CHAPTER 5: ANCIENT ELITES & THEIR PRECIOUS METAL DINNERWARE

Modern visual ideas about ancient dining habits have been erroneously shaped by the frequenting of museums. As so much ancient pottery has survived and so little ancient silver, we are visually and imaginatively influenced by this overwhelming disproportion, to the point that our concept of “the ancients at dinner” is now strikingly wrong. It is necessary, therefore, before focusing on Athenian society, to reestablish or at least reconsider the norms of other ancient elites for whom dining from vessels of silver, gold, and other precious metals was far more common than most give credence to today, a claim supported by abundant literary and textual evidence.

I will first consider examples of the use of gold and silver among the Egyptians, Hittites, Assyrians, Babylonians, Israelites, Lydians, and Persians, and then turn to the Greeks themselves, setting the stage for the upsurge in silver tableware that took place after 470 BCE by looking at the gold and silver of the Mycenaeans, the Homeric heroes, and the early Greek tyrants. (“Homer,” of course, refers to the body of traditional material that functions as a library of Greek cultural archetypes. The Iliad and Odyssey contain several descriptions of silver cups that function to affirm the cultural norms of the competitive Greek aristocracy, irrespective of whether or not any particular members of Homer’s Dark Age audience actually
possessed tableware of gold, silver, clay, or ivy wood, or simply drank from the nearest river with cupped hands. After delineating the history of ancient metalware, it will then be possible to consider more aptly the increased Athenian use of silver after 470 BCE, an increased use which suggests that ceramics did not represent the finest tableware available in Classical times, as may be gathered from even a brief perusal of Donald Emrys Strong's *Greek and Roman Gold and Silver Plate* (1966).

If there is any truth to Herodotus's tale of Psammetichus and the Dodecharchy, then the Egyptians of the 7th century BCE drank from golden cups:

The twelve kings for some time dealt honorably by one another, but at length it happened that on a certain occasion, when they had met to worship in the temple of Hephaestus, the high-priest on the last day of the festival, in bringing forth the golden goblets from which they were wont to pour the libations, mistook the number, and brought eleven goblets only for the twelve princes. Psammetichus was standing last, and being left without a cup, he took his helmet, which was of bronze, from off his head, stretched it out to receive the liquor, and so made his libation. (*Persian Wars*, II, 151)
While the Bible cautions against the gold and silver idols of the pagans (Psalms 115:4, “Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men’s hands”), the Tabernacle in which the followers of Moses worshipped in the desert had twenty wall panels on each side, panels fitting into sockets of silver (Exodus 26:22-25). Another Bible story also reveals silver’s high symbolic value, this time in the form of a cup. Although the biblical Jews were certainly not known for an interest in pederasty, in this story Joseph’s silver cup serves to evoke the deepest intergenerational male-to-male feelings: a father’s love for his favored sons.

After Joseph, one of the sons of Jacob, rose to power as an overseer in Egypt, he played a cruel trick on the brothers who had sold him into slavery and who later came to Egypt to beg for grain during a famine: “Put my cup, the silver cup, in the mouth of the sack of the youngest, with his money for the grain” (Genesis 44:2, RSV, emphasis added). Here the values are clearly marked: the cup is a personal object, and a valuable one, and thus well suited to serve as a token in Joseph’s emotional game playing. The later discovery of the “stolen” silver cup becomes Joseph’s excuse to retain his younger brother Benjamin “as my slave.” The audience, of course, knows that Joseph and Benjamin are brothers sharing a common mother as well as a common father; but, for all the others know, their brother Benjamin, an attractive boy, has simply caught the eye of an official of a foreign court and is perhaps destined to become an Egyptian court eunuch, a sexual plaything for Joseph, a member of the Egyptian elite. Jacob the
Patriarch’s original loss of his favorite son Joseph—by a trick played by his brothers—is mirrored by the “loss” of the treasured silver cup belonging to Joseph the Egyptian overseer—by a trick played on his brothers. This loss is reflected yet again in the possibility of Jacob’s loss of a second favored son, one who is particularly dear to Jacob because he serves to remind him of his lost favorite, Joseph. However, this time the now vulnerable brothers are respectful of Jacob’s feelings and fearful of the consequences for themselves and the rest of their family:

Now therefore, when I come to your servant my father [Jacob], and the lad [Benjamin] is not with us, then, as his life is bound up in the lad’s life, when he sees that the lad is not with us, he will die; and your servants will bring down the gray hairs of your servant our father with sorrow to Sheol. (Genesis 44:30-32)

By creating such a dramatic reenactment—a reminder and a retraumatizing of Jacob’s original loss, centered on a silver cup as a material symbol of the love that a father has for a favorite son—Joseph forces his brothers to feel filial sympathy for their father, something that they evidently did not feel at the time when they sold him into slavery. This silver cup marks Joseph, favored by the Pharaoh for his insights regarding dreams, as part of the Egyptian court; thus, this Egyptian silver cup is a fitting symbol for the favored place under Jacob that Joseph has

17 In the King James version of the Bible Sheol is rendered as “the grave”.
lost, and which he, in turn, causes Benjamin to lose, at least for the duration of his retributive charade.

Did the Persians—under whose hegemony the Jewish scriptures took their final form—place a similar value on silver cups? Amid a discussion about precious cups, Athenaeus illustrates the relevant Persian attitude through the following remark about earthenware cups, a remark made by one of his deipnosophists (masters of dinner-table conversation\(^\text{18}\)): “We must beg to be excused from earthenware cups. For Ctesias says that ‘Among the Persians any man who falls under the king’s displeasure uses earthenware drinking-cups’” (Deipnosophists, XI, 464). This is reinforced in the next section: “Speaking of the Persians in the eighth book of Cyropaedeia, Xenophon writes thus: ‘And what is more, if they own the greatest possible number of cups, they pride themselves on that; and, if they have openly contrived to get them by dishonest methods, they feel no shame at that. For dishonesty and avarice have grown to great proportions among them’” (ibid., 465). This anecdote does not explicitly mention silver or

\(^{18}\) From the Greek "deipnon" (meal) + "sophistai" (wise men). *The Deipnosophists* is the title of a 3rd century BCE work by Athenaeus, describing learned discussions at a banquet. From the Classical website Attalus: "It is a long and extremely diffuse work, which is presented as a series of erudite discussions over dinner. Athenaeus includes frequent quotations from earlier authors, especially from the writers of comedies, which give us a fascinating glimpse of a wide range of ancient Greek life and literature that would otherwise be unknown. Naturally, food and drink are the most common topic of conversation throughout, but often that is merely the starting point for long digressions. *The Deipnosophists* is traditionally split into fifteen books, some of which have survived only in an abbreviated form." [http://www.attalus.org/old/athenaeus.html](http://www.attalus.org/old/athenaeus.html)
gold, but the Athenaean anecdotes that precede and follow it, the whole drift of the chapter, and the emphasis on avarice in this particular anecdote, all point to cups of precious metal.

At great length, Herodotus testifies to the wealth of King Croesus of Lydia (Persian War, I, 50–51). From among Croesus’s extensive treasures are mentioned his dedications at Delphi, which included golden goblets, two enormous bowls of gold and silver, four silver casks, two lustral vases, and a number of round silver basins. Judging from these items dedicated at Delphi, under Croesus Lydia must have had plenty of gold and silver plate, recalling his mythological predecessor, “Midas of the Golden Touch,” from Phrygia.

Figure 3