

Gift Exchange and the Etruscan Kantharos: From Drinking to Diplomacy to Dionysos
Jennifer L. Muslin (University at Buffalo, SUNY)

Most scholars assume that the bucchero kantharos, the most ubiquitous Etruscan object found outside of Etruria, was simply part of a banqueting set and that its presence abroad can be attributed solely to wine consumption. Yet this type of kantharos is seldom depicted in scenes of banqueting in Greek or Etruscan art and is rarely found with other elements of a complete banquet set in the archaeological record beyond Etruria. How is it that a cup used for banqueting is so conspicuously absent from these images and settings? I argue that the bucchero kantharos serves another, more significant purpose: that of gift exchange.

In the majority of its depictions in Etruria, the kantharos is shown in scenes of exchange, usually between elites or between a group and an elite. Such vessels have been recovered mainly from elite Etruscan contexts, such as opulent tombs and houses. Bucchero kantharoi found outside of Etruria are predominantly from non-domestic contexts, such as funerary, religious, and commercial areas. This suggests that non-Etruscans were not using them in banqueting but rather were using them for other symbolic purposes. Kantharoi also appear in scenes of dedication at temples or on altars in sixth century B.C.E. Etruscan and Athenian black figure vase painting. Finds of votive kantharoi from temples in both Etruria and Greece suggest that these depictions have their basis in practice, not only of Etruscans but even of Greeks.

In this paper, I examine the iconographic and archaeological evidence to discuss how this ceremonial object spreads throughout the Mediterranean with the rise of Etruscan maritime commerce and power in the sixth century B.C.E. Through this process, the bucchero kantharos goes from being an object of elite gift exchange and dedication among Etruscans to being a form of gift exchange between Etruscan wine traders and their overseas trade partners, eventually encompassing both commercial and religious connotations. It is later adopted and adapted by populations under Etruscan influence as well as by cities in contact with Etruria, such as Athens. These commercial and religious aspects are united by the Athenians in the figure of the wine god Dionysos, who takes up the kantharos as his symbol.