

## Sharing Food and Eating from One Plate: An Ethno-Archaeological Study

Zeidan A. Kafafi

**Abstract:** This paper aims at studying a type of pottery pots (the “platter”) which first appeared during the Pottery Neolithic period in the Levant (ca. 6500 - 6000 BC, calibrated date) and continued in use throughout the Early Bronze Age (ca. 3500-2000 BC). This food serving platter reflects social functions since a number of persons gather around the single plate and share the same meal. To understand this role an ethnoarchaeological study is also presented and shed light on the communal meal served and is being still served in the Arab world under the name of “Mansaf”. The large size of the serving platter is important: to take in a large amount of rice and meat, and also to accommodate the large number of people who share the dish at the same time.

”Food is an important component of human culture, which not only provides nutrition, but is also used to cement social ties and mark occasions” ( Carol Palmer 2002: 173).

### Introduction:

Platters were first manufactured during the Pottery Neolithic Period, but became more common during the Early Bronze Age. They have low, inverted or sometime everted walls, broad, flattish, often slightly rounded bases.

This study aims at studying the function of the type of a very large dish and the purpose behind using it, such as certain occasions. It is obvious from the size that it has been made to contain a large amount of food, which might be offered for a large number of people, eating from the same dish at the same time. Such big meals are offered either in feasts or to serve families of many persons eating from one plate at the same time.

The social factor is another aspect to be addressed in this study. Could it be argued that this type of pot and food sharing had first been used by the early farming communities, starting

in the Neolithic period and flourishing in the Early Bronze Age? Was this vessel made and used for special occasions?

In an ethno-archaeological study conducted almost ten years ago, C. Palmer (2002:176) maintained that villagers in Jordan describe themselves as *fallāḥīn*, but they have a very strong pastoral element to their economy. Actually, it may be argued that villagers were semi-nomadic, camping for part of the year with their flocks outside their settlements and were typically associated with Bedouin societies. This status could be applied to ancient populations living in the Arab World.

Alois Musil (1908), among other travelers and explorers, described the Arab tribes living in the south of the Levant and presented lists of the kinds of their food. G. Bell, another traveler, claimed that on 15 January 1914 at Al-Yadudeh, Madaba, she ate a *mansaf* hosted by Abu Jaber family. She added: “*they carried out the big tray, bread steeped in a gravy of dry laban and water, with rice and meat on top, to the guests. Then we dined on lamb and spent some time talking politics*” (Bell 2000).

Moreover, Doughty too mentioned the *mansaf* meal several times, and said that “*his simple diet is of great nourishment, boiled mutton upon a mess of temmn, with butter, seasoned with onions, and a kind of cany. When the slave has poured water upon our hands, from a metal ewer, over a layer, we sit down square-legged about the great brazen tinned dish upon the carpet floor*” (Doughty 1926).

It is worth adding that in modern times, Oriental people are using a similar type of pots for either hosting guests or serving big meals called the “*Mansaf*” which is mostly served in feasts or particular occasions. Another function for such large plate is to help several people to eat together from the same plate at the same time. A brief explanation of Ethno-archaeological study is presented below.

#### **Platters and Ethno-archaeology:**

Archaeology started as the study of the collection of objects. Like other scientific approaches or disciplines, in the early stage of the profession archaeologists collected objects for the sake of their own studies. It has been said that the study of artifacts in relation to past human behavior serves as a general definition of Archaeology (Lubar and Kingery 1993). During the last decades ethno-archaeology has contributed immensely to understanding the archaeological material and to explaining how archaeologists interpret the relationship between human behavior and the production and use of utensils (Chilton 1999: 2). However, some archaeologists have also claimed that ethno-archaeological studies failed to contribute to social theory; their contribution, if any, is nothing more than tales (Conkey 1989).

Over the past decades, there has been an expansion of methods and ways used by archaeologists and socio-anthropologists for studying and interpreting the use of

archaeological objects. E. S. Chilton (1999) maintained that “the semantic distinction between ‘objects’ and ‘materials’ is important....the terms *materials* and *material culture* emphasize the constitutive process of artifact manufacture, use, and discard”. Moreover, recent ethno-archaeological studies have agreed that archaeological materials do not reflect only the survival of the tools and pots, but embody the identity of their makers and users (Christensen 1995). In other words, scholars must admit that such a scientific approach may enforce the relationship between people and the objects they manufacture.

This study does not focus on discussing the form of the pot “platter”, which is under study; instead, it emphasizes the social and economic aspects in which this pot has been used. For example, one may raise the question: was this large and wide dish used for special occasions like feasts? Or was it only used for daily purposes? To answer these questions we adopt a methodological and theoretical approach and apply these to envision the relationship among several variables: the size of the platter, the number of people eating out of it, and the number of times it is used for offering food. Before presenting the ethno-archaeological study below, which discusses the main Jordanian meal *mansaf*, it is appropriate to attend first to the vessel platter.

#### **Platters in Archaeology:**

The history of manufacturing pottery vessels in the Ancient Near East, as a defining feature in the south of the Levant (Jordan and Palestine), started around 5500 BC (uncalibrated), and is known to archaeologists as Pottery Neolithic (Amiran 1970; Kafafi 1987; Garfinkel 1999). Nevertheless, there is no good evidence for pottery pots production in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic periods, but the existence of proto-

types and pyro-technology that allows humans to attain temperatures for reducing limestone to lime to make plaster is attested at several sites in Jordan such as 'Ain Ghazal. However, and at the site of 'Ain Ghazal very few pottery sherds have been encountered in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic levels (Rollefson and Simmons 1985; 1986).

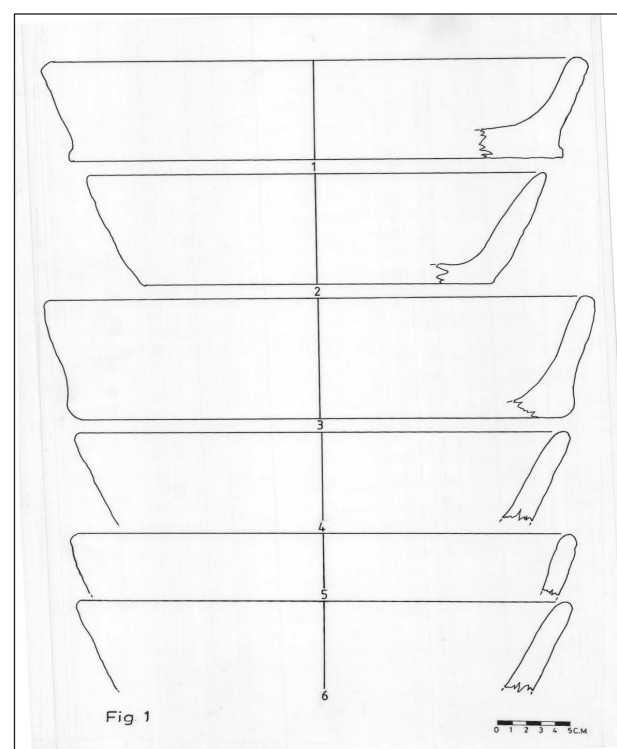
Generally speaking in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic period portable vessels made of either lime stones such as those excavated at the sites of Beidha and Basta in south of Jordan; or of lime plaster called "White Ware = *vaisselles blanche*" uncovered at the site of 'Ain Ghazal, in central Jordan (Kafafi 1986), were found. Some of these vessels were large and very shallow (Kafafi 1986: Fig. 3) parallel to those platters made of clay during the following periods. Actually, the manufacturing of pottery utensils for daily use started by the farming communities settled in villages during the Neolithic and remained in use up to modern times. Exceptions were in desert areas where semi-nomads favored less heavy, fragile and bulky utensils. To add, White Ware vessels remained in use, but it seems to have remained very rare and the pots were often small.

It has been published that the Middle Pre-Pottery Neolithic period is marked by the increase in sheep and goat frequencies, and this period witnessed the onset of their domestication in the South of the Levant (Horwitz and Ducos 2005). Moreover, during this period a reduction in species diversity and an increased and sustained reliance on a few selected species has been observed. This coincidence with the manufacturing of platters made of lime.

The archaeological excavations at the Neolithic village 'Ain Ghazal produced a corpus of pottery from restricted *in situ* contexts in the south and the central fields, datable to around 5500 BC (uncalibrated) (Kafafi 1990). The vessels assemblage includes cups, bowls, jars and platters. Figure (1) shows a number of platters

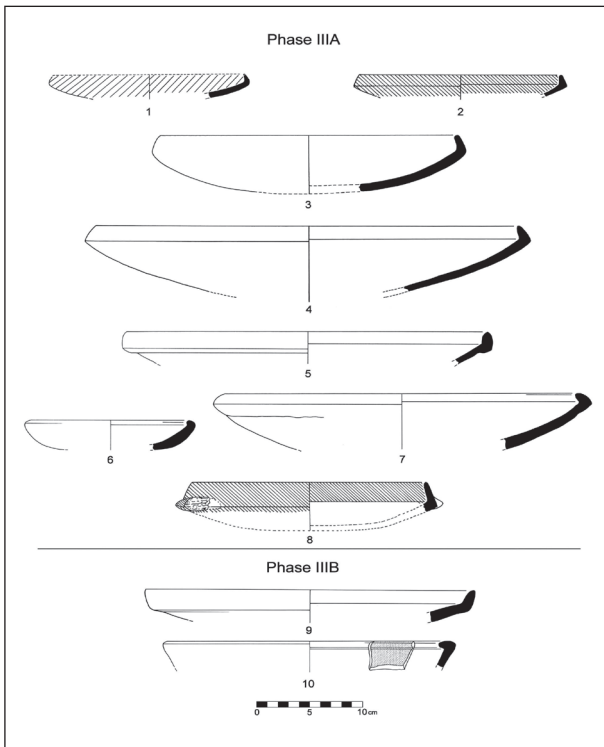
uncovered at the site of 'Ain Ghazal and it is recognizable that some of them are exceeding 30cm in diameter. This means that such a very wide container was used to serve more than one person, eating from the same pot by the same moment. To mention, it might be enlightened that by the rural and nomad communities the members of the family are eating from the same dish at the same moment.

It might be recorded that platters were found in large quantities all through the Early Bronze Age periods. Best examples from Jordan could be presented from the sites Khirbet az-Zeiraqoun in the north of the country (Genz 1998); and Tell Abu el- Kharaz in the Jordan Valley (Fig. 2) (Fischer 2008). This type of pots continued in use through modern times, and similar form is used especially to contain a very famous meal in the Arab World named as *mansaf*. Below is a brief ethno-archaeological study of this kind of food, which is mostly served in special occasions, is presented.



**Fig. 1: Ain Ghazal Pottery Neolithic Platters and Large Bowls.**





**Fig 2: Platters dated to the Early Bronze Age II (ca. 5000 Years Ago) from Tell Abu Al-Kharaz in the Jordan Valley/ Jordan (after Fischer 2008).**

**Ethno-archaeological Study:**

Palmer published a full description of the way a *mansaf* meal is prepared and noted that “*Mansaf* is the main feast dish served at all major religious feasts, celebrations and when guests visit” (Palmer 2002: 189). The meal (*mansaf*) is a traditional Jordanian dish which consists of meat cooked in a sauce of fermented dried yogurt (*ğamid*), and served with huge quantities of rice, sometimes overlying a layer of special bread called (*mashrouh* or *šrak*). When the dish is ready to serve, rich people usually sprinkle the layer of meat with pine-nuts, almonds and other tasty herbal seasonings. In the north of Jordan, a side dish full of radishes, onions, and pickles is usually added to the menu of *mansaf* (Figs. 3-5).

The *mansaf* is associated with a traditional Arab culture based on an agro-pastoral lifestyle in which meat and yogurt are available. In Jordan



**Fig. 3: Mansaf ready for eating.**



**Fig. 4: A layer of bread under the heap of rice and meat.**



**Fig. 5: Radish and onion complement the Mansaf Platter.**

*Mansaf* is served on special occasions and feasts such as: weddings, baby-births, honoring guests, and celebrating major religious holidays.

For preparing the meal of *mansaf*, males gather together and light the fire (Figs. 6-7). After



Fig. 6: Cooking Operation.



Fig. 7: Preparing the Trays.

that, a very large cooking pot full of meat and water is placed over the fireplace. The meat can be mutton, beef, or even camel meat. Usually, during the cooking time, the “culinarians” exchange discussions about either personal or communal problems. Of course, if the *mansaf* is offered due to an occasion, most of the discussion of the cooks will concentrate on the events at hand. In other words, if the people are invited for a *mansaf* in the occasion of a wedding, the cooks will discuss how the bride and groom have first got together. On the other hand, if it is an arrangement for a future marriage, the discussion will touch on how the relationship between the two families is going now, and how it is going to develop in the future.

As for the cooking, once the meat is done boiling, the cook will add the *ḡamid* water-mix (something of a butter-milk kind); this mix is usually prepared in a tray to have it formed into a running creamy sauce somewhat thicker than water. The cook will keep watching the meat cooking in the large pot. In the meantime, other cooks will attend to the cooking of rice.

While maintaining the cooking process, which may take hours at a time, the cooks (of meat and rice), along with other friends ready to extend a helping hand, will start complimenting the chef and pointing out how good the cook is! They may even exaggerate his excellence to the point of deeming him the best among all cooks in the region. The discussion may also bring up the kind of meat and rice, which the host has bought for the occasion.

We can assume that this kind of exchanged discussion reflects social and economic issues. In addition, it points to the standard of living in the country, and shows that an old/new handcraft started in Jordan. In terms of earnings, cooking *mansafs* in Jordan has become one of the sources of living for many Jordanian families, and in many cases the main income for many families.

After the cooks make sure that meat and rice have cooked long enough, they inform the host that everything is ready to serve. Thus, a tray “platter”, mostly rounded, around 30-50cm in diameter, and made of either metal or some other material, will be brought to start arranging the layers of the bread, rice, meat and dried almonds mixed with pine-nuts. It must be pointed out that three types of *mansaf* are usually prepared. The best is for dignitaries and VIP’s, the second for normal and very close relatives, and the third for the





**Fig. 8: Serving Mansaf to Honored Guests.**

family *mansaf*. The first type is distinguished by adding the head of the ram on top of the heap of rice and meat. This food division may indicate that there is more than one social level in Jordanian society.

Once the trays (“platters”) of the “*mansaf*” are set and ready, the host gives directions to a group of people, usually his relatives, to start serving the food and carrying the trays to the area where people are supposed to eat. Often, the *mansafs* are carried either by young people or, in very few cases (old times), by women (Fig. 8). The process of serving is accompanied by folklore songs.

The *mansaf* is traditionally eaten collectively from a large platter in the Bedouin style, 5-7 people standing around the tray with the left hand behind the back and using the right hand instead of cutleries. In some cases, guests are allowed to use dishes and spoons.

To sum up, we rarely think that changes in Arab diet throughout the ages affect or reflect their social and economic behaviors. For example, the *mansaf*, known for a very long time, and may have started during the Pre-Pottery Neolithic period, has survived all along and kept the same social values. Now,

rice in the Levant may have been known only recently (some one hundred years at best); yet, in older times it was not necessary for *Mansef*. Bread, then was used instead and the meal was named “*Thareed*”. Be the name as it may, even then it always needed a large and wide pot (“a platter”) to serve the meal.

### Conclusion:

The discussion above emphasizes that foods, especially the *mansaf* are prepared and consumed by farming and pastoral groups. Although published knowledge (Palmer 2002 173-174) emphasized the point that differences between bedouin and farmers are expressed through food preparation and consumption, we argue that this is not true for the main Arab meal *mansaf*. Nevertheless, we agree that food, especially *mansaf*, reflects hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion.

As mentioned above the meal *mansaf* must be served in a large container, platter; such a pot was first manufactured in the Levant during the Middle Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (ca. 7200 – 6500 BC) as it has been attested at the site of ‘Ain Ghazal (Kafafi 1986). In addition, during the same period goat and sheep were



**Fig. 9: Hands on Mansaf.**

domesticated and herded. And during the Late Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (ca. 6500 – 6000 BC) and at the site 'Ain Ghazal 71% of the excavated bones belonged to domesticated animals, of which goat bones represented 95% (Wasse 1997; Kafafi 2001). This means the population had a surplus of such an animal, and it did not harm their economy if some

were slaughtered for special occasions. In other words, it can be argued that the first people to prepare the meal *mansaf* were those who could manufacture such a large pot, and they perhaps were the villagers and the semi-nomads. No evidence of such a large utensil is found yet in the desert regions.

**Prof. Zeidan A. Kafafi: Yarmouk University, Irbid, Jordan.**

**ملخص:** يهدف هذا البحث لإلقاء الضوء على إناء فخاري وهو «الطبق»، الذي ظهر لأول مرة في بلاد المشرق العربي في فترة العصر الحجري الحديث الفخاري، (نحو ٦٥٠٠ - ٦٠٠٠ قبل الميلاد، حسب الكربون المشع المعايير)، واستمر قيد الاستخدام حتى نهاية العصر البرونزي المبكر (نحو ٣٥٠٠ - ٢٠٠٠ قبل الميلاد). ويدل وجود مثل هذا الطبق على تكافل اجتماعي؛ إذ كان الناس في تلك الفترة يتقاسمون لقمة العيش. وحتى نستطيع فهم دور الأطباق الواسعة؛ أجرينا دراسة إثنو-أثرية، وأخذنا وجبة المنسف العربية، التي تقدم في طبق واسع جداً؛ حتى يتسع لكمية كبيرة من الأكل، خاصة الأرز واللحم؛ إذ يجتمع حول الطبق عدد من الأشخاص، يأكلون في وقت واحد من الصحن نفسه. ومن المعلوم أن هذه الوجبة تُقدّم كذلك في مناسبات عامة في العالم العربي، سواء الأفرح أو الأتراح، ما يتيح المجال للنساء للقاء والحديث في مجالات شتى. لذا، هل كان الحال نفسه عند المجتمعات الزراعية في العصر الحجري الحديث؟

**Notes:**

Sincere thanks are due to Mairna Mustafa for editing the English of the manuscript and for providing the writer with the necessary publications on the subject.

**References**

Amiran, R. 1970. **Ancient Pottery of the Holy Land: From Its Beginnings in the Neolithic Period to the End of the Iron Age.**

Bell, G. 2000. **Gertrude Bell: The Arabian Diaries, 1913-1914**, O'Brien, Rosemary, ed., Syracuse University Press, USA.

Chilton E. (ed.) 1999a. **Material Meanings. Critical Approaches to the Interpretation of Material Culture.** Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press.

Chilton, E. 1999b. "One Size Fits All. Typology and Alternatives for Ceramic Research". Pp. 44- 60 in E. Chilton (ed.), **Material Meanings. Critical Approaches to the Interpretation of Material Culture.** Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press.

Christensen, M. 1995. "In the Beginning was the Potter: Material Culture as Mode of Expression and Anthropological Object". **Folk** 37: 5-24.

Conkey, M. W 1989. "The Place of Material Culture Studies in Contemporary Anthropology". Pp. 13-32, in A. L. Hedlund (ed.), **Perspectives on anthropological Collections from the American Southwest: Proceedings of a Symposium. Anthropological Research Papers No. 40.** Tempe: Arizona State University.

Doughty, C. 1926. **Wanderings in Arabia.** London: Duckworth.

Fischer, P. M. 2008. **Tell Abu Al-Kharaz in the Jordan Valley, Vol. I, The Early Bronze Age.** Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

- Garfinkel, Y. 1999. "Neolithic and Chalcolithic Pottery of the Southern Levant", **Qedem, Monographs of the Institute of Archaeology** 39. Tel Aviv: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.
- Genz, H. 1998. **Die frühbronzezeitliche Keramik von H̱irbet ez-Zeraq̱on. Mit Studien zur Chronologie und funktionalen Deutung frühbronzezeitlicher Keramik in der südlichen Levante**. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.
- Kafafi, Z. 1986. "White Objects From 'Ain Ghazal, near Amman", **Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research** 261: 51- 56.
- Kafafi, Z. 1987. "Les Premiers Poteries". **Dossiers Histories et Archéologie** 118: 20-21.
- Kafafi, Z. 1990. "Early Pottery Contexts from 'Ain Ghazal, Jordan", **Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research** 280:15- 30.
- Kafafi, Z. 2001. "Jordan during the Late Seventh/Early Sixth Millennia BC", **Mediterranean Archaeology and archaeometry** 1: 31 -42.
- Lubar S. and Kingery, W. D. 1993. "Introduction". Pp. viii – xvii. In: S. Lubar and W.D. Kingery (eds.), **History from the Things**. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Musil, A. 1908. **Arabia Petraea. III Ethnologischer Reisebericht**. Vienna: Alfred Hölder.
- Palmer, C. 2002. "Milk and Cereals: Identifying Food and Food Identity among Fallāhīn Bedouin in Jordan". **Levant** 34: 173 -195.
- Rollefson, G. and Simmons, A. 1985. "The Early Neolithic Village of 'Ain Ghazal, Jordan: Preliminary Report on the 1984 Season". **Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research Supplement** 23: 35-52.
- Rollefson, G. and Simmons, A. 1986; "The Early Neolithic Village of 'Ain Ghazal, Jordan: Preliminary Report on the 1985 Season", **Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research Supplement** 24: 147-164.
- Wasse, A. 1997. "Preliminary Results of an Analysis of the Sheep and Goat Bone from 'Ain Ghazal, Jordan", Pp. 215-221 in H. G. K. Gebel, Z. Kafafi and G. Rollefson (eds.), **Prehistory of Jordan II, Perspectives from 1997**. Berlin: ex oriente.
- Wasse, A. 2002. "Final Results of an Analysis of the sheep and Goat Bones from Ain Ghazal, Jordan". **Levant** 34: 59 -82.