81-82; RIMA 3, Shalmaneser III A.0.102.2, lines ii 80-81 (*ta-ši-il-tu*); RINAP 4, Esarhaddon 1, lines vi 44-53 and Esarhaddon 2, lines vi 10-24 (*ta-ši-la-a-ti*).

32 K.10209, line 23' (= SAA 20, 18, line 56) (*i-ḥad-du*).

33 RIMA 2, Ashurnasirpal II A.0.101.30, line 153 (*ḥa-de-e*).

34 Mayer 2013, TCL 3, line 63 (*ḥi-da-a-ti*).

35 RIMA 3, Shalmaneser III 102.14, line 70; Shalmaneser III 102.16, line 41 (*ḥu-du-tú*).

36 *Enūma eliš* III, line 131, (*im-lu-u ḥi-du-ta*).

were «most carefree», they «felt good», «their mood was jubilant».<sup>37</sup> We encounter similar expressions in royal inscriptions, where the verb *elēšu* is often used in construction with *libbu* and *kabattu* to express the rising and jubilation of the spirit. As a reaction to the invitation for the inauguration banquets of palaces and cities, in fact, the gods' hearts became joyful, their moods brightened;<sup>38</sup> on the occasion of these events, the kings made sure that also their human guests participated in the festivities, by making their mood similarly exultant with food, drink, music and gifts.<sup>39</sup>

It has been discussed above how this positive repercussion on the diners' mood was considered such a fundamental element at a festive and shared repast that it became the expression, as a synonymous *pars pro toto*, of these events: it is the specific case of the word *tašiltu*, deriving from the verb *šālu*, «to rejoice».

At a banquet, however, not only the psychological status of each diner was important, but also the social one, which could change positively before and after the meal. The elated mood of the hosts, in fact, often evolved into very concrete manifestations of magnanimity – recalling, therefore, the situation depicted in the literary text *Inanna and Enki*, where the principal outcome of the feast was the change in status of the city of Uruk, that became from that moment onward the depositary of the sacred *me*.<sup>40</sup>

This theme is particularly present in royal inscriptions: Aššurnasirpal for example wrote in his Banquet Stele that he had sent his guests back to their homelands in joy (*ḥadê*) and peace (*šulmu*),<sup>41</sup> using a term which had a legal value ensuring in this way his friendly attitude toward the foreign governors and ambassadors that had shared food and drink at his table.

In a similar way, Šalmaneser III on two different occasions took advantage of a banquet, held to celebrate his regained control over Babylon, to establish a new legal status for the population of the main cities of the region, granting them freedom from service obligation, the *šubarrû*.<sup>42</sup>

37 *Enūma eliš* III, lines 136-137.

38 See for example RINAP 4, Esarhaddon 57, lines vii 17-32, with reference to the god Aššur: *e-li-iš lib-ba-šú ka-bat-tuš im-mir*.

39 RINAP 4, Esarhaddon 1, line vi 50 and Esarhaddon 2, line vi 22, *u-ša-li-ša nu-pa-ar-šú-un*.

40 See the discussion on this text in the Chapter 2.2 of the present study.

41 RIMA 2, Ashurnasirpal II A.0.101.30, line 153 (*šul-me*).

42 RIMA 3, Shalmaneser III 102.5, line vi 4 and Shalmaneser III 102.16, line 62' (*šu-ba-re-e*).



### 8.3 Equipment

A survey of the tools and items mentioned in connection with banquets reveals interesting details on the modalities of their execution. Firstly, the vocabulary concerning tables and seats used on these occasions confirms that there was not, in Neo-Assyrian religious and royal residences, a proper dining room (and consequently, it is very likely that this was absent in private houses, too). The necessary furniture was, in fact, always carried in or out and placed inside the room or in the open space that had been chosen to host the event: there was no immovable equipment, and the terms that appear in the texts point to something that could be relocated in different spaces with relatively little labour and in a short time.

Diners usually sat on stools or chairs, for which the term *šubtu*<sup>43</sup> appears; on the occasion of high-status dinners, however, terms referring to more precious chairs similar to thrones are used. The *kussû*,<sup>44</sup> for instance, was present in written sources only with reference to kings, even when they were vassal rulers, as in the case of the banquet offered to the Mannaeans by Sargon, during his eighth campaign. This text also suggests the existence of various sizes of thrones and their deliberate use by the organizers to denote differences in the hierarchy of those who were sitting at the same table. But *kussû* was also the term used for the seats of the gods: in the prayers of the diviners, in fact, it is upon them that the supreme judges take position, in order to decree a favourable destiny for the worshippers.<sup>45</sup>

The *nēmettu*<sup>46</sup> certainly indicated a chair that was 'special' in some sense: not only does it appear in the protocol for the royal banquet exclusively with regards to the person of the king, but it is also listed in the annals among precious items that were collected as booty during wars, or sent to the king as a tribute. It is possible, therefore, that this particular seat was made of rare expensive materials, probably composed of a structure in wood with inlaid decorations of gems, metals and ivory. There is no evidence, however, that in the Neo-Assyrian time this term was applied to the particular kind of couch that appears in the famous relief of Assurbanipal's banquet, and, given the fact that written sources never suggest that a similar posture was taken during a meal, the translation «couch», suggested by both the major Akkadian dictionaries,<sup>47</sup> cannot be applied to the contexts analysed.

43 K.8669 (= SAA 20, 33), line i 4 (*šub-ti-šu*).

44 See Mayer 2013, TCL 3, line 62 (<sup>giš</sup>GU.ZA-šú).

45 See for example «The Lamb» (published by Starr 1983), line 18 (<sup>giš</sup>GU.ZA ħu-ra-ši).

46 K.3445 (= SAA 20, 16), line i 8'; K.8669 (= SAA 20, 33), line i 3 (<sup>giš</sup>ni-mat-tu).

47 For the word *nēmettu*, the AHW reports «Ruhelager», and CAD «a seat or couch».

All these seats, of whatever kind, were placed near to just one kind of dining table: in all the texts, in fact, only one term appears, *paššūru*.<sup>48</sup> This was a movable piece of furniture, a light (possibly folding) table big enough to carry various containers for food and drinks – but only the ones used by each single diner, that is, one cup for drinking and only one plate upon which the various edibles were piled. Bigger service vessels (such as cauldrons and jars) were placed apart, within the range of the servants who prepared the individual portions to distribute. A table could be shared by two or four individuals: commensality in Neo-Assyrian time (and in general, in the ancient Near East) never meant that all the invitees were sitting around one big, communal table.

The *paššūru* shows a remarkable similarity and continuity of use in the iconographical attestations starting from the third millennium up to the first, in images depicting both religious or civic events. It must have been chosen, then, for its practicality and efficiency, and the ones used by the king and the elite were probably differentiated only by smaller details, such as the legs that could end with lion or bull paws. The term could appear in written sources also accompanied by other connotative lexemes, which suggest an identification of the single item, the table, with the event itself, the banquet: thus, it was also in this case a synecdoche as for the case of the term ‘joy’, discussed above.<sup>49</sup> Interestingly, moreover, the words used in connection with ‘table’ conveyed once again the sense of merriment: Sargon mentions a *paššūr hidāti*,<sup>50</sup> while Esarhaddon offered his guests a *paššūr tašlāti*.<sup>51</sup> Finally, the term could also be described by referring to the person to whom the piece of furniture was presented for the meal, the king<sup>52</sup> and the crown prince,<sup>53</sup> or it could become a symbol of the status of the person who sat at it: Sargon, for example, set for Ullisunu

48 RINAP 4, Esarhaddon 1, line vi 50 and Esarhaddon 2, line vi 20; Mayer 2013, TCL 3, line 63; SAA 7 149, line r. i 3'; SAA 7, 150, line ii 6'; SAA 7, 152, line i 8'; SAA 7, 157, lines r. ii 13 and r. ii 16; K.3445 (= SAA 20, 16), line i 9'; K.8669 (= SAA 20, 33), lines iii 34', iii 41', iii 43', iii 50'-52' (the term is always written logographically, <sup>g15</sup>BANŠUR).

49 For a completely different opinion, see Kinnier Wilson 1972, p. 34. Discussing the expression *paššūr šarri*, the scholar wrote in fact: «By implication all these passages refer to the king's mess, but the actual meaning of the phrase appears to be confined to ‘table’ as an article of furniture and no figurative use is obvious».

50 Mayer 2013, TCL 3, line 63: *ina* <sup>g15</sup>BANŠUR *hi-da-a-ti ú-še-šib-šu-nu-ti-ma*, «I made them sit at a festive table».

51 RINAP 4, Esarhaddon 1, lines vi 49-50 and Esarhaddon 2, lines vi 19-20: *UN.MEŠ KUR-ia ka-li-šú-nu ina* <sup>g15</sup>BANŠUR *ta-ši-la-a-ti ta-kul-ti u qé-re-e-ti ina qer-bi-ša ú-še-šib-šú-nu-ti-ma*, «I seated all the officials and people of my country in it at festive tables, ceremonial meals, and banquets».

52 SAA 10, 98, line 20 (<sup>g15</sup>BANŠUR LUGAL).

53 SAA 7 150, line ii 6' and SAA 7, 152, line r. i 8' (BANŠUR 2-u A.MAN).

a 'table of dignity'.<sup>54</sup> A few terms that appear in the texts refer to containers, used for solid and liquid edibles: the differences among them could regard their size, or the materials from which they were made (metal or pottery), or also the purposes they served. Administrative texts understandably present a particularly rich vocabulary for vessels, since the indication of a measurement unit was fundamental in order to keep under control and capitalize the exchange of goods and foodstuffs in transit from and to the royal palace. Another rich source of lexemes to include in this semantic field is the inscription carved by Aššurnasirpal II, in which it is clear how different vessels were used to hold different ingredients, and how they were not chosen indiscriminately, but followed instead specific criteria linked to the foodstuffs that they were intended to contain.

Thus, a rich class of terms can be mentioned, starting from the more general ones like *karpatu*,<sup>55</sup> *kāsu*,<sup>56</sup> *lummu*,<sup>57</sup> *qulliu*,<sup>58</sup> *šāhu*<sup>59</sup> and *šappu*,<sup>60</sup> for which it is not possible to identify any peculiarity apart from the material (*karpatu* was identified as an earthen container), size (*lummu* referred to a small pot), or shape (the *kāsu* for example had the shape of a goblet or cup, while the *qulliu* was a bowl). Some other containers were specifically meant for one single ingredient, like the *ziqpu*,<sup>61</sup> used for sesame, and the *ziqu*,<sup>62</sup> a wineskin that contained only wine. Service vessels and tools also appear in the texts, such as the *hašbu*, a small pot made of clay that specifically contained in some cases the water used for washing hands,<sup>63</sup> and towels used to cleanse the hands, in their variants *sasuppâte* and *šubât ša qâtê*.<sup>64</sup>

Prestigious vessels could be characterized and identified as such by the materials they were made of: in particular, cups and bowls of silver and gold were reserved for the king's table (reflecting the customs of literary

54 Mayer 2013, TCL 3, line 62: <sup>915</sup>BANŠUR *tak-bit-ti*.

55 RIMA 2, Ashurnasirpal II A.0.101.30, line 117 (DUG).

56 K.8669 (= SAA 20, 33), line iii 45' (DUG.GÚ.ZI.MEŠ).

57 RIMA 2, Ashurnasirpal II A.0.101.30, line 117 (*lu-um-mu*).

58 K.8669 (= SAA 20, 33), line ii 23 (DUG *qu-ul-li-i*).

59 SAA 12, 80, line r. 3' (ZA.ĤUM.MEŠ).

60 RIMA 2, Ashurnasirpal II A.0.101.30, line 131; SAA 7 149, line r. i' 5 and 157, line r. ii 13 (DUG.ŠAB.MEŠ).

61 RIMA 2, Ashurnasirpal II A.0.101.30, line 116 (*ziq-pa-a-ni*).

62 RIMA 2, Ashurnasirpal II A.0.101.30, line 116 (<sup>kuš</sup>*zi-qu*); NWL 6, line 44; TFS 88 line r. 7' (KUŠ.SAL.MEŠ); TFS 89, lines 20'-25' (written both KUŠ.SAL.MEŠ and *zi-qa-a-ti*).

63 K.8669 (= SAA 20, 33), line ii 20 (DUG.ŠIKA *ša* A.MEŠ ŠU<sup>11</sup>.MEŠ).

64 K.8669 (= SAA 20, 33), lines ii 17 and 19. On the *sasuppate*, see Deller, Watanabe 1980, pp. 218-223, where examples of the use of the *sasuppu* and of the distinction between this and the *TÚG ša-qâtê* are provided. These terms have been discussed also in paragraph 5.3.

divine banquets, where gods used similar tableware), but also the shape was a sign of prestige. In this respect, the most interesting ones were the SAG.DU UR.MAḪ,<sup>65</sup> characterized by a lion's head. They appear not only, as one might expect, in texts pertaining to religious or ceremonial events, but also in administrative accounts – witnessing, thus, their widespread use at the royal court, as confirmed by the iconographic sources and the archaeological evidence coming from the palaces of the Assyrian capital cities.

Finally, two terms appear as *hapax* and their exact nature is therefore not fully comprehensible: given the determinative that they both present, they must have been wooden tools, with the *ḥabarāḫḫu* possibly referring to a box or basket used to transport greens<sup>66</sup> and the *tallakku* to a tray or carrier of food.<sup>67</sup>

#### 8.4 Actions

Written sources that inform us about the actions performed during banquets in Neo-Assyrian time include mostly ritual texts and royal inscriptions: administrative records were in fact, by their nature, not interested in describing ritualized gestures or acts that accompanied such moments, and indeed no information regarding this can be gathered from them. Only verbs that concerned the moments of the actual eating and drinking have been considered in this section, in order to identify the basic moments that formed a festive meal.

To start with the introductory phases, they included firstly the moments in which guests were invited (*qerû*)<sup>68</sup> and entered (*erēbu*)<sup>69</sup> the place designated for the repast: these are both rather common and general verbs, but they are however interesting since they witness a centripetal movement toward the banquet. In order to enjoy abundant and tasty food, each guest needed to be a member of the closed group of people who received a personal invitation (and it is meaningful that one of the words denoting the banquet, *qerētu*, derived precisely from the first of the two verbs just mentioned), and they had also to set out for the location indicated for the event.

From the host's perspective, a banquet needed to be set up, and the verb

65 TFS 135, line 4; TFS 144, line r. 15; K.3455 (= SAA 20, 16), line i 22'; SAA 13, 70, line 11.

66 RIMA 2, Ashurnasirpal II A.0.101.30, line 118 (<sup>giš</sup>ḥa-ba-ra-ḫu).

67 SAA 13, 70, line 11 (<sup>giš</sup>tal-la-ak-ku).

68 RIMA 2, Ashurnasirpal II A.0.101.30, line 105 (*iq-ra-a-ni*).

69 K.10209, line 45 (= SAA 20, 19, line 54); K.8669 (= SAA 20, 33), line i 2 (*er-rab*).

used to express this phase is almost exclusively *šakānu*,<sup>70</sup> that expressed the sense of the physical environment of the room very well; the same verb was, in effect, used to indicate the act of arranging the furniture, before the beginning of the meal.<sup>71</sup> In one case, the verb *rakāsu*<sup>72</sup> appears in connection with the placing of the tables in front of the banqueters: this was normally used in religious contexts to describe the moment in which offering tables were set up in front of the deities, and the meals of the gods were neatly arranged upon them.<sup>73</sup>

The very moment of the setting of the table could be expressed by other verbs, however, and the sense of the necessity to perform this act according to a specific code of behaviour is witnessed by the use of terms that meant exactly 'to put an object in its proper place', such as *karāru*.<sup>74</sup>

In letters dating back exclusively to the Neo-Assyrian time, the verb *epēšu*<sup>75</sup> was used, moreover, to describe the setting up of a banquet: even though this predicate was apparently a very general one, with its multiple values that could refer to many direct or indirect objects, this expression was far from being colloquial or non-specific. It is attested, in fact, only in this period, and exclusively in connection with the word *qerētu* (never with any other lexeme that indicated a meal or a banquet); moreover, the senders of the letters were highly-educated scholars, who must have referred to a specific event using a formulaic expression.

Diners could then take their place, and the alternation of the use of *wašābu* in the G and in the Š stems illustrates the alternation of the points of view: diners 'sat down', while hosts 'made their guests sit down' at joyous tables.<sup>76</sup> There are no indications from texts of this period of postures different from the normal sitting: the 'squatting' that can be identified from literary compositions and from documents belonging to the Mari archive was apparently no longer in use, and also the reclining stance seen in the Aššurbanipal's relief finds no comparisons in textual sources.

The serving of the meals was expressed by a specific idiomatic expression: the verb *qerēbu* (that in its basic value meant «to be, to come near»)

70 RIMA 2, Ashurnasirpal II A.0.101.1, line iii 82 (GAR-un); RIMA 3, Shalmaneser 102.2, line ii 80 (*lu áš-kun*); Shalmaneser 102.14, line 71 and Shalmaneser 102.16, line 42 (*áš-kun*); K.10209, line 22' (= SAA 20, 19, line 55) (GAR-an).

71 KAR 146, line iv 8' (= SAA 20, 19, line r. ii 8); K. 8669 (= SAA 20, 33), line i 3 (*i-ša-ku-nu*).

72 Mayer 2013, TCL 3, line 62 (*ar-ku-su-ma*).

73 See CAD R, s.v. *rakāsu* 5b.

74 K.8669 (= SAA 20, 33), line r. i 45' (*i-kar-ru-ur*).

75 SAA 7, 112, line 9' (*e-ta-ap-še*); SAA 10, 70, lines 6, 12 (*e-pa-še*), and 14 (*le-pu-šú*); SAA 10, 294, line r. 23 (*e-ta-pa-áš*).

76 KAR 146, line iv 7' (= SAA 20, 19, line r. ii 7') (*uš-šab*); K.8669 (= SAA 20, 33), line i 4 (*it-tu-ši-bu-ni*).



dishes: ablutions and anointments, for example, served to purify the diners and get them ready to take part in the banquet. For this reason, kings made sure that bathing (*ramāku*)<sup>84</sup> and anointing (expressed with the terms ‘pour’ a liquid, to drench guests with it, in order to convey a sense of abundance: *šaqû*)<sup>85</sup> were ensured for everyone, for all the duration of the feast (even when it lasted for many days). These operations must have been repeated on a regular basis, and in abundance.

Another gesture that accompanied the repast was the distribution of rich new, multicoloured robes (*labāšu*)<sup>86</sup>, that could be worn by the participants during the event, or else (and in addition) taken back to each one’s home. Finally, the distribution of presents was an essential component of the Neo-Assyrian royal banquet, and for this moment not only general verbs such as *nadānu* were used, but also more specialized ones, such as *qāšu*<sup>87</sup> that meant «to make donations» and, in the D stem, gave particular relevance to the lavishness of the event.

In the final phases, once the meal was finished (*gamāru*)<sup>88</sup>, each one stood up and cleared the room (*namāšu*)<sup>89</sup>, or was «sent back» (*tāru*)<sup>90</sup> to his original residence.

84 RIMA 2, Ashurnasirpal II A.0.101.30, line 153 (*u-ra-me-ek-šú-nu-ti*).

85 RINAP 4, Esarhaddon 1, line vi 53 and Esarhaddon 2, line vi 24 (*ú-šá-áš-qi*).

86 RIMA 3, Shalmaneser A.0.102.5, line vi 4 and Shalmaneser A.0.102.16, line 62’ (*ú-lab-biš*).

87 RIMA 3, Shalmaneser A.0.102.5, line vi 4: (*ú-qa-i-su-nu-ti*).

88 KAR 146, line iv 9’ (= SAA 20, 19, line r. ii 9’) (*ú-ga-mar*).

89 K.8669 (= SAA 20, 33), lines iii 49’ (*ú-nam-maš*) and iii 52’ (*ú-nam-mu-šu*).

90 RIMA 2, Ashurnasirpal II A.0.101.30, line 154 (*GUR.MEŠ-šú-nu-ti*).





# Commensality and Ceremonial Meals in the Neo-Assyrian Period

Stefania Ermidoro

## 9 Charts

### Chart 1

Comparison between personnel and officials mentioned in the texts belonging to the Nimrud Wine Lists and in the «Banquets accounts», published in SAA 7.

NWL	SAA 7	Translation
3.u <sub>3</sub> .meš	3-šú.meš	Third men
	3-šú ša a.man	Third man of the crown prince
a.ba.kur/a.ba é.gal		Scribe of the palace
a.ba.meš		Scribes
	a.ba.meš ša nam.meš	Scribes of Governors
a.kin ša lú.gal.kaš.lul		Messenger of the chief cupbearer
	a.man	Crown prince
a.sig ša dingir.meš		Soldier of the gods
a.sig ša mušēzibāte		Soldier of the archers
a.zu.meš		Physicians
ašgab.meš		Leather-workers
azlag.meš		Fuller
barrāqu		Brewers <sup>?</sup>
dāgil mušen.meš		Augurs
	dib.pa.meš	Chariot drivers
	dib.pa a.man	Chariot driver of the crown prince
	dim <sub>4</sub> .meš ( <i>tar-bi-a-ni</i> )	Trainees
	du <sub>8</sub> .meš	Light chariotry
	du <sub>8</sub> .meš a.man	Light chariotry of the crown prince
dumu.kin		Messenger
	dumu.lugal	Crown Prince
dumu.sig.meš / dumu.sig <sub>5</sub> .meš		Soldiers
dumu.meš sig ša dingir.meš/ dumu.sig <sub>5</sub> .meš ša dingir.meš- <i>ni</i>		Soldiers of the gods
é.gal sumun-te		The elder of the palace

NWL	SAA 7	Translation
en giš.gigir.meš ir.kur		Chariot fighters of the servants
en giš.gigir.meš <sup>101</sup> ir.kur.é.gal		Chariot fighters of the servants of the palace
en giš.gigir.meš qurbûte		Chariot fighters of the royal bodyguards
en giš.gigir.meš ša du <sub>6</sub> .meš		Chariot fighters of the light chariotry
en giš.gigir.meš ša su <sub>6</sub> (ša ziqni)		Chariot fighters of the bearded men
en.nun.meš		Guards
en pirri		Overseer of the work force
ér.in.meš		Troops
gal a.zu		Chief physician
gal en.nun.meš		Chief of the guard
gal.geštin.meš		Wine masters
gal kallāpi		Chief of the light troops
gal.kaš.lul		Chief cupbearer
gal.kés.bi	gal.kišir.meš	Chief of the cohort
	gal.kišir kab	Cohort commander of the left
	gal.kišir.meš	Cohort commanders
	gal.kišir.meš qur-zag	Cohort commanders of the bodyguards
gal.še kissete		Official in charge of fodder
gal lú.sag		Chief eunuch
gal.meš		Great men
gal.sag	gal.sag	Chief eunuch
gal simug kù.gi		Chief goldsmith
gal.sum.ninda		Chief of the confectioners
gal 50.meš	gal 50.meš	Commanders of 50
	gal 50.meš ša 3-šú gir.2	Commanders of 50 of the ša-sēpi guard
	gal 50.meš giš gigir.meš	Commanders of 50 of the chariotry
gar.meš		Prefects
	gar-nu.meš ša a.man	Prefects of the crown prince
	gar-nu.meš ša bad.ḫal	Prefects of the cavalry
gigir ša giš taḫlip		Chariot-horse-trainer of the armoured chariots

NWL	SAA 7	Translation
	gigir a.man	Chariot-horse-trainer of the crown prince
	gigir a.man du <sub>g</sub> .meš	Chariot-horse-trainer of the crown prince, of open chariots
giš.du <sub>g</sub> .meš		Chariot-horse-trainer for the light chariotry
giš.gigir.meš	giš.gigir.meš	Chariot-horse-trainers
giš.mušēzibāte		Carriers of protective shields
	giš.pa	Staff-bearer
gin.kéš		Permanent cohort <sup>2</sup>
ḫal.meš	ḫal.meš	Diviners
	<i>hazannu</i>	Mayor
	igi.dub	Treasurer
igi.min.meš		Chief guard <sup>2</sup>
ir.kur / ir.é.gal		Palace servant
<i>kallāpu</i>		Member of the light troops
<i>kallāpu šipirte</i>		Messenger, member of the light troops
<i>karkadināte</i>		Confectioners
kaš.lul		Cupbearer
	<i>kišir gibil</i>	The New Corps
maḥ.meš		Ambassadors
man <i>pūḫi</i>		Substitute king
<i>manzaz pāni</i>		Personal attendant
maš.maš.meš		Exorcists
mí.é.gal / mí.kur	mí.é.gal	Queen
mí.erim.é.gal.meš		Female personnel of the palace
mí.nar.meš		Female singers
mu		Cook
<i>mukil kuš.pa ša mugirrāte</i>		Chariot drivers of the <i>mugerru</i> -chariots
<i>mukil kuš.pa.meš labbašūte</i>		Chariot drivers of the <i>labbašute</i>
<i>mušarkisu</i>	<i>mušarkis.MEŠ</i>	Recruitment officer
mušen.dù.meš		Augurs
nagar.meš		Carpenters
	nam.meš	Governors

NWL	SAA 7	Translation
nar.meš	nar.meš	Singers
nar.meš <i>labbašūte</i>		Fitted-out singers
<i>nasīkāni</i>		Chieftains
ninda.meš		Bakers
	numun <sup>?</sup> .man	The king's seed
nun- <i>ni</i> .meš		Princes
pa.meš		Mace-bearers
<i>pāhizāni</i>		<i>pāhizāni</i> -officers
	<i>qur.zag.gīr<sup>ll</sup> du<sub>8</sub>.meš</i>	Bodyguards of the <i>ša sēpi</i> guard of the open-chariotry
	<i>qur.zag.gīr<sup>ll</sup> giš.gigir</i>	Bodyguards of the <i>ša sēpi</i> guard of the chariotry
<i>qurbūtu</i>		Royal bodyguards
<i>raksūte</i>		Recruits
<i>raksūte ša GAL.SAG</i>		Recruits of the chief eunuchs
sag.meš	sag.meš	Eunuchs
	sag.uš.meš	Regular troops
	sanga	Priest
simug an.bar.meš		Ironsmiths
simug kù.bar.meš		Goldsmiths
sipa	sipa.meš	Shepherds
	suḥuš.meš	Guests
sukkal		Vizier
	sukkal <i>dannu</i>	Grand vizier
	sukkal 2- <i>u</i>	Deputy vizier
sum.ninda.meš		The confectioners
<i>sūsāni</i>		Horse trainers
<i>ša duḥ.meš</i>		Soldier with the open chariot
<i>ša é.2-i</i>		Personnel of the domestic quarters
<i>ša é kudinni</i>		Mule stable attendant
<i>ša é kutalli</i>		Servant of the rear building
<i>ša é<sup>m</sup>Qiqī</i>		Personnel of the <i>bet qiqī</i>
<i>ša gab.meš</i>		Personnel of the open-chariots
	<i>ša gal.é.a.man</i>	Major-domo of the crown prince
<i>ša gīr<sup>ll</sup></i>		<i>ša šēpi</i> guard

NWL	SAA 7	Translation
<i>ša giṛ<sup>ll</sup> dunāni</i>		<i>ša-dunani</i> personnel
<i>ša giš.pa-ri</i>		<i>ša-ḥuṭāri</i> official
<i>ša giš.mušēzibāte</i>		Archers
<i>ša igi é.gal / ša igi kur</i>		Palace supervisor
	<i>ša igi.sila</i>	Overseer of the streets
<i>ša kiširi ša <sup>d</sup>UTU (kišir ša <sup>d</sup>UTU)</i>		Personnel of the Šamaš cohort
<i>ša pān urāte</i>		Overseer of the stables
<i>ša qaqqari / ša qaqqiri</i>		<i>ša muhhi qaqqiri</i> personnel
<i>ša su<sub>6</sub></i>		Bearded men
<i>ša urāte</i>		Groom
<i>ša ugu è</i>		Administrator of the household
<i>ša ugu giš.gan</i>		Keeper of the wine cellar
<i>ša ugu qaqqiri</i>		Administrator of the land
<i>ša ur.gi<sub>7</sub>.meš</i>		Keeper of the hunting dogs
<i>šu.dīlim.du<sub>8</sub></i>		Cupbearers
<i>šu.sīla.du<sub>8</sub></i>		Cupbearer
<i>targumannu</i>		Interpreter
	<i>ummāni</i>	Scholars
	<i>ummān urāsi</i>	Overseer of the corvée workers
	<i>un.meš é</i>	People of the Palace
<i>uš.bar</i>		Weavers
<i>uš kibsi.meš</i>		Trackers
<i>zadim.meš</i>		Makers of bows and arrows

## Chart 2

Gods and other divine elements listed in the *tākultu* ritual text (VAT 10126). They are presented in order of appearance, and with the indication of the temple (when known) or the set in which they belong.

God	Temple / Characteristics
Aššur	Aššur's temple
Enlil	Aššur's temple
Anu	Aššur's temple
Ea-šarru	Aššur's temple
Bēlet-ilī	Aššur's temple
Sin	Aššur's temple
Šamaš	Aššur's temple
Adad	Aššur's temple
Ištar	Aššur's temple temple
dingir.meš gal.meš	
Sebetti	
Narudi	Anu-Adad's temple
Bēr	Ištar-Aššuritu's temple
Ištar-aššurītu	Ištar-Aššuritu's temple
Igigi	We currently know of no cult places for the Igigi gods. Kienast (1965; 1976-1980) has repeatedly suggested that the Igigu are only attested in literary and mythological texts. However, von Soden (1966) has brought forth some evidence that might indicate that there were very few theophoric personal names which invoke the Igigu, suggesting thus that a veneration must have been taking place in some cities.
Anunnaki	Currently, we have no knowledge of a sanctuary dedicated to the Anunna gods, presumably because they had their individual temples in various cities across Mesopotamia.
Ereškigal	Royal inscriptions witness the presence of a temples of Ereškigal in Aššur, but we do not know if this goddess had her own shrine or if it was worshipped in one of the other temples of the city.
dingir.meš ša ki.tim	
Etirtu	Gula's temple
Uqurta	
Šerū'a	Aššur's temple
Tašmētu	Aššur's temple
Nusku	Aššur's temple
Kippat-māti	Aššur's temple
Enlil	Aššur's temple
Dagan	Aššur's temple
di.ku.meš	Aššur's temple
Alam	Aššur's temple
Lahmē	Aššur's temple

God	Temple / Characteristics
Niphi	
Alam	Aššur's temple
Nubalu	
Ea	Aššur's temple
Damgalnunna	Aššur's temple
Malik	Aššur's temple
Lamassu	Aššur's temple
Gimagan	Aššur's temple
alam.meš ša malki.meš u rubî alam.meš ša hupše	
Kunuš-kadri	Aššur's temple (in the Neo-Assyrian period this name referred to a processional street and to one of the doors of Aššur's cella, as well)
ig nakiltu	Architectural elements of Aššur's temple
ig.meš kù.gi	Architectural elements of Aššur's temple
ig.meš kù.babbar	Architectural elements of Aššur's temple
ig.meš zabar	Architectural elements of Aššur's temple
Ilpada	Aššur's temple
dingir.meš darsūti	Aššur's temple
Anzu	Aššur's temple
Maššār-kussî	
Kusarikku	Aššur's temple
Kettu	Aššur's temple
Mēšaru	Aššur's temple
ma-za-az é.kur	Pedestal of the Ekur, Enlil's temple at Nippur. Gods dwelling in this same building are also mentioned few lines later, establishing, thus, an ideological link between the most important sites of the Mesopotamian religion. These were recalled here with the purpose of creating a geographical unity and justify, thus, Aššur's role within the empire as the 'center of the world'.
Tambāja	Aššur's temple
Šamšāja	Aššur's temple
Enpi	Aššur's temple
Kalkal	Aššur's temple
Niš-ili-māti	
Melê	Aššur's temple (?)
Lahmê ša ká šīt	Aššur's temple
Nusku	Aššur's temple
Kusarikku	Aššur's temple
di.ku.meš ša kutalli	Aššur's temple
alam.meš ša é.kur	
alam.meš ša é Aššur	Aššur's temple
papahu rabû	Architectural elements of Aššur's temple

God	Temple / Characteristics
é nakamate	Architectural elements of Aššur's temple
kisāl a.bār apsû	Architectural elements of Aššur's temple
kisāl Mullissu	Architectural elements of Aššur's temple
kisāl namri	Architectural elements of Aššur's temple
ká erbetti u ig.meš-šunû	Architectural elements of Aššur's temple
dingir.meš é erbetti	Aššur's temple
sippu	Architectural elements of Aššur's temple
šigaru	Architectural elements of Aššur's temple
Ehursagkurkurra	Architectural elements of Aššur's temple
Ittu	Architectural elements of Aššur's temple
mutaliktu	Architectural elements of Aššur's temple
hiburnu	Architectural elements of Aššur's temple
raṭate	Architectural elements of Aššur's temple
Anu	Aššur's temple
Antu	Aššur's temple
dingir.meš gal.meš	Aššur's temple
Šalimtu	Anu-Adad's temple
Šuniburu	Anu-Adad's temple
Enlil	Aššur's temple
Mullissu	Aššur's temple
Ninurta	Aššur's temple
Nusku	Aššur's temple
Ea-šarru	Aššur's temple
Damkina	Aššur's temple
Usmû	Aššur's temple
Kudnitu	
Papsukkal	Ištar-Aššuritu's and Marduk's temple
Anzu	Aššur's temple
Ištar-kakkabi	Gula's temple
Manungal	Uraš's temple
Gunzalû	Uraš's temple
Bēlat-šēri	Gula's temple
Qaradāte	
Kulittanāte	
Zababa	Aššur's temple
Dā'iqtu	
Bēl-labrīja	Bēl-labrīja's temple
Gula	Gula's temple
Pabilsag	Gula's temple
Gunura	Gula's temple
Bēlat-palê	Gula's temple
Pāširtu	Gula's temple



God	Temple / Characteristics
Sāhirtu	Gula's temple
Bēlet-Akkade	Marduk's temple
Kanītu	
Kišītu	
Bēlat-jāki	
Allatu	
Bēlat-šarri	Uraš's temple
Daglānu	
alam.meš lamma	
lamma an.ta	
lamma ki.ta	
máš.sag	
uru Aššur	Architectural elements of the city of Aššur
bad uru Aššur	Architectural elements of the city of Aššur
ká.gal Aššur	Architectural elements of the city of Aššur
ki.ne	Architectural elements of the city of Aššur
ká.gal Šamaš	Architectural elements of the city of Aššur
ká.gal Ištar	Architectural elements of the city of Aššur
ká.gal niše	Architectural elements of the city of Aššur
ká.gal šini	Architectural elements of the city of Aššur
ká.gal tašimtišunū	Architectural elements of the city of Aššur
Ebih	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
Tigris	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
Zab	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
kaprāte	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
mišri	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
ldatu	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
qiduru	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
dingir.meš ašibūti Aššur	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
kur Aššur	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
bād.meš	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
dunnātūšu	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
madgallātūšu	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
urpānūšu	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
hurbānūšu	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
Pû-lišānu	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
sukki	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
Nemedi	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
bára	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
kummu	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
jaku ša kur Aššur	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
kur.meš-ni naqbi	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur

God	Temple / Characteristics
Tigris	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
tamtu an.ta	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
tamtu ki.ta	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
eršutu	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
šūt Anum	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
šūt Enlil	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
šūt Ea	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
mul.meš	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
im.kur.ra	Geographical and architectural elements of the land of Aššur
urru	Timing
mušu	Timing
maššarātūšu	Timing
umu	Timing
arhu	Timing
šattu	Timing
dingir.meš kur	Land of Aššur
Ištar kur	Land of Aššur
dingir.meš uru	Land of Aššur
Ištar uru	Land of Aššur
an	Land of Aššur
ki	Land of Aššur
šallaru	Aššur's temple
libittu	Aššur's temple

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## Commensality and Ceremonial Meals in the Neo-Assyrian Period

Stefania Ermidoro

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# Commensality and Ceremonial Meals in the Neo-Assyrian Period

Stefania Ermidoro

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Like a language, food is a witness to the tradition and to the identity of a human group, reflecting self-representation and social interaction. Assyrians developed a particular consciousness of commensality as a vehicle for cultural messages. This book investigates institutional banquets and ritualized meals in the Neo-Assyrian period. Through a philological analysis on commensality, integrated with historical and iconographic data, it offers a new perspective on the Mesopotamian society of the first millennium BCE.



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