

GALATEO. A NEW PROJECT PAVING THE WAY FOR THE STUDY OF MANNERS AND ETIQUETTE IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

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ABSTRACT · This article discusses the background, methodology and digital implementation of the project GALATEO “Good Attitudes for Life in Assyrian Times: Etiquette and Observance of Norms in Male and Female Groups”, which aims to understand anew the importance of etiquette in late Assyrian society (10th-7th centuries BCE). The first results from a brief analysis of banquet scenes are offered at the end.

KEYWORDS · Assyria, Manners, Etiquette, Sociology, Anthropology.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

THE present article constitutes the primary publication relating to the project GALATEO¹ and takes as its specific goal the presentation of the background behind the project, the methodology chosen and its digital implementation. The acronym GALATEO stands for **Good Attitudes for Life in Assyrian Times: Etiquette and Observance of Norms in Male and Female Groups**. This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Global fellowship. The research began on the 1st of June 2021 and will be carried out at the Department of History of Art of the University of Pennsylvania and the Dipartimento di Civiltà Antiche e Moderne (DICAM)

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Ludovico Portuese devised the ideas and carried out the analyses in paragraphs 1, 2, 3, and 5. Paragraph 4 was carried out by Patrizia Marcella Scalisi.

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of the Università degli Studi di Messina for three years, under the supervision of Prof. Holly Pittman and Prof. Annunziata Rositani respectively. GALATEO aims to understand anew the importance of etiquette in late Assyrian society (10th-7th centuries BCE) and to investigate, by means of a multidisciplinary approach, the extent to which etiquette influenced the subsequent cultures of the Middle East. As a showcase of the project, the creation of an open source Atlas will be delivered, which will explore how codified manners and behaviours can be detected from archaeology, texts, and art, and how they contribute to social and cultural identity. The Atlas is conceived as an open repository, in which the addition of new references to delineate the manners of a given culture can contribute to the understanding of etiquette, from the ancient to the modern Middle East.

This project has been inspired by the writing of precepts during the European Middle Ages and in Renaissance courts and cities, and it takes its name from the guidebook *Galateo overo de’ costumi* by Giovanni Della Casa (1558).

The Middle Ages left an abundance of precepts on conduct and socially acceptable behaviour, especially from the Latin-speaking ecclesiastic environment. Most of them deal with an educational process that leads toward a philosophy of manners,

preparation. Special and foremost thanks go to Prof. Annunziata Rositani and Prof. Holly Pittman for their thoughtful and critical reading of the project and, especially, for supporting and hosting the project with enthusiasm and an encouraging attitude. We also thank Prof. Giuseppe Giordano, the department chair, for welcoming the project proposal in his Dipartimento di Civiltà Antiche e Moderne of the Università degli Studi di Messina. We are further indebted to the University of Pennsylvania staff for managing the earliest phases of the project so smoothly. We also wish to thank Dr. Nicola Spada, designer and front-end developer of the Università degli Studi di Messina, for his valuable guidance in the digital implementation of the project. Lastly, warmest thanks go to Maria Pia Michela Portuese for drawing the official GALATEO emblem and for generously accepting the task of drawing for this project.

gestures and speech, which implies a harmony between the body and the soul. The *De Institutione novitiorum* of Hugh of Saint Victor (1096-1141) is a good example in this respect. It is a kind of manual for novices of the community at Saint Victor which outlines the costumes and behaviours required of community canons. In it, manners and bodily comportments are presented as the way to acquire discipline, virtue and finally happiness.¹ The earliest precepts on conduct and manners which involve a lay context come from knightly-courtly circles. These rules of good behaviour are addressed to certain leading groups around the great feudal lords. People regarded courtesy as that which distinguished them from unrefined peasants. *Der Welsche Gast* (1215-1216) is the oldest comprehensive code of conduct written in German, which aims to provide a number of courtly and religious rules of proper conduct as well as to convey several ethical values, such as faithfulness, moderation, justice and generosity.² Another form of precept that bloomed among medieval writings is the handbook of table manners (*Tischzuchten*), that circulated among the nobility in the mid-thirteenth century,³ and courtesy books for children, especially young boys and those from an aristocratic background.⁴

Particularly within the Renaissance courts and cities, writers and intellectuals began to reflect on the characteristics of the ideal courtier and proper attitudes, especially those bound to a lay context. For example, Baldassare Castiglione wrote the famous *Il libro del cortegiano* (*The Book of the Courtier*) (1528), which aims to teach the customs and manners of an ideal courtier.⁵ Among Renaissance writings, another important work is *De civilitate morum puerilium* by Erasmus of Rotterdam (1530), which is dedicated to the young prince but at the same time whose precepts are not intended for a particular class and in which there is no particular

emphasis on social distinctions or orientations; rather, the treatise is a presentation of general human rules.⁶ A little later (1558), the poet, writer and Italian Catholic archbishop Giovanni Della Casa wrote a brief and readable treaty of precepts for the benefit of his nephew on how one should behave in public spaces, which was entitled *Galateo overo de' costumi*, and has become more commonly known as *Galateo*. The title is the Latinised version of the first name of a friend and teacher, Galeazzo (Galatheus) Florimonte, who was distinguished for his refined behaviour, self-control, and literary erudition. Taking the form of a guidebook and written in a colloquial and lively style, Della Casa gives instructions on what to do, and what to avoid doing, in order to be considered attractive, appealing, and polite and not give offense. Della Casa illustrates the complex codes of behaviour that make a person courteous, pleasant, and beautiful with respect to one's manners. It offers a list of norms which describe proper speaking, prescribes certain choices of language, gestures and attitudes to be upheld during conversation, and outlines the appropriate outward appearance and how to behave in ceremonies, avoiding disgusting things that offend the senses or stances that may be viewed as annoying.⁷ These recommendations cover every public aspect of social life, from the dinner table to meetings and social events, and from the smallest gestures to daily acts. From the time of its publication, this book has enjoyed enormous success and influence and, nowadays, "Galateo" serves as a metonymic shorthand for "etiquette" or "courtesy" in Italy.

The project GALATEO takes its name from the latter work and draws great inspiration from the above-mentioned precepts. The questions and topics addressed by these writings in the Middle Ages and Renaissance periods certainly occupied the men of previous epochs as well. Nevertheless,

¹ Minuto 1953; Taylor Coolman 2010: 199-200; Falque 2011. One may also note the *Disciplina clericalis* (early twelfth century) of the Spanish Jew Petrus Alphonsi, which is organized as a master-discipline or father-son dialogue in which various stories and precepts of wisemen and philosophers are told, the aim being to initiate the cleric in undertaking an educational process and acquiring an *ars bene vivendi* (Martorana 2016).

² Willms 2004. In much the same way, a compendium of behaviour for the education of the young nobleman is John Russell's *Boke of Nurture* (fifteenth century), which gives a complete picture of the household life of a nobleman from a servant's point of view. It includes reference to setting out the duties of a butler, the way to lay a table, the art of carving, and other particulars (Elias 1978: 61).

³ Elias 1978: 61-62.

⁴ Petrina 2011.

⁵ Lovett 2012. It is specified that the perfect courtier is endowed with a range of virtues which include both general qualities of character, such as courage, daring, and loyalty, and cultivated abilities in combat, riding, hunting, tennis, and parlour games. Each of these virtues must, however, be shown with discretion, good humour, and grace, while carefully avoiding excessive pride or brashness.

⁶ Elias 1978: 76. Erasmus was not actually concerned only with the education of children or princes, but his precepts relied on the *philosophia Christi*, the ideal of a life full of harmony and wisdom, where it was the practice that mattered, not the dogma (De la Fontaine 1971: 19).

⁷ Rusnak 2013.

past societies and, in particular, pre-classical cultures of the ancient Near East do not provide us with written treaties on or guides to good living, civility and decency of conduct.¹ And yet, some historical periods offer immensely rich legacies of written sources in addition to archaeology and iconography, that lead one to speculate about the kinds of conventionally established rules which govern comportment in life's interactions. The late Assyrian period, in particular, invites one to carry out a polyphonic reading of the evidence (textual, archaeological, visual) to support reconstructing the galateo, or etiquette, of Mesopotamia in the first millennium.

2. METHODOLOGY

Besides supplying an in-depth historical study of etiquette in Assyria, the chief research goal of GALATEO is to develop an adaptable sociological and anthropological theoretical model for the study of etiquette in the ancient Near East. Today, sociology and anthropology are mature disciplines that encompass a large bibliography and rather heated debate with regard to the issues of manners and etiquette from the Renaissance to modern times. Near Eastern studies, however, lack such a methodology and approach for analysing etiquette.² From a **sociological perspective**, the underlying assumption of research studies in other fields is that the sociology of manners and etiquette provides important insights into social norms, social structure, social interaction, and the culture of the population or epoch under investigation. Seminal in this respect has been the book *The History of Manners* by Norbert Elias, originally published in 1939 as a two-volume work in German, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*. Elias' analysis attempts to show how manners and etiquette in Western Europe over the last five hundred years have been shaped by certain fundamental changes in standards of shame and delicacy which went on as a result of the changing class structure, changes to the forms of authority, and the break-up of isolated regions and communities.

From a sociological perspective, etiquette may also contribute to the evolutionary success of a group by indicating a collaboration among individuals, who develop the capacity to demarcate group membership through symbolic markers such as dialect and language, cult and religion, clothing and etiquette. Thus, etiquette promotes so-called **ultra-sociality**, meaning the ability of human beings to cooperate among very large groups of strangers. Etiquette, just like other symbolic markers, allows humans from a specific group to determine whether someone who is personally unknown to them is a member of their cooperating group or, conversely, an alien and enemy.³ This implies that etiquette plays a role in maintaining social and psychological order and is a clear marker of not only social and gender identity but also social class and status in more complex societies. Complexity and uniformity in the rules of comportment may have certainly depended on several factors (political, religious/medical, and economic), but they were also influenced by the control exerted by external constraints (*Fremdzwänge*) from a dominant group on their internal constraints (*Selbstzwänge*), to the point that some behaviours are determined out of awareness.⁴

In developing a sociological theoretical model for the study of manners and etiquette in ancient Assyria, the gender dimension is essential as well as influential in the research process. Assyrian history is apparently a male history, into which exceptional women occasionally intruded. Moreover, in recent years, research has become more aware of women's influence in Assyrian history and has distinguished biological sex from socially constructed identity (gender). However, archaeological contexts (e.g. funerary), visual representations, and inscriptional evidence tends to relate primarily to elites and to provide a symbolic and idealizing gendering of male and female identity and practice.⁵ GALATEO builds on past sociological studies according to which the focus lies not on the rigid sex-gender division, but rather on what produces a gendered system; gender is understood as produced by social situations and interactions among

¹ An example of a work instructing correct behavior comes from ancient Egypt through the so-called *The Moral Teaching of Ptah-Hotep* (Seddon 2010; Löwstedt 2019). An attempt to study etiquette in the Neo-Assyrian period has been proposed in Ermidoro 2015; Portuese 2020a, 2020b.

² An exception in this respect is represented by the study of ban-

quets, for which an anthropological approach has recently been proposed: see Ermidoro 2014, 2015.

³ Turchin 2013; 2016; Gowdy, Krall 2016.

⁴ Elias 1939 (2000); Lévi-Strauss 1964; 1968; Bourdieu 1972 (2013); Mennell 1996: 476.

⁵ Svärd 2007; 2008; 2012; 2013; 2015; Gansell 2012; 2018.

individuals.¹ Thus, GALATEO believes that the interactions between individuals can promote a better understanding of the interplay between gender, class and status. In this sense, manners and etiquette become an essential strategy for highlighting social interactions between men and women as well as eunuchs. Etiquette, in short, may contribute to gender persons in the Assyrian society. That is why GALATEO begins with the concept that gender may be routinely fashioned in a variety of situations and will accordingly scrutinize all pieces of evidence that help to identify behaviours and manners through the interactions between men and women in Assyrian society.

In short, the study of etiquette from a sociological perspective helps to uncover general social changes in social structure, power, and the construction of the social self.

From an **anthropological perspective**, research has studied how manners and codified rules of conduct shape human relations and preserve the integrity of a culture. According to anthropological studies, the protection and preservation of a group of individuals is essentially provided by a kind of hidden band, or dimension, that encompasses the group. This is especially shown by the proxemic distance (both physical and psychological) which the group creates in a sort of territoriality, which denotes the behaviour by which an organism lays claim to an area and defends it against members of its own species. When such a territoriality becomes a shared experience among a group of individuals, distance may be turned into a cultural idea that confers on the group the qualities which make them more successful and persistent than their competitors.² In fact, the requirements of human beings for space are influenced by their environment. Proxemic distance is essential because proximity is potentially dangerous and deadly. The reasons lying behind this relationship between distance and threat/danger are numerous and depend on both evolutionary and cultural factors. The human brain, in particular, relies on senses as information channels, such as olfaction, vision, and hearing. Individuals in close proximity may even fall under the chemical influence of each other's emotions. Disgusting things, in this respect, may influence distance between individuals, while the human disgust system, which varies from individ-

ual to individual or from culture to culture, may function to orchestrate the avoidance of pathogens and parasites. Diseases or evil attacks in past societies may accordingly be avoided by individuals of the same group through maintaining distance at the dinner-table or in public spaces. Hygiene thus becomes an infectious-disease-avoidance strategy, with the consequence that a lack of hygiene may lead to a kind of social ostracism, exclusion and isolation from a group, and selection pressure on individuals to avoid being avoided.³ This can compel a group to codify manners and hygienic customs that mould its individuals; manners and hygienic etiquette, in this sense, provide an indicator of membership to a specific group, are a signal of social intent, and reveal strategies and needs to prevent disease in social groups. Therefore, the study of etiquette from an anthropological perspective leads the investigation to evaluate the strategies which are adopted to prevent a group of individuals from those things that may pollute or defile the integrity of the culture, and that poses an invisible threat to social order.

3. DIGITAL IMPLEMENTATION

The main digital output of GALATEO is an open source Atlas, which explores both how manners and behaviours can be detected from texts, art, and archaeology and how they contribute to social and cultural identity. This Atlas is conceived as an open repository, in which the addition of new references to the etiquette of a given culture from the ancient Near East to the modern Middle East – from any period and any location – can contribute to the development of the concept of etiquette. The Atlas works through a meta-data search engine that relies on tags, keywords, and text associated with an image or a text, which are provided by the administrator or user.

The figures listed below offer an example of how the Atlas is intended to function on a step-by-step basis according to the types of tags or keywords that the administrator or user associates with the image or text. The Atlas thereby serves as a meta-data search engine similar to the most familiar tool of Google search (STEP 1). The search can be refined by periods, tag, or gesture types (STEP 2). If the user chooses to search by gesture type, the

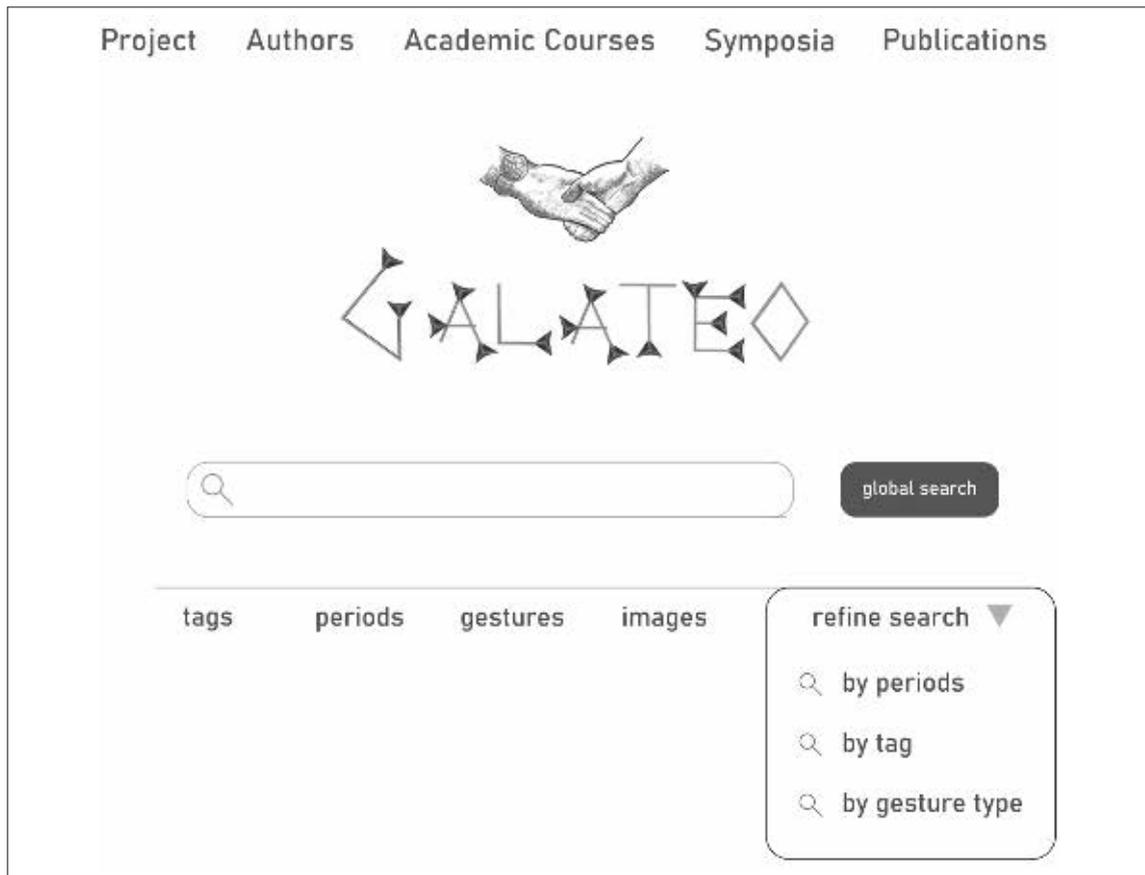
¹ Candace, Zimmerman 1987.

² Hall 1966.

³ Douglas 1966; Curtis 2013.



STEP 1.



STEP 2.



STEP 3.

search engine offers as many suggestions as the administrator has recorded in the Atlas (STEP 3). For instance, if the verb *karābu* “to greet, pray, bless, praise” is searched for, the results will all contain the verb *karābu* (STEP 4). Once the result is selected, the Atlas suggests related results for users to see that contain similar tags or topically related images/texts, offering various options on the bottom part of the screen (STEP 5).

The creation of an online Atlas offers a practical tool which can enrich the study of etiquette in the ancient Near East, and which can explore the ways in which etiquette may have outlived, or radically changed, through time and space down to modern times. Such a tool has an immense social impor-

tance for impacting broader public western perceptions on the ancient Near East and the modern Middle East, with special reference to Islamic culture. As an open repository, the Atlas is constantly growing and so the project GALATEO hopes to grow with it.

4. PROJECT MANAGEMENT

In the main, the foremost goals of the GALATEO project can be summarized as follows: enhancing the cultural, historical and artistic heritage; improving the knowledge of the past; understanding the impact of cultures through times and spaces; detecting the roots of the cultural diversity in

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GALATEO

Search gesture

Search Results



Winged genie, known as apkallu, performing the karābu gesture

Provenance: Kalhu, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 BCE), corridor Z (Zb-02); now in the Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst, Munich, Germany

Gesture: The greeting gesture performed is known in Akkadian as *karābu*, which the standard lexicons gloss as "to greet, pray, bless, praise," and includes a gesture involving the lifted right hand positioned at a level chest-high or higher and directed towards the addressee. [...]

karābu, Kalhu, 883-859 BCE, Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst

STEP 4.

order to reduce social and economic inequalities; making society more inclusive. These goals have been identified during the planning process of the

GALATEO project in the light of the key challenges for social Europe today. The funded project output represents a training model for high quality




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Winged genie

Winged genie, known as *apkallu*, performing the *karābu* gesture

Provenance:
Kalhu, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 BCE), corridor Z (Zb-02); now in the Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst, Munich, Germany

Gesture:
The greeting gesture performed is known in Akkadian as *karābu*, which the standard lexicons gloss as “to greet, pray, bless, praise,” and includes a gesture involving the lifted right hand positioned at a level chest-high or higher and directed towards the addressee. This gesture indicates that one participant has recognized the status of the other and connotes a reciprocal relationship favorable to both parties, a relationship governed by mutual obligations and benefits.

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tags: [karābu](#), [Kalhu](#), [883-859 BCE](#), [Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst](#), [Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II](#)

last searches



Queen mother Nao'a-Zakutu and her son King Esarhaddon (681-668 BCE)

#iabān_appi_gesture



Detail of prisoners performing the *napalsuhu* gesture during the siege of Lachish by the Assyrian king Sennacherib (701 BCE)

#napalsuhu

STEP 5.

researchers that works through a well-defined multidisciplinary analysis established prior to the planning process and writing of the project itself.

Various actions, moreover, have been identified and planned involving different resources, organizations, and the setting up of non-standard mech-

anisms. The GALATEO project offers the opportunity to move from basic research to concrete implementations relying on several diversified scientific approaches and methods from various disciplines (human science, social science, computer science, etc...). In particular, the fund supporting the GALATEO project is a great example of how Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) contribute to the development and implementation of scientific research itself, foster multidisciplinary research training, and encourage the adoption of innovations (*transformative innovation*) using new technologies which can help finding solution paths to societal issues, and providing opportunities for cultural and economic development. In addition, the GALATEO project, characterized by access to innovation and by the application of Project Management (PMI) principles, contributes to the implementation of an innovative research on a field hitherto unexplored, providing formation for scholars as well as higher education teachers, trainers, and social educators. Finally, as a concluding highlight, the GALATEO project examines etiquette and manners of both ancient and modern Middle East from a diachronic perspective with an international dimension, the aim being to track down common roots, to reduce the cultural inequalities and depict the new tree of a more cohesive and inclusive globalized society.

5. DRINKING AT THE TABLE: AN EXAMPLE OF GOOD MANNERS

The bread-and-ale episode, in which Enkidu learns to eat bread and drink beer at the shepherd's table, is part of the story of the civilizing of Enkidu, the companion created by the gods to divert Gilgamesh. Tablet II of the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh tells the way in which Enkidu, under the guidance of a woman, was transformed from animal to human. The civilizing process starts with the woman who clothes Enkidu and proceeds to narrate the consumption of food and drink offered by shepherds: "They put bread before [him,] they put ale before him. Enkidu did not eat the bread, he looked intently as he viewed (it): [*how to eat bread he had never*] even [*been taught,*] [*how to drink ale En-*

kidu did not] know".¹ Enkidu then becomes socialized by partaking in the communal rites of feasting and sharing in the sacrificial meals, which were likely distributed by the temple on feast days.²

It ought to be observed that the ability to eat and drink properly and one's participation in banquets or communal feasting are considered by the writer as the necessary steps towards what we may call "civilization" or one's departure from a previous animal-like status. It hence does not seem by chance that this rejection of one's wild or animal stage is also described by Elias in the context of Medieval manners, who notes that "people, in the course of the civilizing process, seek to suppress in themselves every characteristic that they feel to be 'animal'".³ More interestingly, Honoré Gabriel Riqueti, the Count of Mirabeau (1760) contrasts this state with what most people consider to be civilization, namely politeness and manners, writing that: "If they were asked what civilization is, most people would answer: softening of manners, urbanity, politeness, and a dissemination of knowledge such that propriety is established in place of laws of virtue and nor its face, and civilization does nothing for society if it does not give it both the form and the substance of virtue".⁴ It lies beyond the scope of this paper to offer a definition of civilization and it is not the aim of the GALATEO project, but what emerges from the Gilgamesh Epic and from modern views is that basic manners relating to banquet (food and drink consumption, shared meals) indicate one's own level of humanization. Eating and drinking, together with their textual and visual representation, may thus acquire a plethora of meanings across different cultures, societies, and times, but they always encapsulate a specific notion: the level of humanization and socialization of a given group of individuals.

Textual and visual sources from Assyria in the first millennium do not neglect descriptions or representations of food and drink, or of people eating and drinking; rather, the banquet itself is a major subject of many available sources. The visual representation of banquet, in particular, is based upon a strong Mesopotamian visual tradition which shows the banquet in a heavily stereo-

¹ George 2003: 561 lines 44-48.

² This episode is not described in the Old Babylonian version but in a new text translated by George 2007.

³ Elias 1978: 120.

⁴ Quoted in Elias 1978: 38.

typed way: although food appears frequently depicted, it is never shown as being consumed by banqueters; instead, banqueters are always depicted in the act of drinking or of raising cups of wine or beer held in their hands. In other words, drinking metonymically stands for banqueting. These comments do not pretend to be exhaustive with regard to a theme of such wide chronological and geographical attestation, and the project GALATEO will propose more thorough analyses in the future. Nonetheless, this paper is conceived to offer one of the many possible reasons why the drinking act was used throughout Near Eastern iconographic history, especially in Assyrian times, as subject to show people banqueting.¹ “Good” manners and “etiquette” are here proposed as complementary explanatory options.

Banquet scenes were the subject of a number of works, in which, as has already pointed out, the focus is on drinking rather than on eating.² However, explanations in this respect have rarely been proposed.³ It was already and largely recognised that the banquet, when depicted, represents something positive, although it does not refer to a single kind of event. Using the words of Irene Winter, the banquet scene is “the validating punctuation of an event to which it was juxtaposed or with which it was associated”.⁴ Summing up the meanings detected by previous studies, the banquet and its representation served to celebrate sociability and reinforce group solidarity, to create social cohesion and maintenance, to forge political and cultural relationships, to manifest generosity and positive social relations, to show abundance and hospitality, to offer moments of refreshment, relaxation and en-

tainment, and to celebrate the success of the ruler and his reign.⁵ Nonetheless, although banquet scenes have been polysemously, especially because of their implications of commensality, food consumption is ignored by ancient Near Eastern sculptors. Modern scholars have thus focused on and highlighted the importance of drinking.

Already the scene of the gods drinking was interpreted as connoting the sacred marriage, fertility and abundance, as well as judgment, the decision of destinies and the peaceful maintenance of cosmic order.⁶ With reference to the bowls held by kings and banqueters on Assyrian representations, David Stronach has argued that their importance was linked to the drink they contained, namely wine. Wine was a commodity that could be used to denote rank and status and, in particular, the possession and disbursement of wine were activities that expressed royal authority both in Assyria and in other adjacent areas of the rest of the Near East.⁷ Along the same lines, Mehmet-Ali Ataç has highlighted the connection between drinking wine from a bowl and regeneration and immortality, and has interpreted banquet scenes from the Syro-Hittite and Assyrian cultures as images that resonate with conceptions of the beyond, regeneration, and the attainment of immortality.⁸ Since drinking is associated with scenes of holy rituals and temple building, victory in war and success in hunting, Carl Nylander has asserted that “all [are] to be understood as emblems of high moments of the king’s stewardship under the gods”.⁹ Further, Karen Radner notes that royal banqueting was a reaffirmation of loyalty between the king and his guests, and that the material expression of this

¹ In this context, I do not aim to take into account the scenes where the king or leader is shown seated or standing alone and drinking. These scenes perhaps fall within a different context that does not include the notion of commensality and sociability.

² For a review of the visual evidence extending from the Early dynastic period in Mesopotamia to the Neo-Assyrian period, see Dentzer 1982; Selz 1983; Collon 1992; Pinnock 1994; Winter 2013; 2016; Villard 2013; Portuese 2020b: 81-86. See also the papers published in Lion, Michel 2003.

³ Pinnock (1994: 24) simply observes that “the theme, even when a loaded table is represented, is iconographically “summarized” in the act of drinking”. In much the same way, Pollock (2003: 24) follows Pinnock by noting that drinking summarizes a commensal occasion. Focusing on Neo-Assyrian reliefs, Ermidoro (2015: 231) asserts that the absence of scenes showing eating banqueters must have depended on a “specific ideological choice, and surely not to the inability of the carvers”. Winter (2016: 35 note 2) confines herself to the remark that drinking stands “by metonymy for the whole event”.

⁴ Winter 2016: 35. Winter further notes that the social value of banqueting is evidenced in the Sumerian composition known as the *Curse of Agade*, which records that, in good times, “people would sit together in places of celebration ... [and] dine together”.

⁵ Recent works in this connection are Ermidoro 2015; Winter 2016; and Portuese 2020b: 145-151. One may also mention a passage from the Esarhaddon’s succession treaty which clearly suggests that the consumption of food and drink could be used to seal treaties and oaths: “You shall not take a mutually binding oath with (any)one who produces (statues of) gods in order to conclude a treaty before gods, (be it) by sett[ing] a table, by drinking from a cup, by kindling a fire, by water, by oil, or by holding breasts, but you shall come and report to Assurbanipal, the great crown prince designate, son of Esarhaddon, king of Assyria” (SAA 2 6: 153-157).

⁶ Haran 1958: 21-22; Moorey 1980; Winter 1986; Glassner 1991: 134; Nylander 1999: 78.

⁷ Stronach 1996. On the importance of wine at the Assyrian court, see also Gaspa 2012a: 216-217.

⁸ Ataç 2018: 15-16 and footnote 40, 161-162.

⁹ Nylander 1999: 78.

fealty were these honour-drinking bowls as depicted on reliefs, described in texts, and found in excavations which were often proffered to guests.¹ Finally, the archaeological evidence is used by Alice Hunt to support Radner's suggestion. The so-called Palace Ware form A bowls, which were depicted on palace reliefs and held by the Assyrian kings, were given as honour-gifts when the *adê* contract (loyalty oath) was renewed. In summary, the texts show that the *adê* contract was sealed by the ritual consumption of beer or wine from a drinking bowl, leading one to suspect that the social value and semiotic function of these bowls extended beyond the banquet itself.²

All these interpretations are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary in explaining why the representation of banquets was reduced to the drinking act. However, scholars have presented their arguments by relying on the importance of representing the drinking act rather than on the importance of omitting the eating act. The emphasis and gravity of sharing food is evidenced by the textual sources, and yet this is not shown in visual sources. There thus seems to be an intentional omission on the part of the patron-planner-artist network of the participants eating during banquets. We may thus pose the question, "why was the eating act not represented?". To give an answer which extends beyond social, economic, and political reasons proposed by previous scholars, I suggest that in this context a combination of disgusting things and the reaction of Assyrians and other people from the ancient Near East to disgust may have functioned to orchestrate the avoidance of eating acts from banquet scenes. What I suspect is that some activities, which were part of the everyday life, underwent a process of segregation, a kind of hiding "behind the scenes" – to use the words of Elias – what was perceived to be distasteful.³

From what we read in texts describing rituals and banquets, which include the consumption or offering of food, solid foods such as meat are presented both whole and uncooked as well as boiled or roasted. It is also known that roasted meat which derived from the sheep offerings in Assur was given in the form of leftovers to the royal meals in Nine-

veh.⁴ In this respect, the visual sources show that meat (e.g. from sheep, goat, birds, or hares) could be presumably brought either whole to the table⁵ or cut.⁶ In either case, the absence of cutlery from the textual and visual sources suggests that solid food at table was consumed with the hands: everyone, from the king and queen to the peasant and his wife, would eat with their hands.⁷ In only two instances this is clearly shown. Firstly, on a long, narrow strip of ivory from Fort Shalmaneser a group of banqueters is depicted, who are arranged in two seated pairs consisting of a bearded and a beardless figure, which face each other across a three-legged table. Behind the table stands a beardless attendant, who is holding something in his right hand, perhaps food (FIG. 1). Another example comes from the North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, where the Elamite prisoners eat their meals inside an Assyrian camp (FIGS. 2.1, 2.2).⁸ The latter perfectly describes and conveys the sensation of being at the dining table: a number of people are sitting together, and each is doing what he or she considers necessary; one cleans their hands on their clothes; banqueters fall greedily on the food; someone seems to have set down a piece that one had in one's mouth back into the communal dish; without a towel one's hands are wiped on one's coat, one offers another a glass or a half-eaten piece of meat with dirty hands and uses them to touch one's ears, nose, or eyes; half of the food falls off the table and hands as it travelled from hands to mouth, and from hands to hands. The sensorial experience must have been distasteful as well, since the odours of food and of people eating must have emerged during the course of the banquet. Many aspects cannot be readily surmised from this scene, but the chaotic atmosphere that emanates from the banqueters' movement and crowding allows viewers to perceive the very essence of eating together, taking meat from the same dish, wine from the same goblet, and standing close to each other. In other words, the relief that shows the Elamite prisoners consuming their repast showcases what Elias calls the "invisible wall of affects", namely the wall which repels and separates one human body and another, something that has been in contact with the mouth

¹ Radner 1999-2001: 21-22. See also Portuese 2020b: 149-150.

² Hunt 2015: 182-191. See also Hamilton 1966.

³ Elias 1978: 163. ⁴ Gaspa 2012a; 2012b.

⁵ Barnett 1976: pl. XLII; Barnett *et al.* 1998: pl. 107 n. 147a.

⁶ Botta, Flandin 1849: pl. 64; Barnett *et al.* 1998: pl. 69 n. 76a.

⁷ An iron knife may have been used, since the king himself uses it to pierce a roasted meat during a ritual. However, eating by hands seems to have been a customary manner (Gaspa 2012b: 261).

⁸ Gaspa 2012a: 209.



FIG. 1. Assyrian-style ivory plaque showing a royal banquet, Kalhu, Fort Shalmaneser (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 59.107.22).

or hands of someone else and that appears embarrassed at the mere sight of bodily functions of others or even at their mere mention. The scene itself, in short, is not aesthetically pleasing.

By contrast, Neo-Assyrian texts inform us that in some contexts measures to counteract or conceal distasteful aspects of the banquet were carefully taken. The so-called “Protocol for the Royal Dinner” shows that there were more refined forms of this phenomenon in the case of the Assyrian court: “One *special* stock-room assistant keeps watch, receives dirty napkins and gives out clean ones, receives dirty handkerchiefs and gives out clean ones. One lackey stands before the container of hand-water. [If *water*] is lacking, he pours water from the hand-water (container)”.¹ The text continues by reporting that the use of censers and aromatics must have served for this purpose: “[...] The chariot-driver [brings in the censers], placing [one t]o the right of the king and the other to the le[ft] of the king, at the head of the couc[h]. A lackey [gives aromatics. I]f the aromatics run out, t[he lackey goes out], brings in an iron shovel and removes the burnt [aromatics with it].”² A similar order and cleanliness can be seen in the iconographic sources as well (FIG. 1).³ Taken altogether, these measures can be conceived as solutions adopted by high-ranking groups to make banquets as pleasant as possible. They concern the elimination of what may have been described as disgusting for some or embarrassing for others, although it is unclear whether these measures relied on hygienic aspects or simply on what was considered to be distasteful.

Moreover, the omission of the eating act is well counterbalanced by the representation of the drinking act and especially by the way that the bowl or beaker was held, which was most likely considered an elegant performance. Each representation of the drinking act shows the banqueter balancing a bowl or beaker in one hand, making use of all the fingertips. As far as I know, the only description of a mode of drink-consumption comes from Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia*, in the context of an imaginary discussion between the young Cyrus the Great and his grandfather Astyages, King of the

¹ SAA 20 33: ii 16-ii 21. Gaspa (2012a: 209-210) suspects that the crockery depicted in the “garden scene” of Ashurbanipal may have been used to contain hand cleansing water. For a definition of the court in the Neo-Assyrian context, see Portuese 2020b: 1-6.

² SAA 20 33: ii 1-ii 6. See also Gaspa 2012a: 208.

³ See also the reliefs from rooms 2 and 7 at Dur-Sharrukin (Botta, Flandin 1849: pls. 58-66, 109-114).



FIG. 2.1. Elamite prisoners eating their meal inside an Assyrian camp, from Room S1, North Palace, Nineveh (British Museum 124919; 124788).

Medes: “The cup-bearers of these Kings do their task elegantly and they pour the wine and hand it over neatly. They carry the phiale about on their

three fingers, and they present it in such a way as to put it in the most convenient fashion into the hand of the person who is about to drink”.¹ The descrip-

¹ Xen. Cyrop. 1.3.8, quoted in Miller 2011: 97-98.



FIG. 2.2. Elamite prisoners eating their meal inside an Assyrian camp (Musée du Louvre AO 19913).

tion refers to a particularly elegant practice in the Achaemenid court but, as Margaret Miller notes, the practice has a long prehistory in the arts of Mesopotamia: through a review of the visual evidence, she concludes that the practice of holding a drinking bowl on three fingers was an Achaemenid Persian refinement of an older Assyrian manner of drinking, which was transferred from the Persian court across an impressive geographic range from Georgia to Egypt and even Italy.¹ In fact, the drinking theme, especially the one showing the king and the cup, lives on in Sasanian silver, Islamic painting and in Persian poets, as well as in Greek, Etruscan and later art, becoming the representation of an eternal and common manner of human beings.² In other words, I suspect that there was a deliberate omission of the inelegant eating scene from the representation of banquet scenes and, consequently, a clear preference for drinking because this was also linked to an elegant manner in which the act was performed. This may also explain why the image of Ashurbanipal drinking from a bowl in the famous “garden scene” from the North Palace

at Nineveh was the subject of a specific iconoclastic activity.³ In addition, both the “garden scene” and the reliefs showing the Elamite prisoners came from the same palace area. I can only speculate that the visual combination of these two images was perceived as a message that highlighted the cultural differences between Assyrians and Elamites, the latter of whom were characterised by a lack of proper manners and etiquette.⁴

To conclude, at this very early stage I will refrain from postulating any hygienic reasons in the texts and I prefer, for the time being, to understand the omission of images showing people eating at the table with what was considered to be repugnant to see. By contrast, the representation of people drinking was considered a very elegant act to admire. Accordingly, the scene showing the Elamite prisoners eating must have been perceived as a humiliating act by any viewer.

ABBREVIATIONS

SAA 2: see Parpola, Watanabe 1988.

SAA 20: see Parpola 2017.

¹ Miller 2011.

² Nylander 1999: 78-79.

³ See the analysis by Nylander 1999 in this regard.

⁴ Barnett 1976: pls. LXV-LXVI.

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