

The banquet scene as a symbol of social status, power, and legitimization



Abstract: This study argues that the banquet scene in the Early Dynastic and Akkadian periods was an iconographic “template” representing exalted images of dignified figures and sometimes their relation to certain achievements or professions. This iconography was meant to express the high status and power of the depicted figures and convey the message of legitimization of an owner or user of a seal or any other object showing the theme. The author claims that the banquet did not express real or actual circumstances or events related to the act of feasting, as has often been interpreted in the past, but primarily conveyed a symbolic meaning. Such an explanation excludes, or at least questions, the possibility of other interpretations of the banquet scene proposed by various authors, such as the act of sacred marriage/New Year festival, funeral feast, feast after a victory, feast after successful completion of a building, and many others.

Keywords: banquet scene, Mesopotamian administration, power and status in Mesopotamia, legitimization of power, cylinder seals, contest scene, glyptic art, Mesopotamian art, Early Dynastic art

Karol Zajdowski

University of Warsaw, Faculty
of Political Science and International
Studies; Faculty of Archaeology

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INTRODUCTION

RESEARCH QUESTION AND AIM OF THE STUDY

Although the quantity of archaeological and textual material has increased over the past two centuries, there is still no commonly recognized interpretation of the 3rd millennium BCE Mesopotamian banquet scene.¹ Many basic questions remain open:

- What was the meaning of the banquet scene?
- Did the meaning of this theme remain unchanged over time?
- Was it the same in south Mesopotamia and in Syria?
- Were participants of the “feasts” humans or gods, rulers or ordinary people, owners of seals and objects, or imaginary figures?
- Who were the users of the banquet seals and what were their professions and functions?²
- Why did the scene cease to be represented?

The primary aim of this study is to propose an interpretation of the meaning of the banquet scene. The other inter-related questions will be addressed only partly and superficially, requiring separate, detailed discussions. As the analyzed motif was most frequently used, or at

least most frequently found, in excavated examples of glyptic art, the interpretation of the banquet scene would enable us to better understand the hierarchical and professional functions of the owners and users of the seals, social stratification, and the symbolism of other popular representations carved on glyptic material during the 3rd millennium BCE, such as “contest” and later “presentation” scenes.

DEFINITION

The banquet theme is defined in this paper after Frances Pinnock (1994: 15) as a “figurative motif, where one or more personages are represented seated, sometimes in the presence of loaded tables, or in front of big jars, while they drink through tubes from the jar, or they hold a small cup in one hand”. This definition is broad enough to cover diverse variants of Mesopotamian banquet scene representations.³

TIME AND SPACE

The banquet iconography was attested in lower and upper Mesopotamia, as well as in Syria (e.g. in Tell Brak) and Elam (e.g. in Susa) during the 3rd millennium BCE. The earliest depictions of the scene date back to the late 4th millennium BCE

- 1 The expression “banquet” scene was used for the first time by Contenau (1922) to stress the ceremonial character of representations depicted on some Mesopotamian artifacts. Banquet scenes are also referred to herein as “banquets” or “feasts”. The term “feast”, however, suggests a less formal, neutral event (Renette 2014: 69).
- 2 This question has already been investigated. See for example Gibson and Biggs 1977; Collon 2005; Renette 2014; Costello 2018; Stein 2020b; 2021.
- 3 Gudrun Selz (1983) has distinguished three basic types of the banquet scene: one with people drinking through tubes from a common vessel, the second featuring commensals drinking from cups, and the third type in which a food-laden table is present.



Fig. 1. Early banquet scenes: a – from Choga Mish, 4th millennium BCE (Collon 1992: 23); b – from Ur, SIS 4-5 – strata under the Royal Tombs, ED II period (Legrain 1936: Pl. 8, No. 169); c – from the temple context, Uruk, Eanna IV (Lenzen et al. 1962: Fig. 15:a)

(Collon 1992; Zettler 2011: 280).⁴ One of the oldest examples is a reconstructed seal impression from Choga Mish in southwest Iran, showing a standing figure offering a vessel to a seated individual [Fig. 1:a]. The scene also represents other vessels, cups, as well as musicians playing the harp, clappers, and drum. The other early example from Ur Seal Impression Strata 4–5 depicts what Leon Legrain (1936: 24) called “the graceful (...) forerunner of Shub-ad’s symposium” — a woman drinking from a tumbler with a nude servant bringing food and a lyre player squatting [Fig. 1:b]. Another seal impression [Fig. 1:c], dated to the Uruk period, represents a seated woman (?) with a vessel in her hands, attended by two nude men (?).

Interestingly, the so-called “contest” or “combat” scene was also introduced in the late 4th millennium BCE (Amiet 1980) and, despite subsequent changes in composition, remained in use for the next three thousand years (Costello 2018: 26).⁵

The banquet motif entered the artistic mainstream in the Early Dynastic (ED) I period and flourished during the ED III period (Pinnock 1994: 16; Stein 2020b: 176). It continued to be depicted in seals until the Akkadian period, although it

4 Stein has assumed that the oldest representations of the banquet scene are depicted on painted pottery from the Halaf and Ubaid periods (e.g. Stein 2020b: 178; 2021: 444). However, these examples (e.g. painted Halaf vase from Arpachiyah, burial G2; Hijara 1978: Fig. 1) are much earlier than the 3rd millennium iconography, they may depict daily life or cult activities, and they do not resemble the later representations; therefore, they are not considered here as predecessors of the 3rd millennium banquet scene.

5 It would be important in future studies to trace the temporal concurrence of the two themes (banquet and contest) and the reason for this phenomenon. The origin and the significance of the contest scene have not been univocally resolved and addressed (Rakic 2003; 2014; Costello 2010; Stein 2020a: 275). Stein (2020a) points out that the question of how the contest scene relates to the banquet scene has not been studied although these themes dominated the 3rd millennium BCE iconography, and they often occurred together in the same artifact.

definitely lost popularity in favor of the hitherto less frequent presentation theme (see also Gu. Selz 1983: 576–580; Collon 1992; Kist et al. 2003: 5–6, 15–16, introductory notes by Collon and Wiggermann; Zajdowski 2013). The presentation scene remained popular during the last century of the 3rd millennium BCE and during the first two centuries of the 2nd millennium BCE in south Mesopotamia. In the ancient Near East, there is a break in the continuity of the representation of seated figures holding cups from about 1600 BCE, lasting for almost two centuries (Collon 1992: 26). A new banquet-like theme returned in the 14th century BCE, when the figures were shown seated, or sometimes standing, with an attendant and a table between them. Ivories from Megiddo of the 12th century BCE represent Levantine banquets (Collon 1992: 27). Neo-Assyrian cylinder seals from Ashur and Nimrud, ivories from Nimrud, and relief panels continue the tradition of Megiddo representations showing a seated or standing ruler holding a cup.

HISTORY OF INTERPRETATIONS OF THE BANQUET SCENE

There have been many attempts to explain the meaning of the representations of banquet scenes from the ED and Akkadian periods.⁶ These interpretations have a long history, dating back to the beginning of the 20th century, and they usually refer either to everyday secular activities or ritual occasions, but sometimes they also revolve around the symbolic message embodied in the scene. However, none of

these attempts so far has explained the meaning of the banquet scene conclusively and convincingly.

Banquets and their meaning have often been discussed superficially, in introductory notes to catalogues of seals and sealings or in syntheses concerning cylinder seals (see e.g. Ward 1910; Porada and Buchanan 1948; Frankfort and Jacobsen 1955; Amiet 1961; Collon 1982; Kist et al. 2003). Hence, the symbolism of banquets has usually been presented in an abbreviated manner, without careful explanation of the rationale. Some specific aspects of seals with banquet scenes have been discussed in monographs or articles, in particular since the 1970s (see e.g. Rathje 1977; Dentzer 1982; Gu. Selz 1983; Winter 1986; Collon 1992; Vanstiphout 1992; Michalowski 1994; Pinnock 1994; Nylander 1999; Pollock 2003; Ziffer 2005; Zajdowski 2013; Romano 2015; Costello 2018; Stein 2020a; 2020b; 2021).

Interpretations of the banquet scene that have been advanced to date can be grouped in three general categories [*Table 1*]:

1. The scene was an abbreviation and representation of an actual ceremony, ritual, or important occasion (whether real or mythological) (see e.g. Porada and Buchanan 1948: 15–17).⁷ Feasts might have been portrayed for the same reason as other scenes from everyday life, such as milking/dairy scenes, boating, shepherding, hunting, contests with wild beasts, etc.
2. Banquet representations were

6 The history of these interpretations has also been discussed, for example, in Pinnock 1994: 18–21.

7 See for instance Porada and Buchanan 1948: 15–17.

- a means of conveying a symbolic meaning, which may not be related to any specific occasions or events.
3. Banquet scenes were expressions of a profession or function of the owner of the object that carried such a representation, especially a seal. Therefore, the owner of a seal with a banquet scene may have been, for instance, a court official.

Table 1. Selected interpretations of the 3rd millennium BCE banquet scene ⁸

Interpretation	Examples	Selected authors of the interpretation
1. Banquet scenes as representations of actual occasions and events		
New Year's Festival	<i>Shulgi's Hymn</i> and <i>Iddin-Dagan's Hymn</i> (Pinnock 1994)	Frankfort (1934: 12; 1939a: 77–78; 1939b: 43–48); Moortgat (1949: 19–21, 53–79; 1967); Pinnock (1994: 19); Gu. Selz (1983: 560 – the Akkadian period)
Sacred Marriage	Seal from Tell Asmar representing a couple on a bed and a jar (Amiet 1961: Pl. 91, Fig. 1203)	Frankfort (1934: 12; 1939a: 77–78; 1939b: 43–48)
Agrarian festivals		Collon (1992: 24); Kist et al. (2003: 5, introductory note by Collon); Gu. Selz (1983: 560 – ED period)
Religious festivals		Collon (2005; the scene represents the travel of a king and a queen to a feast in neighboring city-states); Dentzer (1982: 25)
Bringing food offerings for a god	<i>Shulgi's Hymn</i> (Michalowski 1994: 32)	Amiet (1961: 129–130); Kist et al. (2003: 15–16, introductory note by Wiggermann)
Celebration of victory	“Standard” from Ur, mosaic palatial inlays from Mari and Kish	Amiet (1961); Cohen (2005); Kist et al. (2003: 5, introductory note by Collon); Moorey (1978: 60); Pinnock (1994)
Celebration of hunting	Mixed banquet and contest scenes: Ward (1910: 46); Woolley (1934: Pl. 195, U. 12380)	Collon (1992: 24); Kist et al. (2003: 5, introductory note by Collon)
Inauguration of new buildings	Amiet 1961: Pl. 110, Fig. 1463 with the horned banqueter – Ischali, Temple of Ishtar-Kititum; Fig. 1465 with the animal sacrifice – Mari	Amiet (1961); Parrot (1960: 130–132)
Funerary meal	Traces of libations, food offerings, musical instruments in the Royal Cemetery at Ur (Woolley 1934), <i>The Death of Ur-Nammu</i>	Contenau (1922: 109; 1931: 629–630); Pinnock (1994: 21; one banqueter=the deceased); Pollock (2003); Weber (1920: 108–109)

⁸ Due to the limited length of this paper, these interpretations are only enumerated and not described in detail.

Table 1. Selected interpretations of the 3rd millennium BCE banquet scene (continued)

Interpretation	Examples	Selected authors of the interpretation
Commemoration of the deceased	Akkadian as <i>kispu</i> , Sumerian KI.SÌ.GA	Ge.J. Selz (2004)
Palatial leisure		Pinnock (1994)
Everyday leisure/consumption	<i>Hymn to the Beer Goddess, Hymn to the Sun God</i>	Bottéro (1994: 10); Michalowski (1994: 32; the author did not directly relate it to visual representations of banquets); Vanstiphout (1992: 12–13)
Ceremony with preeminent role of women		Moorey (1977)
Celebration of a visit		Michalowski (1994; the author does not directly relate it to visual representations of banquets)
Commemoration of a special celebration		Stein (2020a; 2020b; 2021)
Weaving wool		Breniquet (2008) ⁹
Multiple occasions		Amiet (1961: 131); Collon (1992); Evans (2012: 242–243); Kist et al. (2003: 5, introductory note by Collon); Pinnock (1994); Romano (2012; 2015)
Mythological episode		Dentzer (1982: 23)
2. Banquet scenes as symbols		
Emblem of welfare and order	<i>The Curse of Agade; The Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur</i>	Vanstiphout (1992: 9–10); Winter (1986: 260–261; a cup as a ritual vessel used by a ruler in libations to the “sacred tree”; the ruler acts as the maintainer of the fertility of his lands); Ziffer (2005)
Symbol of long life	Dedicatory inscriptions placed on plaques and statuettes expressing the expectations of donors: a (long) life	Evans (2012: 146–178); Kist et al. (2003: 15–16, introductory note by Wiggemann)
Affirmation of the relationship between individuals or gods	<i>Enki's Journey to Nippur</i>	Michalowski (1994: 33–35; the author does not directly relate it to visual representations of banquets)
Confirmation of a new situation	<i>Enki's Journey to Nippur</i>	Michalowski (1994: 33–35; the author does not directly relate it to visual representations of banquets)
Symbol of decision-making	<i>Enûma Eliš</i>	Nylander (1999: 78; the author does not directly relate it to visual representations of banquets); Vanstiphout (1992: 11–12)

9 This interpretation refers particularly to the “banquet” scenes, where “commensals” drink from a vessel using straws (Breniquet 2008: 278).

Table 1. Selected interpretations of the 3rd millennium BCE banquet scene (continued)

Interpretation	Examples	Selected authors of the interpretation
Symbol of transaction		Bottéro (1994: 11); Michalowski (1994: 35); Neumann (1994: 326; the author does not directly relate it to visual representations of banquets)
Enforcement of familial ties	<i>Nergal and Ereškigal</i> myth	Bottéro (1994: 9–10; the author does not directly relate it to visual representations of banquets)
Symbol of humans serving gods	Epic of <i>Atra-Hasis</i>	Bottéro (2002: 169–170; the author does not directly relate it to visual representations of banquets); Evans (2012: 152–158)
Participation of humans in the banquet of gods	<i>Ritual for Ishtar</i> ; the presence of stone plaques or sculptures representing humans in temples	Kist et al. (2003: 15–16, introductory note by Wiggermann)
Act of obedience and vassalage	Old Babylonian letter of denunciation sent to King Zimrilim of Mari	Michalowski (1994; the author does not directly relate it to visual representations of banquets); Winter (1986)
Appointment of an official	Old Babylonian letter from Tell Asmar/Eshnunna addressed to king Balalama; <i>Enûma Eliš</i> myth	Michalowski (1994: 37; the author does not directly relate it to visual representations of banquets)
3. Banquet scene as an emblem of the position or profession of the object owner		
Banquet scene as an emblem of the position or profession of the object owner	Seals from the Royal Cemetery at Ur	Rathje (1977)

Taking into account the previous interpretations banquets, we shall examine whether a univocal explanation of the theme is appropriate or if several interpretations should be admitted. If several explanations are valid, should they all be related to one banquet representation, or can specific interpretations fit different variants of the banquet motif? What is more, the meaning of the banquet could have changed over time. For example, Pinnock (1994) suggests that the banquet is an iconographic model adapted to varying needs of different geographical regions and periods.

Some authors have indicated that the banquet scene can be interpreted in a number of ways, without a single, definitive explanation. In her interpretation of the scene, Licia Romano (2015: 297) has indicated that the representation may be related to a number of social, religious, economic, and political spheres. According to Romano, the banquet theme depicted real-life celebrations and at the same time had a political function indicating that the seated people belonged to the same privileged “social class and level”. Similarly, Dominique Collon has pointed to

the plurality of occasions “portrayed” as banquets in seals (Collon 1992; Kist et al. 2003: 5, introductory note by Collon). In her article dedicated to the banquet scene and published in 1994, Pinnock has noticed that “one interpretation of the banquet theme is untenable” and that “the banquet theme is not related with one ritual and festive moment, but with a plurality of celebrations”.¹⁰

The banquet scene has also been interpreted as a communal act of feasting and consumption of foods and drinks. Some research has focused on the central role played by feasting in different cultures, with its social functions.¹¹ Recently the scene has been investigated by Diana L. Stein in a series of papers (2020a; 2020b; 2021). In her interpretation of banquet themes, Stein (2021: 452, 458) has suggested that they represented surreal drinking ceremonies, during which the seated figures were attended by musicians,

singers, dancers, and acrobats “probably affiliated with the temple household”. The ceremonies involved hallucinogenic beverages and contact with the spiritual world. The continuity of these spiritual “rituals” is evidenced since Palaeolithic times. According to Stein (2021: 459), the banquet scene was represented in statues, plaques, seals, and other objects in order to commemorate the experience of this spiritual ceremony, which was intended to gain divine support in “all manner of situations, including military maneuvers, building projects as well as in the treatment of personal, inter-personal, and political issues”. These scenes may be seen as evidence of a ritual drinking ceremony sponsored by and for an elite of society (Stein 2020b: 178). However, in the light of the argument presented below, some explanations put forward by Stein are far from the interpretation proposed in this paper.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Of the published studies devoted to the banquet scene, the dissertation of Gudrun Selz (1983) is the most systematic and detailed. The study analyzed a group of 615 objects (529 of which were seals and seal impressions) representing the banquet dated from the ED and Akkadian periods and originating from greater Mesopotamia. However, out of this number approximately 300 Early Dynastic representations come from 21 archaeological sites and the rest from the antiquities market (Romano 2015: 291). As many as 34 cyl-

inder seals with the banquet scene were found in the Royal Cemetery at Ur, and many studies of the discussed motif are based on the relatively abundant material deriving from this site (for example Stein 2021).

The banquet scene was depicted on a variety of artifacts whose origins range from south Mesopotamia and Iran to Anatolia. Apart from cylinder seals, on which most banquet scenes appear, this imagery is also attested on numerous ancient Mesopotamian objects of the 3rd

10 Multiple occasions and explanations of the banquet were also suggested for example by Amiet 1961: 131 and Evans 2012: 242–243.

11 See for example Dietler and Hayden 2001; Hayden 2001; Sallaberger 2018.

millennium BCE, which have been analyzed in this study:¹²

- mosaic inlays on lyres, “standards,” wardrobe chests, or wall inlays (for example Mackay 1929: Pls XXXV, XXXVI; Woolley 1934: Pl. 94; Margueron 2004: 294, Fig. 283);
- stone plaques (Boese 1971: Pls VI, LV, LVI, LVII; Gu. Selz 1983: Pls IV, VI, IX, XVII (small alabaster plate), XXX, XLI, Fig. 478);¹³
- sculpture, as seated or standing figures holding a cup in their hands (for example Gu. Selz 1983: Pls XV, XXXVIII, Figs 195, 435);
- wood, as impressions left in the soil (Woolley 1934: 384–385, Pl. 222c, carved chair-back?);
- pottery (painted: Delougaz 1952: Pls 62, 138); a stone-carved vase (Woolley 1934: Pl. 36, U. 232);
- steles (for example Gu. Selz 1983: Pl. XVI, Fig. 204).

Besides the archaeological and material evidence, ancient texts also constitute an important source that have proved helpful in the discussion (Gu. Selz 1983: 12). Unfortunately, most of the pertinent texts come from the 2nd millennium BCE, so the utility of this source category in interpreting the 3rd millennium banquets is limited.

For the purposes of this study, the corpus of 734 cylinders bearing banquet and contest scenes has been analyzed (493 of these pieces are Early Dynastic and 240 Akkadian). The results are presented in sections devoted to the composition of the seals and the use of the material from which these objects were manufactured. The material has been divided into two categories: cylinders excavated at Ur and those coming from other sites. The seals derive from several collections, catalogues, and reports, including Buchanan (1966); Collon (1982); Frankfort and Jacobsen (1955); Kist et al. (2003); Lambert (1966; 1979); Legrain (1951); Porada and Buchanan (1948); von der Osten (1934; 1936); and Woolley (1934). In order to compare the material used for their execution, only seals, not sealings as in the study of Gudrun Selz (1983), have been taken into account.

This paper employs three key approaches:

1. Since the banquet scene was most frequently represented on seals (and sealings), these objects are scrutinized in detail in order to determine the meaning of the theme.
2. The analysis of seals is conducted by comparing two types of seals popular in the ED and Akkadian

¹² Later representations of banquet-like scenes were depicted on a variety of artifacts, such as ivory and bone amulets (e.g. from the “Tomb of the Lord of Goats” at Ebla, Matthiae 1989: Fig. 149), ritual basins, and statues (see for example Matthiae 1989: 189–194, Pls 126–128). Pyxides or cosmetic boxes and ivory decorative panels from inner Syria, dating mainly from the 8th century BCE, constitute the youngest group of artifacts bearing these kinds of representations (Pinnock 1994: 23, Pl. IXa). In the Neo-Assyrian period, the scene was referred to in wall reliefs (e.g. in the north palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, Frankfort 1970/1996: 193, Fig. 217) and in orthostates (Pinnock 1994: 17–18). A detailed review of later representations of these banquet-like scenes may be found in Pinnock (1994) and Ziffer (2005).

¹³ Plaques were most often found in temples from the ED period, especially at Tell Agrab, Tell Asmar, Mari, Khafajah, Susa, Ur, Fara, and Nippur (Boese 1971).

periods, i.e. seals representing banquet and contest motifs.¹⁴ This approach was necessitated by the preponderance of these two types of seals in the well-stratified material from the Royal Cemetery at Ur. The comparison centers on the quality and material in which the seals were executed, objects found in the same funerary contexts as the seals, and the owners of the two types of cylinders.

3. The banquet scene is compared not only with the contemporary contest seals (horizontal comparison), but also with the subsequent “presentation” theme (vertical/temporal comparison), which developed in the Akkadian and especially in the Ur III periods.

In order to answer the research questions posed in the introduction to this paper, also other types of objects beyond glyptic art have been analyzed. In terms of methodology, the interpretation of the banquet scene has been carried out by investigating the following elements, discussed in detail in the successive sections of this paper:

1. composition of the banquet scene and its evolution;
2. material and quality of execution of seals depicting banquet scenes;
3. accompanying “secondary” themes;
4. contexts in which objects representing banquets were excavated;
5. identification of “banqueters” and owners of the objects depicting banquet scenes;
6. symbolic details of the scene.

RESULTS

COMPOSITION OF THE BANQUET SCENE AND ITS EVOLUTION

Banquet scenes on seals exhibit regional variation. The Early Dynastic representations of one or more figures, seated and drinking from cups, prevail in the south of Lower Mesopotamia (Gu. Selz 1983: 437). It is significant that in the center and north of Lower Mesopotamia the scenes in the ED III period are dominated by figures drinking through tubes rather than from cups (Romano 2015: 291). The last type of banquet theme defined by Selz, which includes tables, is more frequently depicted in the Syrian seals, especially those found at Tell Brak. According

to Donald M. Matthews (1997: 109), this imagery may speak for a different understanding of the banquet theme in the north. However, this type of scene was also popular in south Mesopotamia in the ED III period, and most of its representations were found in the Royal Cemetery at Ur (Romano 2015: 291).

Not only did the scene typology exhibit geographic variation, but also the number of participants of the banquet scene differed depending on the region during the ED period. In her article, Romano (2015) has shown that in south and central Lower Mesopotamia the scenes featured fewer figures compared to north

¹⁴ The “contest” theme is understood here as a representation of animals fighting, humans fighting animals, humans hunting, or human-animal hybrids or mythological beasts fighting.

Lower Mesopotamia and the Jezireh region.

The banquet scene, sometimes depicted in a single horizontal register, could also be extended through the addition of further registers showing different subjects/themes ([Fig. 2] with the accompanying contest scene). The transformation of the banquet theme began in the Early Akkadian period with a relinquishing of the double-register composition: its attestations fell from 43% of the banquet seals from the ED period¹⁵ to only 6% of those dated to the Akkadian period.¹⁶ In view of the apparent specificity of the Early Dynastic assemblage, the banquet seals excavated at Ur were considered separately.¹⁷ The double register was present on 86% of the total of 56 Ur banquet seals from the ED period, but on only two out of seven seals from the Akkadian period. The evidence from Ur seems to indicate, therefore, that the number of registers

could have, to some extent, depended on the region or the office held (Zajdowski 2013: 10–11).

During the Akkadian period, the banquet scene was simplified, comprising fewer banqueters and attendants than in the ED period. The Akkadian banquets typically featured only two seated figures, in contrast to depictions from the ED period, which included more banqueters. Thus, the later seals featured an abbreviated narrative and were forerunners of “presentation scenes”, which showed only two important figures (Zajdowski 2013). The further evolution of the banquet scene from the early to the later Akkadian period also brought a decrease in the number of attendants and vessels placed between banqueters (see Boehmer 1965: 115–117).

The formal simplification and abbreviated narrative led to a significant modification, or “degeneration”, of the banquet iconography during the Akkadian period. This process was coupled with the gradual increase in the use of inscriptions, which seem to have taken precedence over images on the seals by the Ur III period and led to the reduction of motifs engraved on seals.

In a previous article, the present author (Zajdowski 2013) has argued that the banquet theme “evolved” into the “presentation” scene and that the messages embodied in these two types of representations were similar. The Akkadian

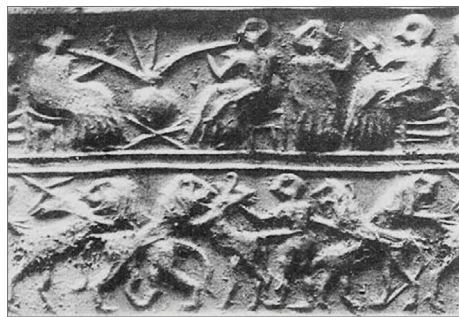


Fig. 2. Banquet scene with accompanying contest theme (Woolley 1934: Pl. 194, U. 12256)

- 15 A similar analysis, though based on a different sample, was conducted by Romano (2015: 293), according to whom more than 40% of Early Dynastic banquet scenes lacked secondary motifs.
- 16 The sample consists of 67 ED and 32 Akkadian period double-register banquet seals presented in [Table 2], based on several collections and catalogues: von der Osten 1934; 1936; Porada 1948; Frankfort and Jacobsen 1955; Buchanan 1966; Lambert 1966; 1979; Collon 1982; Kist et al. 2003.
- 17 Seals published in Legrain 1951 and Woolley 1934.

and Ur III presentation motifs on seals, being much more thoroughly read and interpreted, could shed light on the still-obscure symbolism of the earlier banquet scenes. As it seems, the Akkadian and, later, the Ur III presentation scene did not depict any real event or situation.¹⁸ Likewise, the banquet scene was just a “convention” applied when carving seals or portraying specific figures in a “prestigious” setting, with symbolic elements or events (military victory, building activity, etc.) indicative of high status, elevated social position, or legitimacy of power. Among such symbolic motifs were the seated position of the banqueters, different sizes of the banquet participants, a throne, the presence of servants, musicians, and artists, a cup/tumbler held in hand, and an abundance of food.

MATERIAL AND QUALITY OF EXECUTION OF SEALS DEPICTING BANQUET SCENES

The choice of precious or rare material selected for the production of banquet seals seems to have indicated the role and status of their owners. Studies of seals from the Ur Royal Tombs have shown that certain scenes tended to be rendered in specific materials (Zettler and Horne 1998: 76). For instance, combat cylinder seals were often carved in white materials, like shell or calcite, while a large number of glyptics with banquet repre-

sentations were rendered in lapis lazuli.

An analysis by Rathje (1977: 30) indicated that 80% of the seals with banquet scenes found in the Ur Royal Tombs were carved from lapis lazuli. In contrast, among the cylinders bearing other scenes no more than 45% were cut from any single material. According to Rathje, this may indicate that the banquet seals were distributed only among certain members of an institution at Ur, possibly a court. This supposition seems even more likely given the similarities in cylinder sizes (Rathje 1977: 30). The average length of a banquet seal is less variable than that of seals with other scenes. In the case of the Royal Tombs, the type of material from which the cylinders had been carved was correlated with other objects recovered from the same burials: 31 out of 35 burials with solid gold artifacts contained at least one lapis lazuli seal (Rathje 1977: 26–27).

Lapis lazuli was used most frequently for the production of banquet seals in ED period Ur. As much as 64% of the seals published by Woolley (1934) and Legrain (1936) were made of lapis (sample of 56 pieces).¹⁹ However, a broader analysis failed to confirm the supposition that lapis was a typical material used for glyptics with banquet scenes [*Table 2*].²⁰ Out of the Early Dynastic banquet seals deriving from sites other than Ur (67 of the analyzed banquet seals) only 3% were

18 Presentation scenes were official marks of identity, vassalage, and obedience to a ruler or god representing the realm of elite members of the Akkadian, Ur III, and Babylonian societies (Michalowski 1994: 37). By portraying themselves with the ruler, the officials established their authority within the state (Winter 1986: 253).

19 Woolley (1934) identified 14 kinds of materials used for the manufacture of cylinder seals at Ur.

20 The analysis is based on the sample of seals from the following collections and catalogues: von der Osten 1934; 1936; Porada 1948; Frankfort and Jacobsen 1955; Buchanan 1966; Lambert 1966; 1979; Collon 1982; Kist et al. 2003.

made of lapis, and 8% of contest seals were made of this stone. Apart from lapis lazuli, also limestone, marble, calcite, and shell were frequently used in the ED period to produce cylinders depicting banquets.

Table 2. “Banquet” and “contest” seals from the Early Dynastic and Akkadian periods grouped according to material (Ur and other sites)

	Other sites				Ur ^a				Total								
Period	ED		Akkadian		ED		Akkadian		ED				Akkadian				
Type of scene	C ^b	B ^b	C	B	C	B	C	B	C	C (in %)	B	B (in %)	C	C (in %)	B	B (in %)	Total
Shell	48	11	35	10	46	7	9	0	94	25%	18	15%	44	22%	10	26%	166
Lapis lazuli	19	2	7	1	40	36	16	5	59	16%	38	31%	23	11%	6	15%	126
Marble	46	15	9	0	5	0	3	0	51	14%	15	12%	12	6%	0	0%	78
Limestone	41	15	13	0	4	3	0	0	45	12%	18	15%	13	6%	0	0%	76
Serpentine	14	1	42	12	0	0	0	0	14	4%	1	1%	42	21%	12	31%	69
Steatite	2	1	1	0	19	1	22	1	21	6%	2	2%	23	11%	1	3%	47
Calcite	16	5	0	0	8	5	3	0	24	6%	10	8%	3	1%	0	0%	37
White stone	9	7	3	1	0	0	0	0	9	2%	7	6%	3	1%	1	3%	20
Black stone	8	1	4	3	0	0	0	0	8	2%	1	1%	4	2%	3	8%	16
Gray stone	6	1	6	0	0	1	0	0	6	2%	2	2%	6	3%	0	0%	14
Jadeite	0	0	0	0	5	0	4	1	5	1%	0	0%	4	2%	1	3%	10
Crystal	1	0	3	0	4	1	0	0	5	1%	1	1%	3	1%	0	0%	9
Green stone	2	0	2	1	1	0	3	0	3	1%	0	0%	5	2%	1	3%	9
Alabaster	5	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	1%	4	3%	0	0%	0	0%	9
Hematite	0	0	1	1	2	0	1	0	2	1%	0	0%	2	1%	1	3%	5
Diorite	1	0	3	1	0	0	0	0	1	0%	0	0%	3	1%	1	3%	5
Other	16	4	10	2	3	2	1	0	19	5%	6	5%	11	5%	2	5%	38
Total	233	67	139	32	137	56	62	7	371	100%	123	100%	201	100%	39	100%	734

^a Cylinders from Ur published in Legrain 1951 and Woolley 1934.
^b B – banquet scene, C – contest scene (the “contest” here includes animals fighting, humans fighting with animals, humans hunting, human-animal hybrids, or mythological beasts fighting).

Notably, in the Akkadian period, limestone, calcite, and marble were no longer used for this purpose. Instead, serpentine (31%) and shell (26%) became the most popular materials for rendering the banquet scene. In the ED period, serpentine was rarely used for the carving of glyptics (only 4% of contest and 1% of banquet scenes in the analyzed sample). Lapis remained popular at Ur during the Akkadian period. Five out of seven Akkadian seals with banquet scenes were made of lapis. Despite this small sample, the comparison with the proportion of Akkadian lapis contest seals from Ur (16 out of 62 cylinders) shows that banquets continued to be rendered in lapis relatively frequently also in the

Akkadian period.²¹ Of the Akkadian banquet seals from sites other than Ur (32 of the banquet seals studied), only 3% were made of lapis (the same proportion as in the ED period), while, in comparison, 5% of the contest seals were made of this stone.

Along with the material of manufacture, the quality of execution of cylinder seals can shed some light on the meaning of motifs carved on them. This quality may be reflected in differences between particular types of seals, e.g. banquet and contest scenes. It can be hypothesized that better workshops and more capable craftsmen were employed by the court or elite members. Moreover, these seal-cutters might have worked exclusively for specific officials. Even though the majority of banquet seals found in the Early Dynastic Royal Tombs of Ur are finely made, there are also examples of mediocre carving from various other sites and collections. Collon (2005: 27) observed that later Early Dynastic banquet seals are executed in a more “cursory and linear” style compared to contemporary contest scenes.²²

Significantly, seals from Early Dynastic and Akkadian burials at Ur were usually found near the right shoulder of the deceased, alongside stick pins used to fasten a robe (Rathje 1977: 26), and sometimes associated with brace-

lets or suspended from a belt (Collon 2001: 19). Their visibility suggests that, despite their small size, the seals also served as markers of a specific status or possibly an official position (see Rathje 1977: 25–26).

Members of the high officialdom or royal family may have possessed specially and finely carved seals. For example, Zettler (1977: 36) argued that the seals bearing the “RN, PN, arad, arád-zu/za” formula, associated with the highest Akkadian officials, were of outstanding quality. Similarly, south Mesopotamian rulers in the ED period used exceptional seals depicting contest scenes.²³ In any case, the quality of execution cannot serve as a reliable indicator for interpreting the meaning of banquet scenes, since both contest and banquet seals exist in equally high-quality examples.²⁴

Likewise, comparing the materials used in the execution of banquet and contest cylinders from the ED and Akkadian periods offers limited insight into the meaning of the scenes. Instead, it appears we are rather dealing with local traditions governing the use of a certain material, similar to regional differences in (1) the number of registers, (2) the choice of “secondary” themes, and (3) the specific subtype of the banquet scene employed. Therefore, the choice of materials used for carving cylinders was

21 The fact that lapis remained a popular material for carving cylinders with the banquet scene at Ur during the Akkadian period, while elsewhere this stone was almost out of use, may testify to the significance of lapis at this particular site.

22 Nevertheless, applying modern aesthetic categories to evaluate the quality of Mesopotamian seals may be misleading. The style might have reflected regional workshops, functional requirements or evolving techniques rather than hierarchical distinctions.

23 See, for example, Moorey 1977; Pittman 2013.

24 See, for example, the royal seals from Urkesh (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1995–1996).

likely influenced by a) the availability of particular stones at a given site and b) local carving traditions.²⁵

ACCOMPANYING “SECONDARY” THEMES

In many instances, representations of the banquet scene are accompanied by another motif carved on the same object (e.g. seal, stone plaque). Can these different types of “secondary” scenes help in interpreting the banquet itself?

An analysis of the accompanying scenes from the ED period indicates the most frequent motifs were as follows:²⁶ fighting lions with or without a hero (15.6%), the Anzu bird with or without a hero (12.9%), herds of animals (12.7%), and dance and music (9.5%) (Gu. Selz 1983: Table 2). The last category shows that the accompanying theme may be closely related to the banquet, depicting musicians, dancers, domestic animals, food bearers, and vessels. Sometimes the coexisting scenes feature military deeds, hunts, inaugurations of buildings, or other important events. On these grounds, Pinnock (1994: 25) has suggested that secondary motifs are usually connected with kingship.

According to Romano (2015: 290, 293), the occurrence of secondary motifs is not accidental, and a relationship can often be observed between the place of an object’s discovery and its accompanying scene. The themes chosen for seal manu-

facture tended to reflect local, rather than widely shared, traditions. For example, the motif of Anzu with lions was one of the most common symbols of Lagash, likely associated with Ningirsu (Evans 2012: 100–101). Similarly, other symbols may be interpreted as typical of specific cities or regions, as in the Khabur river basin, where banquet scenes are frequently linked with contest or war scenes.

Among the seals found in the Royal Tombs at Ur, there is a group showing mixed “banquet-contest” representations rendered in two friezes. The grave goods differ significantly between burials containing seals with both scene types and those with only the banquet theme (Rathje 1977: 30). The analysis of seals from the Royal Tombs led both Romano and Rathje to a similar conclusion: the motif may be linked to the institution or household to which the deceased belonged (Rathje 1977; Romano 2015: 293–294). The evidence suggests that secondary scenes accompanying banquet representations were sometimes used to (1) indicate the profession or social function of a seal owner, although this supposition requires further supporting evidence. Secondary motifs, especially popular in the ED period, were also used to (2) distinguish one seal from another. Inscriptions identifying the seal owners are rare at that time, but they become a rule in later periods.

25 The fact that lapis remained a popular material for carving banquet cylinders at Akkadian Ur, while this stone was hardly used elsewhere, demonstrates the importance of lapis as a trade commodity at Ur.

26 Sometimes it is difficult to unambiguously distinguish the so-called “banquet scene” from other types of scenes, especially when secondary motifs appear on a seal. When a banquet scene appears alongside another motif (e.g. the contest scene) on the same object, such examples are still classified as “banquet scenes.”

Secondary scenes accompanying the banquet motif on seals, inlaid objects, or stone plaques were often, in fact, the “principal” themes. This is because the symbolic message of the banquet motif was fairly general, typically denoting the status and position of an individual within the social hierarchy. The Peace side of the Standard of Ur, portraying a victorious, prosperous ruler seated and holding a tumbler, illustrates this point well. In that example, the primary message is to present the victorious ruler, his wealth, and the prosperity of his state. When the banquet motif is accompanied by a military scene (e.g. Amiet 1980: Pl. 92, No. 1213), it may be assumed that the main idea is to depict a victorious figure, be it the seal’s owner or its sponsor. Another example is the stone plaque of Ur-Nanshe found at Girsu, which shows the ruler in a similar seated position. However, in the upper, main part of the plaque, he is depicted carrying a basket on his head. Here, the key message is to present the ruler as a great builder.²⁷ In such instances, the seated position, the cup, and the depiction of some spectacular deed (3) are all intended to highlight the greatness of the individual.

The choice of themes may have been influenced by hierarchical superiors or patrons who controlled both seal-cutters and the distribution of seals.²⁸ This suggests that (4) the use of the banquet scene could have varied depending on the vision of a local sponsor of the artist seal-cutter. The seals of Queen Uqnitum

and those of her servants from Urkesh, dated to the Akkadian period, provide highly personalized examples (Kelly-Buccellati 2010: 191–192). As Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati has noted, it is very likely that these seals were commissioned, and their designs influenced—or even invented—by the queen herself. (5) The intention behind such designs could have been very specific, such as conveying a message of legitimization or the succession of an heir to the throne.

Following this reasoning, we may argue that there was no fixed structure for the composition of banquet seals with accompanying scenes; rather, the imagery varied across Mesopotamia depending on time and location.

CONTEXT IN WHICH OBJECTS REPRESENTING BANQUETS WERE EXCAVATED

More than 400 cylinder seals were excavated by Leonard Woolley in the Royal Cemetery at Ur. Of these, approximately 30 seals with recognizable designs were found in burials identified as royal. With few exceptions, the cylinders were engraved with only two themes: the combat/contest and the banquet (Zettler and Horne 1998: 75–76).

An analysis conducted by Cohen (2005) has shown that some of the burials in the Royal Cemetery, including the Royal Tombs, were specifically outfitted for feasting [e.g. *Fig. 31*], while others appear to have been equipped only with vessels suitable for everyday consumption. Graves with “feasting” ware usually

27 Similar scenes are depicted in glyptics, for example Amiet 1961: Pl. 109, *Fig. 1444* (Kish) and Pl. 110, *Fig. 1463* (Ischali, Temple of Ishtar-Kititum).

28 This patronage can be related, for example, to the Akkadian seals of the servants of Uqnitum, Enmenanna, Tutanapshum, and Tuta-shar-libbish (see Kelly-Buccellati 2010: 191–192).

contained multiple bowls and naked pots — vessels used for individual consumption— though their quantity suggests provision for numerous guests. These burials also included pottery used for specialized food and drink preparation and consumption, such as sieves and basins. The presence of silver, gold, electrum, and stone vessels indicates the luxurious nature of these meals (Cohen 2005: 89).²⁹ Many of the vessels were found in direct relation to the bodies, even placed in their hands. Notably, the forms of the vessels found in the graves exactly match those depicted in the banquet scenes from the Royal Tombs.

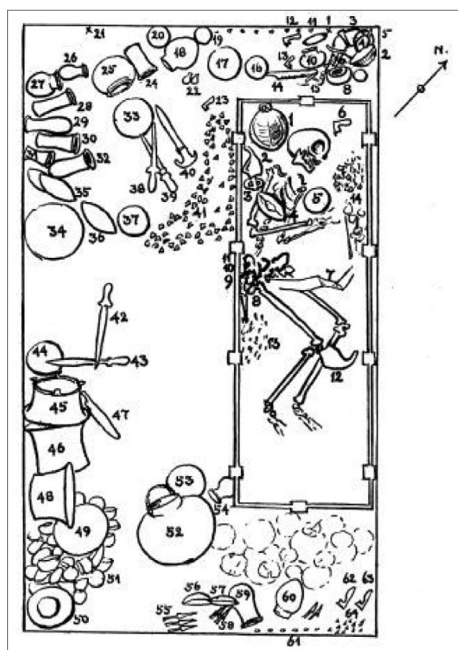


Fig. 3. Plan of PG/755 (grave of Meskalam-dug?) (Woolley 1934)

In some cases, the funerary ceremony included human and animal sacrifice.³⁰ The individuals buried in the same graves as the principal deceased in the Royal Tombs were likely attendants — people portrayed in banquet scenes as those who “stretch their hands toward the seated individuals” (Cohen 2005: 92). Each man and woman interred in these graves carried a small cup of stone, clay, or metal. Musicians with lyres, harps, cymbals, and sistra were found alongside other members of the court, including soldiers and male and female servants. One of the most elaborate objects is a magnificent lyre discovered against the northwest wall of the death pit of PG 789 (Woolley 1934). The banquet was undoubtedly a symbol of status —possibly even in the afterlife— if we assume that the vessels were meant for feasting beyond death. Members of the Ur elite, accompanied by their servants, may have wished to be represented and to continue to participate in this “banquet setting” or “convention” in the underworld.

Banquet scenes are also depicted in wall mosaic inlays from Mari, Telloh, and Kish [Fig. 4].³¹ The representations from the latter city were found in primary contexts in Early Dynastic Palace A and consist of inlaid, incised shell, stone, and mother-of-pearl. They were found in Room 61, the function of which is unknown, and in Room 35, which was probably an entranceway. The frieze from Room 35 ran along all four walls and depicts a few seated figures, a musician

29 For instance, graves PG/1407, PG/755, and PG/800.

30 Literary evidence for human sacrifice accompanying the funeral of a ruler is found in *The Death of Gilgamesh*.

31 See Cros 1910–1914: Pl. II, 1; Parrot 1969: Fig. 13; Moorey 1978: 58–61.

playing the cymbal, some soldiers, and a captive. The banquet scene accompanies a representation of a war victory. Cohen has compared this single-register frieze with the representation known from the Standard of Ur.³² An inscription bearing a ruler's name on one of the frieze fragments may indicate that the ruler wished to represent himself in a way that was easily intelligible to his subjects (Moorey 1978: 60).³³ The placement of the frieze in the palace, along with the inscription, suggests that the ruler intended to commemorate his military deeds and evoke a psychological impact on visiting dignitaries.

There are examples of Early Dynastic sculpture showing figures holding cups that resemble the “banqueters” shown in scenes on seals, plaques, and inlays. Standing figures—both male and female—with cups or, more precisely, solid-footed goblets, are attested only at the beginning of the ED period among

the earliest stratified examples of temple sculpture, and later disappear from the Early Dynastic temple sculpture corpus. Such standing sculptures are attested in the Tell Asmar sculpture hoard and in a fragment of a standing female figure from the Shara Temple at Tell Agrab (Evans 2012: 190). In the Asmar hoard, goblets are held by the largest male and female figures, as well as by two other male figures. Approximately 660 solid-footed goblets, resembling those held by the sculptures, were deposited in Room D 17:26 of Archaic Shrine III at Tell Asmar's Abu Temple.³⁴ These goblets were likely used to pour libations on the sanctuary altar (Evans 2012: 155). Some of the vessels from excavated Early Dynastic temples are richly and elaborately decorated—for example, a limestone cup with sculptured figures from the Shara Temple at Tell Agrab (Frankfort 1970/1996: 30).

Seated Early Dynastic sculptures have been found in temples, with numerous

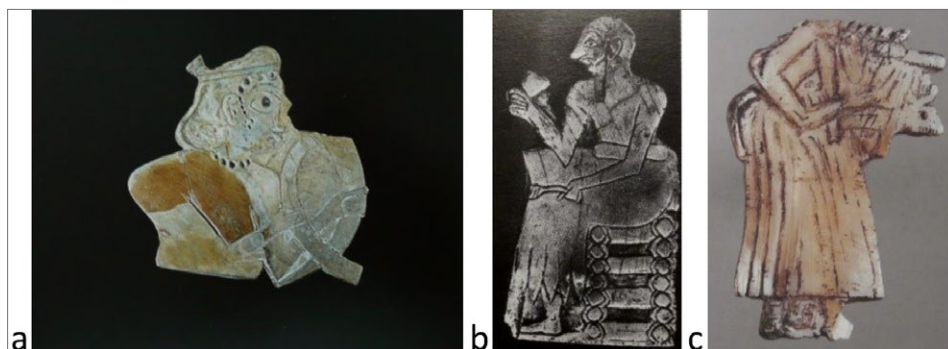


Fig. 4. Shell inlay of a female musician from Kish, Palace A, and shell inlays from Mari (a – Aruz and Wallenfels 2003: 91; b, c – Margueron 2004: Figs 283, 294)

³² See also Cohen 2005: 143.

³³ A similar inlay fragment from Telloh bore the name of Ur-Nanshe.

³⁴ Solid-footed goblets, mass-produced conical vessels found in large quantities in the mid-ED I, are attested in Archaic Shrine III at Tell Asmar, Inana Temple XI at Nippur, and Sin Temple V and VI at Khafajah (see Delougaz 1952: 56–57; Wilson 1986: 63).

examples excavated at Mari (Evans 2012: 189). a similar seated position was also characteristic of statues of deities placed in temples (Roux 2006: 184).³⁵ The seated position of sculpted figures can be understood as a visual indicator of status, corresponding to the high rank of the donor. For example, seated inscribed figures of Ebih-il from Mari and another sculpture of Seskina from the Inana Temple at Nippur both bear the title *nu-banda*, denoting the donor's important rank (Evans 2012: 185–186, Figs 66–67). According to Evans, the high-ranking title of *nu-banda* was expressed “through the prerogative of sitting”.³⁶

In addition to examples of sculptural art, stone plaques depicting banquet scenes also appear in temples. Although none has been found in their original position, it is possible that these plaques were once attached to temple walls or doors us-

ing pegs.³⁷ They often show seated figures—possibly gods, rulers, or dignitaries—holding cups in their hands.³⁸ The banquet scene is frequently accompanied by other types of scenes, such as temple construction, processions, chariots, or boat scenes.

Besides sculpture, vessels, and plaques, a variety of other objects—such as mace heads, seals, animal figures, and items made of perishable materials—were also dedicated to temples. Inscriptions on these objects indicate that donors most commonly petitioned the resident deity for a healthy, long, and prosperous life for themselves, their family members, or their rulers (Evans 2012: 116, 184).³⁹

The locations in which artifacts representing banquet scenes or related with banquets were found indicate that these objects were intentionally placed in prestigious contexts, such as temples (statues, stone plaques, tumblers),⁴⁰ palaces (wall

35 An important group of sculptures in a “banqueting” position—albeit much later than the period under discussion—comes from Syrian and Palestinian sites, particularly Ebla, Hazor, and Tell Halaf, and dates to the Middle Bronze I-II period. The Eblaic statues were mainly found at the city gates and the porch in front of the great temple in the Lower City North, probably dedicated to Hadad (Pinnock 1994: 23). The monuments from Hazor were found in temples, while those from Tell Halaf came from burials. Most of the statues represented seated male figures holding a cup in one hand (see, for example, Matthiae 1989: 189–194, Pls 126–128). Significantly, such types of statues—depicting kings, high priests, or other officials—were placed in public urban places. Their placement and distinguishing features, such as the seated position and the cup held in one hand, emphasized the notability and power of the prominent figures they represented.

36 However, the association between the seated position and high status is not always consistent. See, for example, the Early Dynastic stone statue of a standing male figure dedicated by Lu-gal-hursag, *saĝĝa* official of Enlil, found in the Inana Temple (level VIIB) at Nippur (Evans 2012: 194, Fig. 69).

37 See also Nadali 2024 for a discussion and interpretation of stone plaques representing banquets found in temples.

38 For instance, the text from the votive plaque from Umma indicates that it was dedicated to the goddess Nin-ezen-la by a state-archive scribe Nigdupae (Boese 1971: 208–209, Pls XXXVI, UM 1).

39 For instance, about 30 inscribed statues and three inscribed stone vessels were found at Mari in the Ishtar Temple and the temples of Ishtar and Ninni-zaza. In general, the majority of inscribed stone vessels were dedicated to goddesses by female donors (Evans 2012: 184, 190).

40 Tumblers deposited by donors were found in temple storerooms, such as Archaic Shrine III at Abu Temple at Tell Asmar.

inlays), or royal graves (seals, pieces of furniture, musical instruments, cups/tumblers). This may indicate that affluent people connected to public institutions sponsored objects representing or associated with the banquet scene.

IDENTIFICATION OF “BANQUETERS” AND OWNERS OF OBJECTS DEPICTING BANQUET SCENES

To better understand the meaning of the banquet, it is essential to address the question of the “individualization” of Early Dynastic and Akkadian seals.⁴¹ Once it becomes possible to determine that a specific motif was carved for an

individual whose profession and institutional affiliation are known, the symbolic meaning of the banquet, contest, presentation, or other themes can be more accurately interpreted.⁴²

As Collon has noted, “it is difficult to establish the identity of the participants (of the banquet scene)” (Kist et al. 2003: 5, introductory note). When there is more than one banqueter, they may face each other or all turn in the same direction. They can be of the same or different gender [Tables 3 and 4]. Servants or attendants are often present, sometimes bringing objects to the seated figures.

Table 3. Gender of banqueters and attendants in banquet scenes from the Early Dynastic period* (Pollock 2003: 22)

	Drinker	Attendant
Woman	152 (27%)	69 (20%)
Woman (?)	77 (14%)	13 (4%)
Man	229 (41%)	231 (67%)
Man (?)	99 (18%)	31 (9%)
TOTAL	557 (100%)	344 (100%)

* The analysis is based on images of banquet scenes from Gu. Selz 1983.

Table 4. Gender of seated banqueters in scenes with more than one participant* (Pollock 2003: 22).

Men only	Women only	Men and women
58	26	118
29%	13%	58%

* Includes the scenes in which the gender of two or more banqueters can be ascertained.

Feasting figures represented on Early Dynastic seals were generally depicted without horns or other animal attrib-

utes. Horns, as a symbol of divinity, became especially popular in the Akkadian period. Therefore, earlier rep-

41 In this section, mainly seals have been analyzed. However, “individualization” refers to several categories of “ownership” of seals or other objects: who was depicted in the scene, who sponsored the object, who was the owner (or beneficiary) of the object, and who was its final user.

42 Franke (1977) has pointed out that the “attempt to formulate relationships between the owners of cylinder seals and the scenes depicted on them has proved to be one of the most unrewarding aspects of the study of cylinder seals. If apparent correlations are found on one seal, they are often contradicted by other examples.”

representations of divine figures might have lacked such markers, and deities are identifiable on only a few late Early Dynastic seals (Kist et al. 2003: 5; GeJ. Selz 2004: 192–193).

Sometimes, the owners of objects depicting a banquet scene are identified by inscriptions. Early Dynastic stone plaques were sponsored not only by rulers but also by private donors such as merchants, scribes, and stonecutters. Plaques dedicated by these professionals are usually divided into three horizontal registers, with a banquet scene appearing in the upper frieze. The horned headdresses worn by the seated banqueters represented in the Early Dynastic stone plaque from Nippur — dedicated by Ur-Enlil, a merchant — signify their divine status (Evans 2012: 100, Fig. 36). This indicates that none of the seated banqueters is the donor. Inscriptions on stone plaques sometimes functioned as labels. On one plaque from the Inana Temple, for example, a dedication from Lumma, the chief stonecutter, appears in the middle register (Evans 2012: 205 and Fig. 39). The proximity of a male figure to this inscription suggests that the donor of the plaque has been represented outside the banquet scene occupying the top and bottom registers.

Temple sculpture is a phenomenon that developed in the ED period and continued into the Akkadian period.⁴³ In contrast to standing male and female figures holding cups, seated Early Dynastic temple sculptures predominantly represent women (Evans 2012: 189). Only a few male banqueting statues are known. According to Evans (2012: 198), statues of seated female figures holding a cup and a piece of vegetation may reflect the special status of women who assumed cultic duties on behalf of others.⁴⁴

Inscribed Early Dynastic temple sculpture was principally a male prerogative, with only a handful of inscribed statues of female donors known (Evans 2012: 180–191).⁴⁵ Around half of the inscribed statues from excavated contexts come from Mari. These were dedicated by various officials — overseers, scribes, singers, cup-bearers, inspectors — as well as other donors. For example, two inscribed statues dedicated to the Temple of Ninni-zaza at Mari by Urnanshe, the exalted singer/musician, include one depicting a figure holding an instrument (Evans 2012: Fig. 65). However, statues dedicated by rulers are also attested, such as the one by Pabilgagi, a ruler of Umma (Frankfort 1939b: Pl. 115E).

43 The earliest corpus of Early Dynastic temple sculpture is the ED 1 Asmar hoard (Evans 2012: 119).

44 According to Evans (2012: 198), the use of seated statues by female temple donors may correspond to the banquet iconography found on Early Dynastic cylinder seals. Banquet seals from Early Dynastic private graves of Ur show a ratio of 9:5 in favor of women, based on the accompanying equipment (Moorey 1977: 36). A similar pattern appears in the dedication of inscribed stone vessels, the majority of which were offered by female donors to goddesses (Evans 2012: 190). In contrast, male donors dedicated most of the inscribed stone mace heads from the Shara Temple at Tell Agrab.

45 There are approximately 550 surviving examples of Early Dynastic temple sculpture, 90 of which are inscribed (Evans 2012: 117).

For a long time, it has been commonly assumed that seal motifs functioned as markers of highly personalized identification in ancient Mesopotamia.⁴⁶ However, starting from at least the ED period, it seems more plausible that certain offices—particularly those within institutional administrative hierarchies—used seals with specific identifying designs that functioned more as “signets of office” than as personal markers.⁴⁷ Each seal was carved primarily with reference to the office or function of the individual, and only secondarily could it be personalized. In such cases, seals are inscribed with the owner’s name and sometimes depict objects likely associated with their professional or personal life.⁴⁸

Banquet seals from Ur are particularly important for studying hierarchy in the ED period, as they were deposited in graves over a relatively short span of time and exhibit a clear correlation between (1) the material used (lapis lazuli), (2) their distribution (limited to the Royal Tombs and adjacent graves), and (3) the type of carved motif. The banquet motif appears in a much narrower distribution compared to other

seal subjects, suggesting that this theme may have been used by a single institution (Rathje 1977: 30).⁴⁹

Based on evidence from the Royal Tombs of Ur, Peter R.S. Moorey (1977) observed that banquet seals, typically made of lapis lazuli, tend to be more often associated with women involved in court activities linked to “primarily female” institutions.⁵⁰ Contest scenes, usually carved in shell or calcite, were likely connected with male members of the household, possibly involved in military activities.⁵¹ However, such associations between motifs and gender are not absolute. The lapis lazuli cylinder seal U. 8981, found in loose soil at Ur, depicts a double-register contest scene and bears the inscription: “Nin-bànda, nin, dam Mes-an-né-pà-da”. In this context, it is striking that the seal of Queen Ninbanda features a combat scene [Fig. 5].

A detailed analysis of seals from the Royal Cemetery at Ur was conducted by William Rathje (1977), who found significant correlations between the materials of grave goods and the motifs depicted in glyptic art. Graves containing three or more gold objects featured banquet scenes

46 See, for example, Collon 2001; 2005.

47 See also Rathje 1977.

48 For example, seal No. U. 12374 from the Royal Tombs of Ur—found near the lyre player (?)—is described elsewhere in this paper.

49 According to Costello (2018), the case of the Royal Tombs of Ur demonstrates a narrow range of variability in seal imagery, specifically limited to the contest and banquet motifs. This may indicate a more specific control over the messages being communicated during the ED III period, in contrast to the ED I, when a greater variety of themes is attested (Costello 2018). This restricted thematic range at a single site (Ur) supports the idea that the banquet scene did not depict a variety of individual circumstances, but rather conveyed a symbolic message.

50 According to Stein (2020b: 183), the frequent discovery of banquet seals and sealings in temples or related administrative buildings may indicate that some of these seals belonged to temple staff.

51 See also Rathje 1977: 26.

in over 80% of cases. Cylinders depicting contest scenes were typically associated with burials furnished with functional items such as containers, weapons, and tools, whereas banquet scenes were more often linked with a variety of ornaments (Rathje 1977: 29). Banquet cylinders also appeared more frequently with objects made of precious materials—gold, silver, or composite media—while contest seals tended to accompany less valuable copper items. A third group of seals from Ur, engraved with both banquet and contest scenes in two friezes, was found in graves more frequently equipped with body ornaments, larger and more varied containers, tools, weapons, and gold items (Rathje 1977: 30).

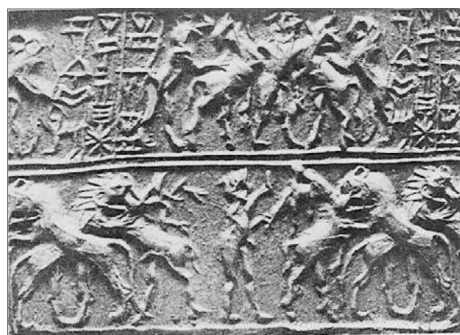


Fig. 5. Lapis lazuli cylinder impression, found at Ur in loose soil, inscribed “Nin-bànda, nin, dam Mes-an-né-pà-da” (Woolley 1934: Pl. 207, No. 216, U. 8981)

Considering this, Rathje (1977: 30) suggested that mixed banquet-contest seals possibly belonged to functionaries involved in court and public economic affairs, while seals depicting only banquet scenes may have been reserved for the internal court. In addition, Pollock (2003) proposed that, based on evidence from the Royal Tombs of Ur, women were more likely than men to use seals featuring banquet motifs. This could indicate a correlation between the gender of the figures depicted and the gender of the seal’s owner or sponsor. The frequent co-occurrence of contest-only seals with functional objects may mark a lower tier of officialdom within the administrative hierarchy. These seals might have belonged to military officers, as suggested by the fact that weapons and tools accompany ED III period Ur burials containing contest seals approximately twice as frequently as graves with banquet cylinders (Rathje 1977).

However, from at least the ED period, south Mesopotamian rulers and senior members of the royal family used seals depicting contest scenes⁵²—a tradition that survived until the first millennium BCE. Akkadian royal family members probably also employed contest motifs on their cylinder seals. Similarly, officials whose seal inscriptions link them to the

52 See, for example, Moorey 1977: 56; Pittman 2013. Early Dynastic royal contest scenes have been excavated at Ur, including the seal of “Mes-kalam-dug, lugal” from the Royal Tombs of Ur (Woolley 1934: Pl. 196, No. 55, U. 11751) or the seal of “Mes-an-ni-pad-da, lugal kiš^{ki} dam-nu-gig” found in the “Seal Impression Strata” at Ur (Legrain 1951: Pl. 30, No. 518). Later rulers also possessed seals with the “presentation” motif. One example is a sealing from Tello, dating to the latter part of Gudea’s reign, which depicts a clean-shaven man accompanied by a female deity. In the scene, Gudea is led before Enki by his personal god, Ningishzida. The inscription reads: “Gudea, *ensi* of Lagash” (see also Zettler 1977). However, there are also examples of Mesopotamian royal banquet seals from the periods discussed: Queen Pu-abī from the Royal Cemetery of Ur; King Ishqi-Mari and a royal wife of Mari; and Queen Uqnitum of Urkesh (Beyer 2007; Suter 2018: 143–144).

Akkadian royal family often adopted this motif. One such seal found at Tell Mozan (ancient Urkesh) was owned by Tar'am-Agade, a daughter of Naram-Sin, most probably either the queen and wife of a local *endan* or a priestess acting alongside an Akkadian administrator (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 2002: 15).⁵³ Both her seal and that of her husband were found together in a cache within the excavated Urkesh palace, and both depict contest scenes (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 2002: Figs 2, 3).

According to Stein (2021: 451), we may assume that seal owners—including rulers, officials, priestesses, or priests—often appear as one of the figures depicted in the engraved scenes. However, these individuals are not necessarily rendered in a seated position; they may instead be portrayed in other roles, such as female attendants (e.g. a priestess on the plaque



Fig. 6. Lapis lazuli seal found at Ur in PG/800, bearing the inscription "Pu-abi nin" – "Pu-abi, the queen" (Woolley 1934: Pl. 193, No. 16, U. 10939)

from Inana Temple VIII at Nippur, Gu. Selz 1983: No. 75) or as professional performers (e.g. Woolley 1934: U. 12374, Pl. 71; PG. 1236).

Irene J. Winter (1987: 74) has suggested that inscriptions on seals depicting the presentation scene, dating from the Ur III period, were intentional references to the seated ruler shown in the image. She cites examples of sealings portraying a seated Ibbi-Su'en, who is also named in the accompanying inscriptions. In seals from the early part of his reign, the ruler appears beardless, while in later examples he is fully bearded. Accordingly, the interceding figures in these scenes were likely intended to represent the officials named in the legends.

In some cases, the iconography of seals found in the Royal Tombs of Ur appears to have been specially tailored to suit the owner or user: for instance, women had seals depicting a seated woman, and certain figures were identified through accompanying cuneiform inscriptions.⁵⁴ The lapis lazuli banquet seal (U. 10939) bearing the inscription "Pu-abi nin" (Pu-abi, the queen/lady) was found lying against the shoulder of a corpse in the main chamber of PG/800 [Fig. 6].

Apart from seal U. 10939, possibly portraying the queen herself, another remarkable seal with the banquet scene from the Ur Royal Tomb complex is seal number U. 12374. It was found in

⁵³ The seal belonging to her brother Ukin-Ulmash also bore a contest scene.

⁵⁴ So far, not many Early Dynastic or Akkadian seals clearly linking a profession of a seal owner with an inscription have been excavated in south Mesopotamia. The excavations at Urkesh have yielded Akkadian seals of individuals connected with the household of Queen Uqnitum, where the professions are named and portrayed at once. These are two seals belonging to the nurse Zamena and one belonging to the cook, whose name is unknown (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1995–1996: 21–24).

PG 1237 beneath the body of individual No. 7, who was lying in the corner of the “Great Death Pit.” Near the corpse were a lyre made of gold, one of silver, and another of mixed materials. The individual was adorned with golden earrings, a gold pin, gold finger rings, hair wires, and two necklaces of gold and lapis lazuli. The seal buried with the individual depicts a double-register banquet scene

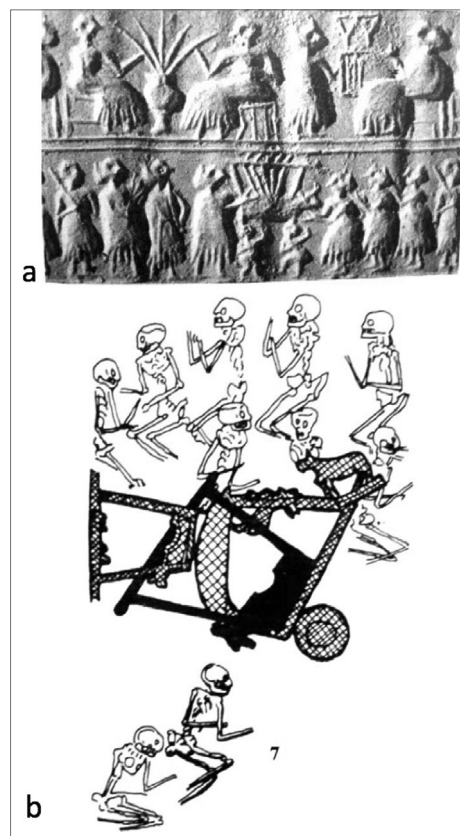


Fig. 7. a – seal No. U. 12374 belonging to body No. 7; b – the Great Death Pit and body No. 7 with nearby lyres (Woolley 1934: U. 12374, Pl. 71; PG. 1236)

and bears the inscription “Dumu-kisal” [Fig. 7] (Zettler and Horne 1998: 79). In the upper register, three seated banqueters are shown — two drinking through tubes and one raising her hand with a cup (?). The lower register presents a musical performance with dancers and musicians: two women to the left followed by a man with a staff and cymbals, while another woman plays a bull lyre. In front of them, a group of three additional women, probably also with cymbals, is shown. It seems very probable that the seal was specially carved for female No. 7 and portrayed her during a performance.

During the Akkadian period, high-ranking administrative officials used seals with scenes specially tailored to them, while individuals holding lower offices probably had more individualized or personalized imagery carved on their seals. This distinction is supported mainly by the analysis conducted by Zettler (1977), which shows that the so-called “Sargonic, royal type seals” bore only two types of scenes, whereas other seals — of the “PN, PN plus title/profession” type — display a greater variety of motifs. It should be noted, however, that a few exceptions to this pattern do exist.⁵⁵

Beyond the Akkadian period, several examples from the Ur III period also demonstrate that seals imagery and inscriptions were carefully tailored to fit the rank and position of their owners within the state hierarchy.⁵⁶ When an Ur III official held a position in close bureaucratic proximity to the ruler, the seal often included a “royal name” for-

⁵⁵ See Gibson and Biggs 1987.

⁵⁶ See, for instance, examples described in Zettler 1977; Winter 1986; 1987; Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1995–1996; 2002; Pittman 2013.

mula and depicted the seated king (Gelb 1977: 120; Franke 1977: 61; Winter 1987: 76–77).⁵⁷ Conversely, when the official was inferior to the king in the administrative hierarchy, the seal referenced an immediate superior, such as a local *ensi* or *šagina* (Winter 1987: 77). Winter (1987: 90) has further suggested that seals depicting seated gods may have belonged to individuals of lower status, such as minor state officials, members of temple administration, or merchants.⁵⁸

These later examples may correspond with the earlier banquet motif, in which seated figures—though not necessarily rulers—could be understood as hierarchical superiors of the owner of the seal or plaque, representing individuals currently in power.⁵⁹ This supposition would align, to some extent, with the later use of metal coins or seals bearing representations of reigning kings or administrators. In contrast to the seated superiors, the seal owners of inferior status were represented standing. Only the highest-ranking officials, as owners or sponsors of seals or plaques, were depicted seated, sometimes alongside other seated members of the elite. The role of the banquet scene was to legitimize the owner of a seal and to visually convey his or her hierarchical position in relation to those in power. At the same time, superiors who commissioned or used objects featuring banquet representations aimed to reinforce their own exalted and symbolic status.

If seal motifs were not chosen randomly during the Neo-Sumerian and Akkadian periods, this suggests that Early Dynastic seal imagery was also adjusted to the rank, profession, or gender of the seal's owner. Royal Akkadian seals, Ur III cylinders of high officials, and the assemblage from the Royal Tombs of Ur indicate that seals of the highest-ranking officials were intentionally selected—or possibly presented—to them. Based on these observations, we may conclude that in the 3rd millennium BCE, there was at times a clear correlation between the scenes depicted on cylinder seals and the professions or socioeconomic functions of their owners. Only secondarily was the choice of motifs random or based on personal preference (see also Rathje 1977: 26). Of course, as discussed elsewhere in this paper, regional and local differences also affected the distribution of motif variants and the materials used for seal production.

Despite the few presented examples of banquet seals from Ur carved especially for their owners—depicting figures engaged in their everyday roles and duties—it remains difficult to assess the extent to which the Early Dynastic and Akkadian seals were individualized across greater Mesopotamia.⁶⁰ Little is known about the owners of banquet seals, and it is still impossible to determine definitively if the banquet motif was associated with a specific office or profession. This

57 Seals of Aakalla, *ensi* of Umma, and the one of Naša, *kurušda* of Drehem may be such examples.

58 The available evidence suggests that there were no restrictions on seal ownership in the Ur III period. Inscriptions on presentation cylinders indicate that their users were not only immediate subordinates of a king but could have also been officials of minor rank, see Steinkeller 1977: 41–53.

59 For more on hierarchy in banquet scenes see Costello 2018.

60 See also Gibson and Biggs 1977.

is due to the lack of sufficiently large and relevant glyptic corpora with inscriptions from Mesopotamia, aside from the seals found in the Royal Tombs of Ur that were excavated in appropriate archaeological contexts. However, the Akkadian corpus from Urkesh includes seals of individuals connected with the queen and king through their seal inscriptions. These seals feature motifs that align them with the professions mentioned in their legends (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1995–1996: 7).

SYMBOLIC ELEMENTS OF THE BANQUET SCENE

According to Ziffer (2005), the context of the banquet was a perfect occasion for projecting an exalted image of a ruler, the wealth of his country, and his might. Rulers shared this abundance to show their power and to create closer ties of dependency and “friendship” with their subjects. The representation of a feasting ruler may have been symbolically intended to express his or her wellbeing.

As William Hallo (1996: 191–193) has demonstrated, the pictogram for *GAL* has the appearance of a cup.⁶¹ Thanks to ancient representations and texts, we may understand the symbolism of the cup and the seated position as means of expressing the place of an individual—though not necessarily a ruler—within the social

hierarchy.⁶² The use of this drinking vessel was a symbol of vassalage and sovereignty. Cups were given to administrative functionaries as emblems of their authority and legitimization (Michalowski 1994: 37; Nylander 1999: 78). However, as Winter (1986) has pointed out, deities portrayed in presentation scenes never hold cups, and therefore, the vessel alone does not denote the high status of a figure holding it.

A long history of representations of seated rulers, for instance the kings of Mari, demonstrates that in ancient Mesopotamia the act of sitting conveyed an unambiguous message of high status. The phrase *ina kussi ittašab*, “sitting upon the throne”, was used in Akkadian as a synonym for rule (Winter 1986: 255). In one of the Šulgi hymns, the king is described as sitting on the throne (Winter 1986: 255):

To hold high the head on the lofty dais
you are suited

To sit on the shining throne you are
suited

To a brilliant crown on your head you
are suited.

Gods in ancient Mesopotamia feasted like humans and were described in mythological texts as participants in banquets, fed and attended to by people. Rulers, royal family members, and officials wished to be represented in the same way. As a re-

61 According to Ziffer (2005: 138), the Sumerian word for king, *LUGAL*, can be translated not only as “the great man,” but also as “the man of the cup”.

62 The importance of the cup as a symbol is evident in certain cases of iconoclasm. One of the chronologically “late” examples comes from the end of the Neo-Assyrian period. When Median, Babylonian, and Elamite armies conquered Nineveh in 612 BCE, they likely damaged parts of bas-reliefs representing reviled figures, for example, Ashurbanipal’s nose and right hand holding a cup. The decision to destroy the cup as an emblem must have held particular significance for both the Assyrians and their enemies.

sult, a seated individual raising a cup denoted authority, and this image became a metaphor for exercising kingship (Ziffer 2005: 138) and dominant status (Winter 1992: 25; Felli 2001: 148). The depiction could also have been perceived as a symbol of a prosperous state and the wellbeing of its people. Considering representations on Early Dynastic and Akkadian banquet seals, we argue that the seated figures were high officials or elite members, while less “important” attendants are shown standing. This is a general rule in the later presentation theme, the successor to the banquet motif (Zajdowski 2013).

While describing his impressions from the netherworld in *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*, Enkidu recalls the fates of different individuals after death. For instance, those who had only two sons sit on a couple of bricks, eating bread in the netherworld. By contrast, the happy fathers of seven sons sit on a throne and listen to music as companions of the gods (Szarzyńska 2003: 72–80). Musicians and singers in the entourage of a royal figure

were viewed in Mesopotamia as symbols of high status (Kelly-Buccellati 2010: 186). Musicians could have been highly important individuals—for example, Lipushiaum, the granddaughter of Naram-Sin, is mentioned in an inscription on a plaque from Girsu as a lyre player for the god Sin (Frayne 1993: 159–160). Their performances are depicted, for instance, on the banquet seals of Queens Pu-abī and Uqnitum, discussed elsewhere in this paper.

In the Hurrian text *Song of Kumarbi*, Anu, the first among the gods, stands before Alalu, the king of heaven, and places the drinking cup in his hand (Popko 2005: 134). After nine years of Alalu’s rule, Anu vanquishes him and takes his seat upon the throne. When Anu comes to power, Kumarbi sinks at his feet, gives him food, and places the drinking cup in his hand. This passage illustrates the relationship between “banqueters” and “attendants,” or servants, who prepare and serve food and drink. Seated gods hold a superior status, emphasized by the act of being waited upon. Inferior gods serve them, offering food or drink. This act of vassalage and obedience is clearly depicted in glyptic and other artistic representations of banquets, where a servant presents a cup, food, or other objects to a seated figure. For the inferior deities, it is “normal” to serve their superiors. Through this service, they gain the goodwill and legitimization of the high-ranking gods.

Royal seals excavated at Mozan/Urkesh clearly express the idea of legitimization embodied in banquet scenes.⁶³ One example from the AK building at

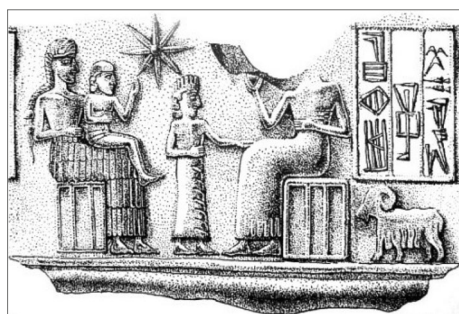


Fig. 8. Sealing of Uqnitum, royal consort of Urkesh. Akkadian period (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1995–1996: 10, Fig. 4b)

63 A combination of features characteristic of both the banquet and presentation scenes can be observed on seal impressions from Urkesh, especially those belonging to the queen (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1995–1996: Figs 4a, 4b, 6, 7; Zajdowski 2013: 5).

Urkesh bears an inscription identifying the owner of the seal: “Uqnitum, the wife of Tupkish (the king)” [Fig. 8]. Giorgio Buccellati and Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati (1995–1996: 16) point to the meaning of the message conveyed by this representation. First, the queen asserts her position at court as the king’s principal wife, shown seated opposite King Tupkish. Second, Uqnitum is the mother of the heir and crown prince, who touches his father’s lap. The legitimization here concerns the sovereign’s family — his children and his wife. The image on the cylinder seal, as a medium of communication, disseminated Uqnitum’s message both within and beyond the palace institution (Kelly-Buccellati 2010: 191–192).

During the ED and Akkadian periods, high officials would not have personally impressed their seals on stored goods. Several individuals were sometimes authorized to act as representatives of the person named on a seal (see Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1995–1996: 28). It is

possible that this multiple entitlement applied to offices responsible for certain commodities, rather than to specific individuals. The representatives entitled to use the seals of their superiors were not necessarily identified by name in the seal legends. This suggests that the seals legitimized them to act on behalf of the originating authority, rather than in their own name (see Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1995–1996: 28).⁶⁴

The banquet motif, widely used and popular in Mesopotamia in the ED and Akkadian periods, was eagerly adopted as a “template” by sponsors and seal-cutters. The composition of banquet scenes — with prominent seated officials — suggests that the intended message was to legitimize subordinates to act on behalf of their superiors. Subordinate functionaries required the authority of the depicted officials, while the high officials, in turn, sought to disseminate their exalted image or political message, as exemplified by the seals of Queen Uqnitum from Urkesh.

CONCLUSIONS

Numerous papers have attempted to interpret Mesopotamian banquet scenes. Some scholars have argued that the scene represents a single occasion or carries one specific meaning, while others suggest it refers to multiple events or contexts. However, it is doubtful whether the scene depicts any actual celebration or feast. In this paper, we have argued that the banquet theme should not be understood as a straightforward representation of a real occasion or event.

The presented evidence indicates significant regional variation in the use of specific banquet scene subtypes, particularly during the ED period. The motif was internally diverse and applied with considerable flexibility. It appears in a wide range of shifting contexts — depending on time and place within Greater Mesopotamia — often alongside other scene types, making it unlikely to depict any particular circumstance or occasion. For instance, if

64 For example, multiple seals from Urkesh are attributed to the same individuals: four (possibly six) to the king and eight to the queen (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1995–1996: 28).

the scene were intended to depict a funerary repast, it is unlikely that individuals would have used and worn cylinder seals bearing such imagery. Similarly, if the theme symbolized military victory, women would probably not be shown as seated “banqueters” nor would they likely have used this motif on their seals.

When we analyze Late Uruk period seals representing the so-called “priest-king,” the main figure is shown as a warrior, hunter, or someone connected with the temple or gods (Pittman 2013: 326). This may be analogous to the later banquet scene, which was likely not meant to represent any real event, but rather to position an official within a particular context — engaged in notable achievements (such as building, hunting, warfare, or travel), shown in relation to a hierarchical superior or deity, or depicted as leading a certain lifestyle marked by a sumptuous entourage of servants, dancers, musicians, and abundant food.

The banquet motif, depicted in glyptics, sculpture, and stone plaques, was used by individuals holding various offices, functions, and professions. For example, both the musician and the queen from Ur used seals bearing this theme. A similar pattern appears with the contest scene, which was employed by rulers and possibly also by warriors. Therefore, we may consider the banquet scene an iconographic “template.”

The 3rd millennium brought a gradual process of “standardization” in seal imagery, culminating in the Ur III period. In the ED period, the “banquet template” was, in some ways, comparable to the later

“standard contest” or presentation scenes, though it was more diverse and flexible than the Akkadian or Ur III glyptic repertoire. By analogy, neither the contest nor the presentation scenes represented a specific celebration. I would therefore argue that the term “banquet scene” is not appropriate (see also Stein 2020b: 177). The term is misleading, as it implies that the scene depicts an actual “banquet” — a real event — rather than a symbolic representation. To avoid such misinterpretation, it would be preferable to use a different term, for example the “seated scene.”

Assuming that the banquet theme functioned as a template or administrative matrix for representing dignified figures, the “secondary” scenes accompanying it may have conveyed additional — and at times more specific — messages. For example, on the plaque of Ur-Nanshe from Tello, the image of the ruler carrying a basket of bricks on his head seems to be the primary and more meaningful symbol of the “builder”, in contrast to the image of the seated ruler.

The evidence discussed in this paper suggests that we can distinguish two basic types of messages conveyed by banquet representations:

1. High social status — these scenes depict the owners or sponsors of the objects (sometimes shown with relatives and other seated elite members) possessing “higher” social status in a prestigious “banqueting” position.⁶⁵ They sought to disseminate an exalted image and a political message em-

65 For example, the lapis lazuli seal of Queen Pu-abī, seated inscribed figures of Ebih-il from Mari or Seskina from the Inana Temple at Nippur, both *nu-banda* officials (see Evans 2012: 185–186).

bodied in the banquet scene. In addition to the message “Look, I am powerful and affluent,” another idea was conveyed: “I participate in sumptuous banquets where I am waited on, while I sit and give orders.”⁶⁶

2. Place in the social hierarchy and legitimization — in this variant, the motif was used by professionals, subordinates, or servants of “lower” social status. The scene served as a backdrop highlighting banqueting dignitaries, deities, or hierarchical superiors of the seal owner, user, or sponsor of a stone plaque. If depicted and identifiable, the servants appear without cups, standing, and sometimes shown performing professional tasks.⁶⁷ The inclusion of these subordinates alongside prominent “banqueting” figures expressed their authority, legitimization, place in the social hierarchy, and sometimes their profession.⁶⁸ The representation—featuring important seated figures—served as a “template” or “convention” to legitimize and empower subordinates to act on behalf of their superiors. This is comparable to the presentation scene, which gradually replaced the banquet motif during the

Akkadian and Ur III periods. It presented the social status of an owner or user of the object in relation to a superior. In this context, the scene conveyed the following messages: “I am a member of a social hierarchy,” and/or: “Here are my superior(s) represented in the banquet scene.”

To support the hypothesis that banquet scenes in the ED and Akkadian periods were intended to express status, hierarchical position, and legitimization of the depicted figures, the following interrelated considerations have been presented in this paper:

- Composition. The eventual replacement of the banquet motif by the presentation scene during the later Akkadian and Ur III periods suggests a continuity in the messages conveyed by both motifs. These scenes communicated the high status of seated figures, the place of an official or professional in the social hierarchy, or the legitimization of a seal user (Zajdowski 2013). The banquet scene functioned as a visual “convention” for portraying dignitaries.
- Material and execution. The motif was often rendered on valuable materials (e.g., the Standard of Ur, lapis lazuli banquet seals from the ED period, compared

66 Sometimes, a more specific, individual message could have been embodied in the scene, as exemplified, for instance, by the seals of Queen Uqnitum.

67 For example, the seal of Dumu-kisal or the Early Dynastic stone plaque from Nippur dedicated by Ur-Enlil, a merchant (Evans 2012: 100, Fig. 36).

68 In some cases, owners or users of seals are impossible to identify; in such cases, the “banquet” template would have been used to authorize their transactions “on behalf of” the authorities represented by the motif. However, this hypothesis requires further research.

to shell contest seals from Ur, or wall mosaic inlays), suggesting the high status of the objects' owners or sponsors. The relatively consistent length of banquet seals from the Early Dynastic Royal Tombs of Ur, compared to the variability in seals depicting other scenes, suggests a more controlled production and distribution, at least at Ur. It means that in certain regions of Mesopotamia, the motif may have been reserved for use by specific public institutions. Nonetheless, the choice of material for banquet seals across Greater Mesopotamia appears to reflect local traditions.

- Secondary themes. Motifs accompanying the banquet scene primarily served to differentiate seals and their users. These secondary themes were often related to kingship and included motifs of warfare, hunting, or the inauguration of buildings. Such associations suggest that the banqueters were elite figures linked to such important events. Regional differences are observable both in the choice of “secondary” themes that accompanied the banquet motif and in the use of specific variants of the banquet scene.
- Context. Banquet scenes occurred in “prestigious,” institutional, public, or ritual contexts such as temples (as votive

plaques, sculpture, seals, tumblers, or inlays), royal palaces (as inlaid objects), and royal tombs (as inlaid objects, furniture, musical instruments, or seals). Grave goods accompanying the burials with banquet seals in the Royal Cemetery of Ur were often made of precious materials such as gold. This suggests that owners of objects with the banquet scene had high social status and intended to be commemorated and depicted as banqueters.⁶⁹ The contents of the Royal Tombs of Ur—including cups and other vessels associated with feasting, as well as sacrificed attendants—were important for the buried elite members also in the afterlife. Thus, the banquet scene may be interpreted as an iconographic “template” showing elite individuals in settings of everyday affluence: sitting, eating, drinking, listening to music, and being served.

- Identification of banqueters. Objects (seals, stone plaques, sculptures) representing banquet scenes were owned, used, and/or sponsored by individuals of different roles, genders, and professions, such as merchants, lyre players, rulers, and queens. This means that the use of this theme was not, in general, “reserved” for any particular and narrow group. However, the example of the mo-

69 Statues of “banqueting” figures were also located at the city gates at sites in Syria and Palestine dated to the MB 1-2 period.

tif's use within the Royal Tombs of Ur suggests that in some local contexts it could have been adopted by a more specific group or institution.

- Symbolism. The seated position, cup in hand, in the presence of

musicians and attending servants denoted prestige associated with the banquet scene. Early Dynastic rulers were frequently portrayed in such a position, which, after the ED period, becomes the prerogative of gods or kings.

Dr. Karol Zajdowski

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3868-5672>

University of Warsaw

Faculty of Political Science and International Studies; Faculty of Archaeology

karol.zajdowski@uw.edu.pl

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