An Etruscan Bucchero Chalice in the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology

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Fig. 1. Cylinder-impressed chalice, bucchero, late seventh–early sixth century BCE, from Tarquinia?, Italy, Diam. 15 cm, H. 14.5 cm. Marburg Collection, KM 2590.
Among the many artifacts in the collection of the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology at the University of Michigan that will appear in the museum’s new Upjohn Wing is an Etruscan bucchero chalice with a cylinder-impressed figural relief encircling its bowl (KM 2590: figs. 1 and 2). The bowl stands on a stem to a height of 14.3 cm, and its diameter is 15.0 cm at the rim. Numerous breaks in the bowl suggest that it was found in a fragmentary state, but nearly all the body sherds have survived, and the chalice bowl and upper part of the stem were subsequently restored. Both the lower half of the stem and the foot are modern reconstructions based on preserved examples.

The bowl of the chalice is incised below the lip with two horizontal lines. Below these, the relief scene showing seven figures (fig. 3) repeats itself four times in a continuous band, with figures II, III, and IV repeated a fifth time. From right to left, the scene begins with three standing figures moving toward a seated individual. The first two figures (I and II) are women, each of whom wears a long braid that falls down her back. Both women raise one arm toward the seated figure (IV), perhaps as a sign of greeting or veneration, while the opposite arm extends out in front of the torso. The first woman (I) holds nothing in her hands, but the second (II) holds a circular object that should be interpreted as a garland. A male figure (III) stands in front of them and strikes an identical pose. One arm is raised, and the other extends forward holding a bow. Another male figure (IV) seated in a high-backed chair faces them. He too raises one arm, and in the other hand he holds a spear. A long-necked bird sits beneath the chair. To the left of this group, a female figure (V), raising one arm and holding a garland in the other hand, faces another male figure (VI) seated on a folding stool.1 In his elevated left hand he holds a garland, and his right arm extends toward the female. Behind him, a standing male figure (VII), facing the same direction as the seated males, holds a spear with both hands. A third incised horizontal line beneath the relief frames the scene, and, below this line, regular carinations mark the ledge at the base of the bowl. The bowl and lower stem were wheel thrown separately and then joined.

The chalice type was one of the most popular and enduring vessel forms throughout the period of bucchero production (Brady 1977, 14). Near Eastern vessels possibly informed the shape: Ramage (1970, 25) states that imported Assyrian chalices

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1 Stools of this type have been recovered from Etruscan tombs. Giuseppe Sassatelli (1985, 252) mentions an ivory example excavated from the sepolcreto dei Giardini Margherita near Bologna and dating to the end of the sixth century BCE. Its exceptional craftsmanship and costly material lead Sassatelli to conclude that it symbolized a magisterial position once occupied by the deceased.
of the eighth and seventh centuries BCE served as the model. As an Etruscan type, the chalice shape changed little over time, but subtle variations have allowed archaeologists to establish the relative chronology of its development based on the morphology.

According to Van Ingen, the Kelsey Museum chalice dates from the late seventh to the early sixth centuries BCE.

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2 For an examination of Near Eastern influence on Etruscan manufacturing, see F.R. S. Ridgway 2001. Camporeale (2000, 413) writes that similar vessel forms indicate that local potters were familiar with models from the Near East, while Magness (2001, 83) sees the similarities as evidence that “some of the craftsmen who produced them were Near Eastern immigrants.”

3 See, for instance, Ramage 1970, 26 and Rasmussen 1979, 99–100, 190. The Kelsey chalice discussed here resembles most closely Ramage’s type 4C, which she calls “the commonest form of the chalice by far” (Ramage 1970, 26), and Rasmussen’s type 2e (Rasmussen 1979, 190).

4 See the catalogue of vases at the Kelsey Museum compiled by Van Ingen (1933). Hayes (1985, 95) dates a chalice with an identical relief
Bucchero pottery appeared in Etruria no later than the mid-seventh century BCE. The earliest examples, classified as *bucchero sottile*, are characterized by their thin walls, refined fabric, and variety of shapes, and this type of bucchero continued to be produced until about the turn of the century. True *bucchero sottile*, however, had a short lifespan, perhaps only thirty years, when it began to be replaced by a thicker-walled type known as *bucchero pesante*.

During a transitional period vessel walls gradually became thicker, the surfaces duller, and the decoration more plastic. Brady (1977, 12) attributes this development to a change in function: originally, bucchero may have been used primarily as luxury funerary ware as a substitute for more expensive metalwork. Later, bucchero was mass-produced as tableware, which, in turn, led to standardized production and often also a decline in quality.

The figural scene on the Kelsey Museum’s chalice opens up avenues for further thinking about Etruscan ritual, religious belief, and socioeconomic status. D. Caccioli (1984, 57) argues that the scene represents the “deceased in [the] underworld,” a presentation of the recently dead individual to the deities who rule the afterlife. Further investigation, however, suggests that this interpretation is oversimplified. By taking account of the variety of contexts where such chalices were found, and comparing the Kelsey Museum’s example to other works that are similarly decorated, I will suggest another, more complex and multivalent reading of the figural scene.

The provenance of the Kelsey Museum chalice remains uncertain. Tarquinia is conjectured, but this assumption may be based only on the likelihood that it was found in a funerary

Context and Meaning


I do agree that the bucchero vessels functioned as tableware at symposia. The claim that bucchero was a cheap substitution for metal ware, however, can be refuted by examining the rich finds in many tombs, such as the Regolini-Galossi tomb, where metal vessels were found with bucchero ones. Furthermore, it is questionable to assume that originally these metal vessels and early fine bucchero pieces were meant solely as grave goods.

Caccioli (1984) discusses this theory at length and identifies figures II and V as a dead woman who is presented to the king and queen of the underworld, Dionysus (Fufluns) (IV) and Persephone (Pher-siphnai) (VI).
context. The necropolis at Tarquinia includes many of the most famous and opulent Etruscan tombs; thus, the site presents a logical possibility. The greatest majority of Etruscan artifacts are, in fact, found in tomb assemblages. Of the more than 30,000 Greek pots that survive today, for example, most were found in Etruscan tombs, where they served as funerary offerings. The proportions are so imbalanced that Robin Osborne (2001, 280) writes that “finding a body of material from mainland Greece comparable to the body of material from Etruscan tombs is not easy. . . . Etruscan tomb material has to be compared with material found in non-funerary contexts in Athens.” Likewise, the ratio of locally produced Etruscan wares such as bucchero found in funerary contexts relative to those found in other contexts is so much greater that, without this source, questions concerning Etruscan ritual, religious belief, economy, and trade, among others, would be nearly impossible to address.

On the one hand, Etruscan funerary contexts are vital sources of information. On the other hand, the recovery of so much material from tombs can cause us to assume that a given artifact must have funerary significance alone. In Etruria a “tyranny of the tomb” arises, where most Etruscan artifacts, because they were found in a funerary context, assume funerary significance. A relief impressed on a chalice from an Etruscan tomb then must represent a scene of the underworld. As tempting as this conclusion may be, I argue that this approach is simplistic. Such a reading limits the significance of an object solely to the context in which it was likely found. To say that its significance rests with its function as a burial object ignores the fact that it also was used and experienced in the living world prior to its burial, serving as an emblem of status for the living in much the same way it later evoked the status of the deceased. One must account for both contexts. A dual approach is suggested by Larissa Bonfante (1986, 269), who writes: “Each family tried to have as fine a set [of banqueting vessels] as possible, which was handed down as an heirloom or placed as a gift in the grave of its owner. Those who could not afford expensive imported pitchers and mixing bowls made do with local imitations or native, local ware, but bucchero cups were used by everyone.” Bucchero vessels pervaded Etruscan society as functional items in symposia of the living as well as the dead and as symbols both of inclusion and of status within this culture.

Objects, like people, have unique biographies. Their life histories evolve and change as they change hands, are viewed by different actors, and assume different functions, and so too do the meanings assigned to them. John Robb (1988, 337–338) writes that “[m]eaning does not reside in artifacts or people but in the moment of interaction between the two; symbols’ meanings do not exist outside of the moment in
which people apprehend them and assemble them into meaningful formations.” In relation to the Kelsey chalice, it is important to note that its life history did not end with its burial. Its “death” was not the result so much as a hibernation until it was recovered and re-experienced by the modern world. Its biography continues today as an exhibit in a museum, where its meaning has been assessed through its prior use as a probable funerary object. We have, however, only two stages of its earlier life history: its “birth,” or manufacture (seventh/sixth centuries BCE), and its final deposition. Without a known provenance for the vessel, we have no archaeological evidence at our disposal to tell us when or where the latter phase occurred and, consequently, how long the object functioned and generated meaning in Etruscan civilization. Thus, our reading of the relief scene as a depiction of the underworld stems from an incomplete understanding of the full life cycle of the vessel. It symbolizes a scene of death for the modern audience because the only likely context available to us is a funerary one.

Furthermore, Etruscan burials are characterized by their attempts to recreate a link to the living world. Often the spaces inhabited by the dead appear to represent the houses of the living. This can be seen in the early Villanovan hut urns that resemble domestic spaces. Etruscan tombs regularly reference similar spaces. According to Ridgway and Ridgway (1994, 8), “[t]he concept that is basic to the whole phenomenon . . . is fundamentally alien to the Greek mentality: the idea that the tomb should reproduce its owner’s house in as much detail as possible.”8 The tombs, according to this interpretation, do not merely embody a general domestic plan but instead become more personalized by reconstructing the layout of the deceased’s house, creating a space that would be immediately familiar to this person during his life in the underworld.

Similarly, scenes painted on tomb walls and the objects deposited with the dead relate to activities of the living. Banquets, for example, are a common motif found in tomb paintings. Many of the funerary objects also allude to eating and drinking, and this is the context in which the Kelsey Museum chalice should be placed. Its function as a symbol of status at symposia predominates in a culture where “most important at all times was the set of pitchers, mixing bowls, cups, and mugs for the drinking parties the aristocrats held in conjunction with their dinner parties” (Bonfante 1986, 269). Its later (hypothetical) deposition as a funerary object extends its value as a status

8 See also n. 31, where they write: “It is equally clear that the chamber tombs, extremely rich both in their architecture and in the objects deposed to accompany the dead, belong only to the aristocratic families, and imitate their houses, with concomitant typological evolution.”
object for the deceased in the underworld. As an offering in a tomb the chalice evinces the Etruscan perception of a tangible connection between the world of the living and the world of the dead, and as it functioned in the living world so too would it have fulfilled the same function for the deceased.

Representations of similar scenes of seated and standing figures appear in various media in Etruscan art. We find it on other bucchero vessels. In her study of human figures on impressed friezes, Scalia (1968, 366) has identified seventeen vessels, including the Kelsey chalice, that were decorated with this same cylinder. Of these, three are amphorae, eleven are chalices, and two are broccae (pitchers). We can add two more: a chalice in the Royal Ontario Museum (inv. 920x92.59) and a chalice fragment at Bryn Mawr (inv. P-1582) (Hayes 1985, 95). Not all the vessels have a provenance, but those that do help to shed light on production and workshops. One amphora was found in Castellucio La Foce; two chalices come from Orvieto; and four pieces, three chalices and one brocca, come from Chiusi. Although the numbers are small for this specific cylinder, that the majority were found either within Chiusi or within Chiusine territory is suggestive of a workshop in Chiusi. Furthermore, if we begin to include other pots with similar scenes, the numbers increase dramatically, and the same pattern emerges: “out of 302 collected vases, at least 142 therefore originate from Chiusi or from the territory of Chiusine expansion” (Scalia 1968, 360).

Bonfante also recognizes the importance of Chiusi in her study of situlae found in northern Italy and Europe. These small vessels are characterized by multiple registers of figural scenes that Bonfante sees as influenced by Etruscan art. One common motif on the situlae is highly reminiscent of the Kelsey chalice relief. The middle register of the Vace situla (fig. 4), which dates to the late sixth century BCE, depicts four seated males attended to by standing male and female figures. Instead of holding garlands or bows, the standing figures hold dining objects such as ladles and a mixing bowl. The different iconography does change the meaning of the event being depicted, but stylistically we have a highly characteristic Etruscan scene. According to Bonfante (1981, 17), “the primary Etruscan contribution to situla art is in the figures that populate the registers.” She also sees Chiusi as the primary source of this influence. “Chiusi seems to be the crossroads of commerce between northern and southern Etruria, and the center from which Etruscan influence radiated northward” (Bonfante 1981, 17). The artistic output of this Etruscan city, specifically of Chiusi, is highly characterized by these motifs.

9 “Su 302 vasi raccolti almeno 142 quindi provengono da Chiusi o dal territorio di espansione chiusina.”
miniature relief friezes, is so great that we see not only its direct
effect in the neighboring region but also its indirect impact on
the art in regions farther north.

Another object that should be compared to the relief
frieze on the Kelsey chalice is a terracotta relief excavated in
Murlo, which dates to the first quarter of the sixth century
BCE. From right to left, a male, facing right, sits on a folding
stool, holding a curved *littus* in his right hand and raising his
left palm upward. Behind him and facing the same direction, a
figure stands holding a spear in his right hand and a sword by
the blade in his left. Next, a female seated on a rounded-back
throne, reminiscent of the seventh-century throne found in
tomb 89 in Verucchio, holds a stalk in her right hand and part
of her clothing in her left. Attending to her is another female,
who stands and holds a fan in her left hand and some sort
of vessel in her right. Behind her, three figures, a male in the
center and two figures of indeterminate sex flanking him, sit
on folding stools. The latter two both hold branches that have
been identified as pomegranates (Gantz 1971, 6). The central
seated male holds a double axe in his right hand. Like the seat-
ed figures in front of them, their left palms are raised upward.
Finally, another figure of indeterminate sex stands behind them
holding a staff that terminates in two branches. The left palm,
too, is held upward.

Again, this frieze should also be compared to what was
being produced in Chiusi in this period. As Bonfante ob-
served (1981, 2), Murlo’s proximity to Chiusi puts it in direct
cultural and artistic contact with “the artistic sphere of Chiusi,”
and the similarities in style underscore again how substantial
the production was in the workshops here.

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10 See Scalia 1968, 19; Sinos 1994, 103; and Haynes 2000, 125, who
all link the Murlo friezes to the artistic output at Chiusi.
Interpretations of the Scene

Interpretations of the friezes depicting seated and standing individuals vary greatly. The various interpretations, however, do not necessarily mean that some readings are more correct than others; rather, they suggest the possibility of a multiplicity of meaning. The form and style of the frieze decorations could be adopted and adapted to create new meaning for different contexts.

Bonfante (1981, 45), for example, reads the seated and standing figures on situla art as real activities of daily life. “They are never mythological. The situlae depict local customs, fashions, furnishings, all the signs of a rich, aristocratic style of life.” The relief of the middle register of the Vace situla depicts a banquet, she argues (Bonfante 1981, 21). That the figures are seated corresponds to seventh-century dining practices in Etruria. The Montescudaio urn and the Tomb of the Five Chairs in Cerveteri, both dating to the seventh century BCE, portray seated diners. It is only during the sixth century that we begin to see Etruscans reclining at banquets (Haynes 2000, 122; Bonfante 1981, 22). This change from sitting to reclining appears much later in situla art: “In contrast to Etruria, in the situla art, it is only very late—well into the 5th century—that we finally get a picture of a banqueter reclining on a couch, instead of sitting” (Bonfante 1981, 22). Furthermore, the iconography of the Vace situla relief supports the idea that this is a banquet. The attendants standing in front of the seated men all hold objects related to banqueting. The figure at the far right holds a small bowl in the left hand while lifting a ladle to the seated man’s mouth as if to feed him. The second attendant holds what appears to be a situla and also lifts a ladle toward another seated man, who lifts a vessel to his mouth as if to consume the contents. The third attendant stands in front of another seated man, holding a bowl and raising the other arm toward him.

The Murlo terracotta relief exhibits stylistic traits similar to analogous examples in other media, but the interpretations are much more varied. At issue is the identification of the figures, human or divine. Gantz (1971, 8–23) and Sinos (1994, 103) take up the latter case. Gantz, through a study of the iconography of each, argues that they all represent deities. The first seated figure is Zeus. Although he holds a litius instead of a thunderbolt, Gantz (1971, 8) argues that this attribute is not unheard of in Etruscan iconography. Behind him is an attendant, but because he (or she) holds weapons he/she must be seen as an arms bearer for Zeus. This would be Athena (Gantz

11 Haynes (2000, 122) and Bonfante (1981, 22) identify the banqueting frieze plaque from Murlo as the first example in Etruria of reclining at a banquet, “in the style of Chiusi” (Bonfante 1981, 22). For a thorough treatment of Etruscan dining represented in Etruscan art, see Tuck 1994.
Next, the female seated closest to Zeus on the elaborate throne would have to be Hera (Gantz 1971, 11). Gantz is unable to identify the female behind Hera but posits that it is a deity whose name is unknown to us, or that “the artist of the Murlo frieze has simply not bothered to make the identity of this figure specific” (Gantz 1971, 13). The three seated figures are Persephone and Demeter holding pomegranates, which are a sign of rebirth. They flank Dionysus, who holds a double axe, an attribute that appears with him in numerous vase paintings (Gantz 1971, 13–19). Finally, the last figure holds what appears to be a caduceus and should be read as an Etruscan equivalent to Hermes (Gantz 1971, 23). Sinos, whose study deals mainly with the procession frieze from Murlo, mentions this frieze and agrees that they are divine figures (Sinos 1994, 103).

Others prefer to see human figures and aristocratic themes in the friezes. Cristofani (1975, 12) argues that all four reliefs from Murlo read together create a complete narrative about the wealth and power of the dynasty controlling the complex and that the seated figures of the frieze described above are the same aristocrats that appear also in the chariot procession frieze from Murlo. Bonfante (1981, 44) agrees with his position “in stressing the importance of the couple and the aristocratic family unit. . . . There is nothing exactly like them in situla art, but they belonged to this same aristocratic world.” The aristocracy was the key political component in Archaic Etruscan society, but to interpret this scene as an articulation of one family’s authority requires the acceptance as fact of two basic assumptions. First, this reading presupposes that the Murlo complex functioned as a center for political rather than religious activity. The nature of this site, however, is still a subject of debate. Second, it maintains that the function of the complex inspired the subject matter of art when, in fact, the relation between the function of the complex and the significance of the frieze may not be so tangible.

Bonfante (1981, 44) highlights this problem: “[i]n any case it is clearly impossible to draw a hard and fast line, in the art of this period, between religious, symbolic, and ‘secular’ art. The Archaic period, even in Etruria, saw little or no distinction between sacred and non-sacred, divine and profane, genre and symbolic.” While it may be possible to identify figures in the frieze scene or even make a strong case for what it represents, it is problematic to distinguish sacred versus secular functions based on these interpretations. A “sacred” scene does not necessarily predispose

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12 Sinos (1994, 103) criticizes his conclusion, saying that where there are two aristocrats in the chariot procession frieze, the identity of five seated figures must be accounted for. Furthermore, the attributes of the seated figures are not shared by the figures in the procession frieze.
Reading Meaning in the Kelsey Chalice

the medium on which the scene is displayed to a sacred function, and vice versa. In the case of the Kelsey Museum chalice, for example, what was represented on the frieze does not necessarily signify the function of the cup. A sacred theme does not preclude a secular context.

The various readings of such similar scenes reveal the difficulty of achieving a single interpretation. Since there is a multiplicity of meaning in similar depictions, it follows that no one interpretation can be applied to all examples. Similar discrepancies mark the various interpretations of the cylinder-impressed friezes, such as the one on the Kelsey Museum chalice. As in the Murlo frieze, the question remains as to whether humans or deities are represented. Camporeale (2000, 416) asserts that they represent an elite class and that they “show scenes of gift-bearing to enthroned dignitaries.” Others argue that they are divine. Walters (1912, 232) explains scenes of the type shown on the Kelsey chalice as a gathering of worshipping deities. The three standing figures approaching the seated male are possibly Artemis, Leto, and Apollo. Logically, the gods would be approaching Zeus, whom Walters identifies as the seated male. In the next scene, however, he inexplicably alludes to the standing female, seated male, and the standing male behind him as mortals, calling them men and woman. Scalia (1968, 361, n. 22) also cites a chalice whose similar relief has been described as processions and oblations to a seated goddess. She, however, makes no claim of her own concerning their identities.

In attempting to go beyond the mere identification of the figures and toward a fuller understanding of the scene, one must caution against limiting the function of the piece based on the interpretation. To say, for example, that the relief scene on the chalice represents the presentation of the deceased to the gods of the underworld works under the assumption that the chalice functioned only for the purposes of immediate burial with the deceased. The evidence, however, suggests that these vessels had a far wider function. As has been noted, Chiusi was the site of mass productions of bucchero ware. The cylinder-impressed friezes represent a quick technique for decoration suitable for mass production. It is difficult to believe that the vessels were made and sold directly for the grave and that their functional applications for dining and drinking were ignored. If they were used in banquets, furthermore, then a scene portraying the soul of an individual in the underworld would be untimely at best (and uncomfortably prophetic).

The iconography itself makes it difficult to determine whether the figures are human or divine actors. The garland,

13 Quoted from Levi (1927, 483): “processioni e offerte a una dea seduta.”
for example, which three figures hold (the second, fifth, and sixth), can be symbolic of something otherworldly. In Tomb 5591 at Tarquinia, garlands inexplicably hang over an outdoor scene of dancing (fig. 5). They also functioned as physical objects in Etruscan society. In a painting in the Tomb of the Old Man (fig. 6), a woman, reclining with her husband on a banqueting couch, offers him a garland. Although the painting appears in a funerary context, one can assume, as does Frederik Poulsen, that it represents Etruscan custom.14 The meaning of

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Fig. 5. The Tomb of Hunting and Fishing, Tarquinia. Photo: author.

Fig. 6. Back wall of the Tomb of the Old Man, Tarquinia. Photo: after Poulsen 1922, fig. 30.

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14 Poulsen (1922, 37) remarks on verses from the Greek poet Dromon: “[a]s soon as we had eaten, the slave girls removed the tables; then we seized again the wreaths of violets and bound our brows with garlands,” writing that “[t]he Etruscans seem to have
the bird underneath the high-backed chair is also ambiguous. Birds often appear with deities. An Etruscan intaglio shows Zeus (fig. 7), clearly identified by his thunderbolt and an eagle at his feet. The top register of an Etruscan mirror (fig. 8) displays a congregation of deities, identified by their names inscribed above them. Beneath the figure to the right is a long-necked bird. One needs only to return to the painting from the Tomb of the Old Man (fig. 6), however, to see that birds are also found in association with humans. The meaning of the bow, held by the third figure from the right, is perhaps less ambiguous: it seems out of place as an attribute of a suppliant and is unexpected for a worshipper (Sinos 1994, 115, n. 23). In the center of a terracotta relief from Velletri (fig. 9) a male figure holding a bow can be compared to the one on the Kelsey chalice. The bow suggests to Sinos (1994, 115, n. 23) that we are not dealing with mortals in the Velletri relief: “even the Velletri seated figures frieze, although it depicts only seated men, seems better understood as a divine gathering, for otherwise there is followed the Greek rules minutely, but like the Egyptians they let the free-born women partake of the festivity of the symposium itself.”
no explanation of the figure with the bow and arrow.” Even this conclusion is open to challenge as modern views of appropriateness color our expectations of what should and should not appear in Etruscan art.

Other factors support the conclusion that the frieze represents a gathering of deities. Interpreting the frieze as a representation of the elite ideology of the Etruscan aristocracy does not explain how non-aristocrats viewed it. As bucchero production increased, such vessels became available to a wider range of people, presumably from a more diverse socioeconomic background. Camporeale (2000, 416) claims that there was “a more ‘democratic’ use of this kind of vessel.” He suggests that members of the new rising middle class who would have used the vessels would also have attempted to adopt the mores of their social superiors. I argue that scenes representing deities would be more accessible to all classes. In support of my contention, I would also note that there are examples of cylinder-impressed reliefs on bucchero vessels on which deities are unquestionably represented. The relief on an unprovenanced amphora (fig. 10) includes a winged figure who holds two animals (Scalia 1968, 379). This is Potnia Theron, “Mistress
An amphora and chalice, found in Castellucio La Foce and Sarteano, respectively, were impressed with a cylinder relief (fig. 11) that shows another winged deity (Scalia 1968, 378). What is interesting about this scene are the two figures standing to the right, who face each other and appear to be engaged in conversation, oblivious to the seated figure to the left. If these were subordinates paying homage to a seated elite, their behavior surely does not demonstrate it.

A sacred meaning to these friezes does not mean that they could not be used in “secular” banquets. They were. The vessels, like the banquet itself, brought a certain amount of honor to their owner. They could have been prized possessions of the owner in life, which accompanied him or her to the grave. The honor accompanies the deceased, and the vessels themselves help him or her participate in the banquets of the afterlife.

