



HERACLES TO ALEXANDER THE GREAT

Treasures from the Royal Capital of Macedon,
a Hellenic Kingdom in the Age of Democracy

A collaboration between

the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

and the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Tourism,
17th Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities

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HERACLES TO ALEXANDER THE GREAT:
Treasures from the Royal Capital of Macedon,
A Hellenic Kingdom in the Age of Democracy

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Back cover illustration: A celestial or solar symbol
became the emblem of Macedonian royal power
Frontispiece: Back of the marble throne and eternal
seat of the Queen Mother Eurydice

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12 The royal banquet: a capital institution

Angeliki Kottaridi



Fig. 185 Cup with nail-headed handles and high foot (Cat. no. 461)

The banquet (*symposion*) was an indispensable component of every public or private feast or festival and of every convivial assembly.¹ As a rule, the banquet followed the communal meal, and was for the Greeks, from the time of Homer until the end of antiquity, the essence of social life, irrespective of socio-political developments and differences. At once an institution and an obligation, participation in the banquet was, together with war, hunting and politics, a vital element of a man's social identity. Indeed, this is the reason why in Dorian societies the gift that accompanied the rites of passage from adolescence to manhood was a wine cup.

A central subject of life, the banquet also left its mark on death: together with strictly personal paraphernalia, weapons, jewellery and the *unguentaria* (aromatic-oil containers) necessary for funerary rites, the wine cup was included as part of the essential equipment of the 'thirsty' dead on their journey of no return, often with a jug or a pitcher; in exceptional circumstances, a full set of banquet vessels was placed in the tomb (fig. 185).

While those initiated into mystic cults expected eternal life beyond death, the banquet – the most common entertainment in life on earth – became the ultimate promise of the delights of posthumous existence. Free of cares and troubles, the followers of Bacchus and Orpheus, initiates in the secret path to salvation, were not lost in the darkness of Hades but continued to live happily in the eternal banquet of the Blessed, in the jubilant light of the Elysian Fields. And it is not accidental that the central figure of the Bacchic and the Orphic mysteries, the dying and the reborn god whose fate presaged that of his followers, was Dionysus – the god who gave men the gift of wine, the god of intoxication and of ecstasy.

These beliefs, combined with Platonic instruction, were to acquire fervent followers in fourth-century BC Macedonia, where the king and his family as well as his noble companions (*hetairoi*) became initiates of Bacchus and had

expectations of the eternal bliss of heroes. The heroised dead were very often accompanied in the tomb by all the necessary tableware, which, in addition to the banquet vessels, some more precious than others, even included the compulsory couch. As a result, the royal necropolis of Aegae constitutes an everlasting source of information on the Macedonian banquet that complements, in a very eloquent way, the scant textual evidence.

Amyntas I (540s–498 BC) claimed to the Persian legates of Darius that, according to the Macedonian custom, women of the family did not sit down at the banquets of men (a story given to us by Herodotus). However, the presence in the tombs of the queens of objects associated with the procedure of sacrifice and the ensuing meal, and of the banquet overall – iron spits, pitchers, cups, bowls, jugs, *amphoras*, couches, and so forth – indicate that, in special circumstances of festive rites and celebrations, these women must have graced banquets with their presence just like the Homeric Queens Helen and Arete. And if this practice was the case with the queen-priestesses of the archaic period, there is no reason to suppose that it would not hold true for wives, mothers and sisters of kings, such as Eurydice, Olympias and Thessalonice. The Macedonian queens of the Hellenistic *oecoumene*, with paramount among them Cleopatra the Great, are known not only to have attended banquets, but also frequently to have hosted them, sometimes with fateful historical consequences.

However, apart from ‘royal exceptions’, the banquet was for the Macedonians, as indeed for all the Greeks, an entirely male affair and in fact, in order to attend them as equals a Macedonian had to have slain a boar; that is, he had to have completed successfully the basic initiatory test in the rite of passage from adolescence to manhood.

Being the most extroverted activity of public and private life, the banquet was the best arena for the conspicuous display of social status, wealth and power. At the same time the banquet as a group activity, frequently repeated, exercised great influence on the formation of the tangible reality that is characterised as material culture. The royal palace, the areas where priests gathered, the best rooms of the houses, the courtyards, the gardens and groves became the banquet space, to which the most valuable and luxurious furniture and vessels of every household were destined.

Homer often describes the preparation for a banquet: the heroes take their bath with water which is heated in a bronze cauldron; they are rubbed with aromatic oils and they put on clean clothes. They then sit down together to delight in the pleasures of food and drink. The feast is accompanied by music: a bard sings of the adventures and feats of men and gods, while the diners discourse.

In the time of the epics, from the tenth to the seventh centuries BC, the banquets of the Macedonians were rather simple. The vessels are clay, often of local handmade manufacture and without any decoration – small *amphoras* and *hydrias* for the transportation of wine and water (fig. 186), the characteristic jugs with the raised spout (cut-away neck jugs) (fig. 187), used for serving, large and sometimes massive cups, bowls with their distinct button-



Fig. 186 Clay *hydria* for the transportation of wine and water (Cat. no. 381)



Fig. 187 Jug with cut-away neck (Cat. no. 457)



Fig. 188. Bowls with nail-headed handles (Cat. nos. 428, 436, 455)



Fig. 189. An early *krater* alluding to Bronze Age prototypes (Cat. no. 463)



Fig. 190. Protogeometric bowl (Cat. no. 431)

shaped or nail-headed handles and the favourite cup of Dionysus and of the Macedonians, the *kantharos* in all its variants (figs. 188, 191, 193). There are also cups with long handles for ladling the wine and water, which resemble their wooden prototypes and bring to mind similar vessels used diachronically by transhumant pastoralists. The ceramic repertoire also includes clay soup-bowls and basins (fig. 190).

In the transition from the second to the first millennium BC, large *kraters* are also used, in which wine was mixed with water and which recall their Mycenaean prototypes (fig. 189). There are also a few local pots decorated with simple matt-painted geometric patterns. In the course of time, the local matt-painted pottery gives way to the wheel-made, mostly imported, pottery. Typical examples of this new pottery are the *skyphoi* and the *amphoriskoi* decorated with the extremely popular pattern of concentric circles, which introduce to the Macedonians the fashion of the geometric period.

In the aristocratic societies of the archaic period, the banquet, which had developed into an arena of critical, philosophical as well as political ferment that would lead to unprecedented changes for the world, acquired its 'classic' form (fig. 198): when the evening meal is over, the diners wash and perfume themselves, put on a wreath, and recline, usually in pairs, on couches, in order to enjoy wine, which is always diluted with water in the proportions ordered by the master of the banquet (*symposiarch*), so as to control the time and degree of inebriation.

In the seventh century BC the Temenids introduced new trends to Aegae with regard to banqueting accoutrements. Next to the traditional cut-away jugs and the *kantharoi* (deep cups with impressive handles), large and small black-figure column *kraters* (wine-mixing bowls) (fig. 192), *kotylai* and *skyphoi*

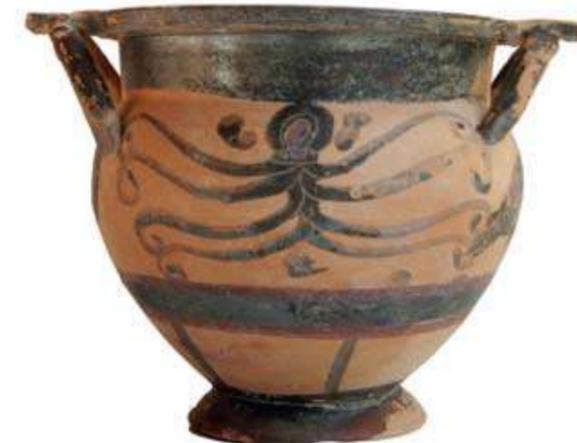


Fig. 192. Black-figure column *krater* with a representation of an octopus (Cat. no. 503)



Fig. 191. *Kantharos* (bowl/cup)(Cat. no. 450)



Fig. 193 *Kantharos* (bowl/cup)
(Cat. no. 438)



Fig. 194 Clay Attic cups from the burial of a royal lady in the Queens' cluster (Cat. nos. 196–97)



Fig. 195 Trefoil-mouth jug
(*oinochoe*) (Cat. no. 493)



Fig. 196 Front and back view of a red-figure *pelike*, a type of vessel used as a container for liquids (Cat. no. 528)

(simple bowls with or without handles), small and large *kylikes* (cups with shallow body, horizontal handles and high or low feet) from Corinth (fig. 195), the eastern part of Ionia, the Aegean islands, and the workshops of Athens (fig. 194) and the settlers in the Thermaic Gulf, now appear. The degree of penetration of the products of the commercial centres into the marketplace (*agora*) of Aegae fluctuates following the general historical developments that dictate also the trends of fashion (fig. 196). Yet, beside imported banquet vessels, there are always local imitations, as well as local creations in typical grey colour such as the elegant mixing bowls (*dinoi*) with coil-shaped handles (fig. 204), which apparently imitate metal prototypes. Furthermore, bronze vessels – cauldrons, *hydrias*, jugs, basins, and various dishes – constitute in the archaic period the basic component of these valuable household goods. Metal and clay vessels, products of local workshops, are characterised by their geometric simplicity and the functional clarity of their form as well as by the non-existent or limited decoration – trends which constitute a continuing feature of Macedonian art until the late classical period.

In the democratic cities, excessive extravagance aimed at personal promotion was considered dangerously deviant. This applied principally to banquets given in the homes of private citizens as well as of office holders who had to



Fig. 197 (left) Two clay *calyxes* (cups) (Cat. nos. 540–41)
 Fig. 198 (right) Red-figure vase showing a banquet scene (Cat. no. 539)



Fig. 199 Silver *kylix* (drinking cup) from the tomb of Alexander IV (Cat. no. 480)

Fig. 200 Silver plate from the tomb of Alexander IV (Cat. no. 484)



Fig. 201 Silver lion foot from a vessel (Cat. no. 229)

be careful not to affront public feeling about equality, either with the luxury of their house or their household goods or with the abundance of drinks and delicacies. However, this practice did not apply to the kingdom of Macedon, where the luxury and the magnificence of the royal presence becomes a vital element of prestige for the state itself. And if in the democratic city the banquet was, along with the *agora*, the venue par excellence for fermenting and generating politics and ideology, the royal drinking party, the banquet of the Macedonian king, was elevated to the most important event not only of the social but also of the political life of the state.

The dynamic expansion and the great prosperity of Macedonia during the reign of Alexander I (498–454 BC) is manifested in the banquet sets: apart from the imported red-figure vases of excellent quality, silver *kylikes*, basins and plates (figs. 199–201) appear along with couches with bronze-covered legs. As suggested by the finds from the queens' cluster dating to the reign of Perdiccas II (454–413 BC), the household effects of the palace of Aegae included gold, ivory and amber couches that bring to mind the passage from Plato, the

comic poet, who speaks of well-dressed guests reclining on *couches* rich with *ivory* feet and dining on their *purple* cushions (according to Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists* 2.2.30). In the reign of Archelaos (413–399 BC) the guests of the king, who was the greatest patron of the arts in his time, were hosted in rooms decorated by the most accomplished and most highly paid painter of the day, Zeuxis, and enjoyed the presence of the cream of the Greek intelligentsia, since among the Macedonian sovereign's friends and dining companions were none other than Euripides and the tragic poet Agathon, *amphitryon* (the host of the dinner) of the Platonic *symposion*.

The wealth and largesse of the Macedonian kings may well have provoked the democrats of the south, who looked upon such qualities as a threat that could overturn their own world. However, this does not by any means imply that the royal banquets did not meet the aesthetic demands of the intellectuals of the age, which they sometimes even surpassed. At the royal drinking parties of the young philosopher-king Perdiccas III (368–360/359 BC), brother of Philip II and a pupil of Euphraios, student of Plato, the climate is known to have been especially strict, since in accordance with the royal host's tenets, entry was barred to those who were not conversant with geometry.

Philip II (360/359–336 BC), who was not only the greatest general of his age but also one of the most intelligent and astute Greek statesmen of all time, attached considerable importance to persuasion and to victories that could be won at a diplomatic level. In this context, the court festivals and the banquets of the munificent king, which of course went beyond the bounds of measure and, like many other aristocratic habits of the Macedonians, were criticised by censorious democrats, were not merely the order of the day but proved to be extremely effective political weapons. Through these banquets Philip succeeded in impressing his enemies, who nevertheless lost no opportunity to accuse him of wantonness, drunkenness and barbarity. However, the finds of the royal tombs and the palace of Aegae confute this impression categorically and give us an unexpectedly full and vivid picture of the royal milieu, in which luxury was harmoniously combined with elegance and wealth, with impeccable good taste.

The dining rooms (*andrones*) that occupied most of Philip II's palace at Aegae were luxurious, with elegant and certainly the most spacious banquet halls of their day. Two of these halls occupy an area of about 267sq.m. each. These are the largest halls without internal support known in classical architecture and their roofing constitutes a real technological achievement of ancient engineering. Organised in a tripartite arrangement with ante-rooms, the largest of which open onto the courtyard through impressive columnar façades, they create distinct units within the building and constitute another innovative invention of the architect of Aegae (fig. 258). This new layout of banquet spaces, which evidently served functional needs, soon found imitators and became a trend not only in the palaces and houses of nearby Pella – Macedon's new capital – but also throughout the Hellenistic *oecoume*, creating a point of reference for 'civilised behaviour' both in a private and a public context.

In the 16 banquet halls securely identified in the palace at Aegae, it is estimated that there was space for 224 couches, from the spatial arrangements and dimensions of the halls, along with the raised platform along the inner walls of the rooms. Thus Philip could hold a banquet for more than 400 guests at once, an unprecedented number by Greek standards, exceeded only by the legendary feast of Alexander the Great, ruler of the world, and by his successors (*diadochoi*) who were to become kings in the East.

Floors with inlaid marbles (*opus sectile*) and wonderful mosaics, such as that showing the abduction of Europe, heavy bronze-clad wooden doors, walls with brightly coloured stuccoes, adorned with choice paintings, precious furniture and vessels, purple dyed and cloth-of-gold bedsheets and curtains, composed the setting of the royal banquets. The richly ornamented couches, with inlays of glass and gold and ivory reliefs, found in the tomb of Philip II, masterpieces of great artists of their time, allow us to imagine the splendour and sumptuousness of the furnishings of the royal dining halls. Of comparable quality and value was the rest of the royal domestic equipment. Silver was used in abundance for the banquet vessels, which are outstanding not only for their luxury but also for their superb quality: the spare, clean lines of the forms are combined with graceful detail in an ensemble of unrivalled elegance, harmony and charm.

Although the Athenians accused the Macedonians of being uncontrollable wine drinkers, all the vessels for the royal banquet, especially the cups, are much smaller than the cups used in Athenian banquets. The tendency for small banquet vessels as well as the use of fancier forms and shapes, which is observed initially in royal equipment and subsequently in all Macedonian households, eventually becoming a fashion of universal appeal, may well denote changes in the procedure of the banquet and the 'ceremony' of wine-drinking. This had apparently become more complex and sophisticated, with a strong tendency towards refinement. This practice is seen for the first time in the court of Philip II and was consolidated in the reign of Alexander the Great, setting the tone for Hellenistic banquets and following the more general rise in living standards.

In place of the voluminous *kraters* (fig. 202), the much smaller buckets (*situlae*), which resemble the large Attic *skyphoi* (fig. 205), are easier to carry and appear with increasing frequency. The cups are much smaller (fig. 197) – the *calyx* is the most typical example, from the bottom of which a relief face usually emerges to the surprise and delight of the drinker, a feature especially cherished in Macedonia; also popular are the miniature *kantharoi*. Elegant cups with nail-headed handles (fig. 211), which reflect traditional Macedonian prototypes, co-exist harmoniously with elegant bronze and silver Attic *kylikes* (fig. 206). The various jugs retain their traditional forms, but along with them one now sees more innovative small *amphora*-bottles (fig. 57), the shape of which resembles an *unguentarium*, underlying therefore the value of their contents. The ladles with their bird-shaped handles and the intricate strainers became decisively the order of the day (fig. 215). One such silver-gilded

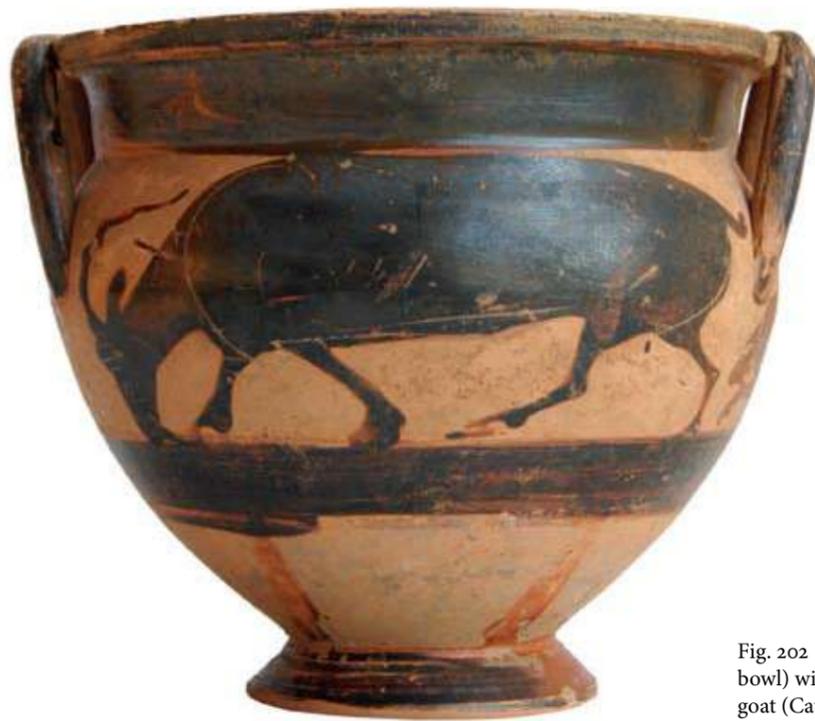


Fig. 202 Black-figure *krater* (wine mixing bowl) with a representation of a grazing goat (Cat. no. 504)



Fig. 203 Black-glaze cup (Cat. no. 531)



Fig. 204 (left) A mixing bowl (*dinos*) with coil-shaped handles that apparently imitates metal prototypes (Cat. no. 502)

strainer, a veritable masterpiece in miniature signed proudly by the craftsman Machatas, was found in the tomb of Philip II (fig. 216).

The sources refer to the bounty of the host, who instead of estimating beforehand, as was the norm, how much wine would go into a *krater*, so as to keep tabs on the cost of the banquet, gave his guests the opportunity to decide for themselves how much wine and in what proportion of mix they wanted to drink, placing all the necessities on the table of each. This seems to have happened at the royal drinking parties of Philip and Alexander: at the royal banquets choice wine came from the cellar undiluted in elegant silver *oinochoi* (jugs), as did fresh cool water. Along with it came honey, myrrh, spices and condiments of aromatic fruits and flowers, essential ingredients for the royal cocktail. This wine was mixed according to the rules of degustation and the desires of the drinker in a bucket (*situla*) (fig. 214) and was served with an elegant ladle into cups (fig. 217), first passing through a strainer.



Fig. 205 Attic red-figure drinking cup (*skyphos*) with himation-clad men (Cat. no. 507)



Fig. 206 Bronze cup (Cat. no. 474)



Thus the enjoyment of wine becomes a true ritual, a highly specialised procedure addressed to the refined palate of a real 'gourmet' who took pleasure in the taste of the drink as well as in the harmony of the music, the beauty of high art, the stimulation of high philosophy (fig. 207). We should not forget that the banquets of Philip II and Alexander the Great were renowned not only for the wealth, luxury and abundance of the vessels, drinks and food but also for the participation of the leading musicians, actors, poets, and intellectuals of the time; and of course the most beautiful and witty courtesans (*hetairai*) were not absent either.

Fig. 207 Ivory fragment from a gold and ivory funeral couch showing Dionysus escorted by a maenad (female follower) and a flute player .