Chapter 6

Conspicuous Consumption: Social Function and Semiotic Meaning of Palace Ware

Palace Ware was transported across the Neo-Assyrian imperial landscape as a concept or social practice and adapted and modified to meet the social and symbolic needs of its consumers outside the imperial Central Polity. Although changes in the size, style and colour of Palace Ware in the Annexed Provinces and the blending of local and Assyrian attributes in the Unincorporated Territories indicate context driven social function and semiotic meaning, these new values, meanings and practices have their roots in the social function and symbolic meaning of Palace Ware in the Central Polity and imperial administration where the concept and social practice originated. Therefore, by understanding the function and meaning of Palace Ware in the Neo-Assyrian Central Polity for the imperial administration and examining how these concepts and social practices were modified in the Annexed Provinces and Unincorporated Territories we can begin to understand why Palace Ware migrated across the imperial landscape and, perhaps, the relationship to and perception of the Neo-Assyrian empire, administration and/or the concept of ‘Assyrian’ by its consumers outside the Central Polity.

Neo-Assyrian Central Polity

Attributes consistently and uniformly reproduced on vessels, for which there is no associated functional or manufactural behaviour or explanation, often possess social or cultural significance or value. We identified five potential indicators of social value and/or semiotic meaning in the Palace Ware assemblage from the Central Polity: thin walls; fine-grained fabric; vessel colour; vessel capacity; and dimples. These five attributes are unique within the Neo-Assyrian ceramic repertoire to Palace Ware, distinguishing it from Assyrian Common Ware or table ware and storage vessels of similar shape.

Iconographic evidence and the performance characteristics of Palace Ware vessels, such as permeability, suggest that their practical function involved the consumption of beverages (see discussion in chapter 3). A range of drinking vessel forms exists in the Assyrian ceramic repertoire, from rhytons to cups and bowls. What made Palace Ware unique within this assemblage and a symbol or
icon throughout the empire was the social/symbolic practice with which it was associated and in which it was used.

Social Function of Palace Ware

Drinking vessels have few technological or formal requirements. They must hold liquid and are generally portable but occur archaeologically in a variety of shapes and sizes. Palace Ware forms A and B are relatively small (modal height of 3 and 12 cm respectively) and light (modal weight of 110 and 100 g respectively) suggesting that they were designed for individual rather than communal consumption. Form C vessels are larger (modal height 20 cm) but not significantly heavier (modal weight 200 g) suggesting that they functioned either as serving containers for the smaller form A and B vessels or were used for communal drinking. Although Palace Ware was not glazed or treated with resin, the vessel walls are partially vitrified as a result of firing, either by design or incident, which rendered the vessel body impermeable. The most significant attribute of Palace Ware vessels potentially related to their social function as drinking vessels, however, is capacity.

Palace Ware from the Assyrian Central Polity has a discontinuous capacity profile with four distinct differentiated modes (figure 6.1). The distribution around the modes is quite tight and approximates a Gaussian curve or normal distribution with a standard deviation of 100 mL for the mode at 500 mL and 500 mL for the modes at 1.5 L and 3 L respectively. The distribution around the mode at 700 mL has a standard deviation of 100 mL on one tail and 200 mL on the other. The extended tail associated with the 700 mL mode, form B vessels, results from the diminutive size of the B1 cups. When we correct for the two sizes of form B vessel, the standard deviation associated with 700 mL is