

Space Oddity: Exercises in Art and Philosophy

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Nefs d'Or, Nefs d'Argent Between Space and Power

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Abstract The so-called *nefs* were an important 'presence' in the European courts starting from the Late Middle Ages. They were precious miniature ships, shown during banquets held in the halls of the nobility. In addition to delighting the sight of diners thanks to their ornamental richness, they were used as containers of spices, drinks, or luxury silverware. The preciousness of the vessel and of its content were just some of the elements that determined the function of ostentation of power through the *nefs*. Taking into consideration sources and examples ranging from the fourteenth century to the early sixteenth century, the purpose of this contribution is to investigate both the spatial relationships in the practices of use of the object and those intrinsic to the object itself. The main trajectories of analysis refer to three spatial relationships: that of container and content, that of long-distance travel embedded in the object, and the geography of power in noble banqueting rituals. These spatial relationships reflect power relationships that will be investigated on a case-by-case basis in the course of our study.

Keywords History of art. Nefs. Late Middle Ages. Early Modern Age. Ship models. Ritual. Power. Conspicuous. Consumption.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Defining the Nef: Some Evidence from the Fourteenth Century. – 3 Representing Ships: Nefs From the Fifteenth Century to the First Decades of the Sixteenth Century. – 4 Symbolic and Spatial Dimensions of the Nefs. – 5 The Role of the Nef. Ritual and Material Culture in the Courts. – 6 The Nef as Element of the Ritual Space. – 7 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

Published by French historian Henri Moranvillé, the *Inventaire de l'orfèvrerie et des bijoux de Louis I, Duc d'Anjou* (Moranvillé 1903)¹ allows us to retrace the splendour of the collections of precious objects belonging to King Charles V of France and his brothers, including Louis I of Anjou-Valois. Drawn up between 1379 and 1380, the inventory lists – among various artefacts – many “Nefs d’or” (Moranvillé 1903, 56), “Nefs d’argent dorées” (248-61), “Nefs d’argent esmaillé” (248-9), “Nefs d’argent hachées” (260-1), “Nefs d’argent blanches” (261-3). In this essay, we will examine the so-called *nef* or ‘table *nef*’, a term used in Old French that indicates the ship. It is an artefact linked to the richest environments and places of prestige such as the table or the salon of courts and higher aristocracy. A specific object whose origin and diffusion can be traced back to the Late Middle Ages.

The following analysis is primarily intended to be a study on the three-dimensional representation of a miniature ship.² Starting from the first half of the fourteenth to the beginning of the sixteenth century, this study will develop an in-depth look on this type of object through a historical-artistic approach, focused on capturing aspects of stylistic evolution from a chronological and aesthetic point of view. Furthermore, this article proposes a reflection on the topological relationship that characterises our perception of space: through the case of the nefs we will study the relationship between the container and its content. Moreover, considering how the container has many functions that can be related to cosmologies, meanings, and different worldviews, as well as to aesthetics formed in specific historical processes of social groups, it is our will to argue that table nefs symbolically preserve the idea of long-distance travel. To do this, both material and metaphorical elements will be considered, even in those cases in which these small ships were not used as actual containers for material goods. Travel and the idea of movement can be seen as part of the meaning of a nef, thus contributing to enriching its value and the prestige of its owner. Last but not least, another spatial relationship that nefs allow to investigate is the ritual space that is typical of the medieval table or banquet.

In the present article, Andrea Missaglia is responsible for §§ 1-3 and 5, Feliciano Tosetto is responsible for §§ 4 and 6-7.

1 For an in-depth comment by the author, see also Moranvillé 1901.

2 Miniature vessels were created for different purposes and contexts; in this paper we will examine the specific category of nefs, in relation to the court dinner table of sovereigns and high personalities. There is not much monographic literature on nefs, see mainly Oman 1963, and more recently Timmermann 2021, with bibliography.

2 Defining the Nef: Some Evidence from the Fourteenth Century

In the European art history context, the ship has always been a theme of particular importance, especially for its value as a symbol in Christian iconography. We know that nefs – scaled-down replicas of ships – were an important element of the table in the medieval banquet, and for this reason they were objects of high material and formal quality. Coming into common use at least from the Late Middle Ages, nefs were ship-shaped containers that used to be placed on the table in luxury dining rooms. They were typically made in two sections and the upper part was often removable, so the hull could be used to store assorted items: spoons, knives, crockery such as serving dishes or glassware, but also spices, salt, pepper, condiments, and drinks. Dating back to the first half of the thirteenth century, the first textual sources cite them as containers for wine (Oman 1963, 3, 25). Starting from the fourteenth century, some miniatures give us useful insights to start defining the image and the function of the nef during court ceremonies or during those events that included a banqueting moment. During these great ceremonies, the nef was usually placed in front of the most important person at the table, as a sign of his status. This is testified by the miniature from the second quarter of the fourteenth century from the *Secretum Secretorum*³ illustrating King Alexander III of Macedon at the dining table. In front of the King, in addition to the cup, we see a golden nef. Lifted up from the table by a base, the ship is represented with some typical features that let us understand it is a cog,⁴ a round merchant boat with square sails, which from the twelfth century had begun to sail the European seas. We can find this ship type in numerous miniatures from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, such as in a copy of the *Décameron de Boccace*.⁵

Another famous miniature illustrating a nef is the one by the Master of the Bible of Jean de Sy in the *Grandes Chroniques de France*.⁶ In

3 London, BL, Ms. Add. 47680, f. 60v. The *Secretum Secretorum* is a treatise in epistolary form attributed to a Pseudo-Aristotle, which purports to be a letter written by the Greek philosopher Aristotle to his pupil Alexander the Great on a wide range of topics. On the miniature, see Oman 1963, 7; Timmermann 2021, 275. A deliberate anachronism is clearly recognisable in this miniature and in all the others that will be mentioned in this paper. For a digitised copy of the manuscript, see http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=add_ms_47680_f060v.

4 For features' description, see Timmermann 2021, 275. See also Steusloff 1983; Springmann, Schreier 2008.

5 Paris, BnF, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Ms-5070 réserve, f. 91v. For the miniature, see <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b7100018t/f196.item>.

6 Paris, BnF, Ms. Français 2813, f. 473v. An illuminated manuscript dating back to the 70s of the fourteenth century, commissioned by Charles V of France. The text il-

this miniature we find a sumptuous banquet with sovereigns and high prelates, a banquet offered in 1378 by King Charles V of France (1364-1380) – in central position – to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV (1355-1378), accompanied by his son Wenceslaus of Luxembourg. The miniature depicts the royalties at the table with three nefs, with the largest one placed in front of Charles IV.⁷ The design of these three ships is crescent-shaped,⁸ without mast and sails, and it is represented with a certain research into details that characterise the golden band of the hull at deck level. It is also interesting to notice how the nef facing Wenceslaus has a visible lid.

There is not much material evidence for the fourteenth century, but some artefacts still survive. We can find some nefs that were re-considered as religious objects. The first example is the so-called 'Golden Ship', the *Goldenes Schiff* [fig. 1], dated to the first half of the fourteenth century and preserved in the parish church of St. Mary of Uelzen,⁹ in Germany. Fashioned with gilded copper, this nef is adorned with precious stones, gems and cameos. The richness of this artefact is accentuated by the preciousness of the materials that define it. Examples like these were unique pieces, realised with the specific purpose of displaying wealth. Another survived object is the nef belonging to the Cathedral of Toledo,¹⁰ in Spain, which is dated to the last quarter of the fourteenth century. Donated by Toledan archbishop Pedro Tenorio (1377-1399) with the desire of converting it into a reliquary, this precious ship displays, like the previous example, refined decorative features such as some quadrilobed coats of arms, originally decorated with translucent enamel. All elements that make it a high quality object.

illustrates the history of the Kingdom of France from the beginning of the Valois dynasty to the events of the reign of Charles V. In the miniature, the banquet is held in the midst of a great spectacle wanted by King Charles to commemorate the capture of Jerusalem during the First Crusade in 1099. On the miniature, see Oman 1963, 10; Fliegel 2002, 22; Belozerskaya 2005, 227; Timmermann 2021, 272-4. For a digitised copy of the manuscript, see <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84472995/f958.item>.

7 In his work Timmermann (2021, 274) argues that the largest ship is placed in front of Charles IV because he is the oldest sovereign.

8 As observed by Timmermann (2021, 274), the nefs' shape recalls the ship used for the transport of siege troops visible in the foreground of the image.

9 For an in-depth look at this nef, see Timmermann 2021, 284-6, with further bibliography.

10 See Oman 1963, 14; Fliegel 2002, 24; Timmermann 2021, 275.



Figure 1 Northern goldsmiths (?), *Goldenes Schiff*. First half of the 14th century. Uelzen, parish church of St. Mary. © Wikimedia Commons

3 Representing Ships: Nefs From the Fifteenth Century to the First Decades of the Sixteenth Century

Increasingly, visual evidence for the nefs became more common during the fifteenth century. We can note how numerous nefs appear formally simpler, generally as containers with lids without masts or ropes, with references to real ships only in form. Several miniatures testify to this typology, and many nefs can be found within scenes related to episodes of the Arthurian cycle. For example, some episodes from the two volumes of *Tristan de Léonois* of Luce de Gat, dated to the first quarter of the fifteenth century,¹¹ such as the scene of the banquet at the home of Guidaban's father,¹² the scene where Galahad is presented to King Arthur,¹³ or the scene where a damsel kneels in front of Arthur.¹⁴ As a further example, we can also add the scene with Arthur and his knights from *Des Cas des nobles hommes et femmes* by Giovanni Boccaccio, translated by Laurent de Premierfait.¹⁵ The type of crescent-shaped nefs shown in foreshortening is widespread in the field of miniature art, and we find it not only in relation to Arthur, but also in scenes involving other kings or emperors, as in the miniature from the *Histoire romaine* of Titus Livius, translated into French by Pierre Bersuire¹⁶ or in the miniature from *La flor des estoires de la terre d'Orient* by the Armenian Hayton of Corycus.¹⁷

Remaining within the sphere of the art of manuscript illumination, we can compare one of these nefs with the contemporary images of real ships. A convincing comparison can be made between a nef [fig. 2] from the *Livre que fist Jehan Bocace de Certalde des cleres et nobles femmes, le quel il envoia a Audice de Accioroles de Florence*,

11 For the manuscript's detailed description and full bibliography, see <https://jonas.irht.cnrs.fr/manuscrit/45501>.

12 Paris, BnF, Ms. Français 101, f. 77v. For the miniature and manuscript's description, see <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b9059123t/f79.item>.

13 Paris, BnF, Ms. Français 101, f. 178v. For the miniature, see <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b9059123t/f180.item>.

14 Paris, BnF, Ms. Français 100, f. 125v. For the miniature, see <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b9059122d/f127.item>.

15 Paris, BnF, Ms. Français 226, f. 237r. For the miniature and the description of the manuscript, generically dated to the fifteenth century, see <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b9009520k/f246.item>.

16 BGE, Ms. fr. 77, f. 86r. The manuscript is dated to the first decades of the fifteenth century. For the miniature and manuscript's bibliography, see <https://www.e-codices.ch/en/list/one/bge/fr0077>.

17 Paris, BnF, Ms. Français 12201, f. 10v. The manuscript is dated to the early fifteenth century. For the miniature and manuscript's description, see <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8452199j/f30.item>.



Figure 2 French miniaturist, *Queen Kneeling in front of the King*. 15th century. Illuminated manuscript page, from *Livre que fist Jehan Boccace de Certalde des cleres et nobles femmes, lequel il envoya a Audice de Accioroles de Florence, countess de Haulteville*. Paris, BnF, Ms. Français 12420, f.114r. © Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

*countess de Haulteville*¹⁸ and a miniature [fig. 3] from the *Tristan de Léonois*, representing a cog.¹⁹ Miniaturists often emphasise the presence of the base supporting the bottom of the hull. It is an important element for the visual impact that a viewer could experience in front of a nef. We see it in the miniature with Knight Brumant the Superb's punishment [fig. 4] in the *Lancelot-Grail*. 4,²⁰ where the pedestal supporting the nef rises through a high rim, has a polylobed

18 Paris, BnF, Ms. Français 12420, f. 114r. The manuscript is generically dated to the fifteenth century. For the miniature, see <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bt-v1b10509080f/f235.item>.

19 Paris, BnF, Ms. Français 101, f. 349r. For the miniature, see <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b9059123t/f351.item>.

20 Paris, BnF, Ms. Français 120, f. 474r. For the miniature, dated to the beginning of the fifteenth century, and manuscript's description, see <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84920806/f11.item>.



Figure 3 French miniaturist, *Cog with Passengers*. First quarter of the 15th century. Illuminated manuscript page, from *Tristan de Léonois*. Paris, BnF, Ms. Français 101, f. 349r. © Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

shape and is characterised by wide pitches delimited by visible ribs' lines. A further example is a banquet scene, a feast served to King Alexander and his courtiers depicted in a miniature from the mid-fifteenth-century manuscript *L'Histoire du bon roi Alexandre* by Jean Wauquelin.²¹ In the miniature, the nef has a railing decorated by a sumptuous Gothic spire ending in a lily. It also has a base supported and raised in height by small animal legs. Finally, we can also recall the nef in the well-known and much discussed Limbourg Brothers' illustration for the month of January from the *Très Riches Heures*²² of Jean of Valois, Duke of Berry (1360-1416). The nefs in these examples are of considerable form and size, heavily gilded and incorporating jewels and other precious materials: they were explicitly symbols of

²¹ Paris, Petit Palais, LDUT00456. For manuscript's description and bibliography, see <https://www.parismuseescollections.paris.fr/fr/petit-palais/oeuvres/livre-des-conquestes-et-faits-d-alexandre#infos-secondaires-prolongement>.

²² France, Chantilly, Musée Condé, Ms. 65, f. 1v. For a digitised copy of the manuscript, dated between 1412 and 1416, see <https://les-tres-riches-heures.chateauchantilly.fr/>.



Figure 4 French miniaturist, *The Punishment of Sir Brumant*. Early 15th century. Illuminated manuscript page, from *Lancelot-Grail*. 4. Paris, BnF, Ms. Français 120, f.47r. © Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

royal status and power. Supporting evidence for this is represented by the surviving table ship preserved in the Cathedral of Reims and today known as ‘Reliquary Nef of St. Ursula’,²³ donated as a tribute in 1500 by the city of Tours to Queen Anne of Brittany, consort of King Louis XII of France. This nef has mast, sail, and rigging, and the deck – which is also a lid – is populated by various passengers. It is crafted from gold, silver, copper, and carnelian (a variety of red chalcidony), with coloured enamels embellishing the little figures and the basement. Miniature crews also characterise other nefs, such as the one now in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg, dated to 1503 and crafted by a local goldsmith shop.²⁴ Known as the *Schlüsselfelder Schiff* by the name of the patrician family of Nuremberg who owned it, this table ship was made in imitation of a specif-

²³ On this object and its conversion into a reliquary, see Salet 1966; Normore 2012; Rouillac 2012; Timmermann 2021, 283-4.

²⁴ Timmermann (2021, 276-9). For ship’s parts shown in detail and bibliography, see <http://objektkatalog.gnm.de/objekt/HG2146>.



Figure 5 French goldsmith (?), *The Burghey Nef*. 1527-28. London, Victoria and Albert Museum. © Wikimedia Commons

ic ship type, the carrack. The carrack was a sailing vessel, normally equipped with three masts, which started to be used from the fifteenth century and became a well known ship in the Modern Age due to its usage for ocean navigation. Crafted from precious gilded silver and supported by a double-tailed mermaid base, it is a sumptuous goldsmith work lively populated by its crew: you can see for instance the sailors working the sails and climbing up the shrouds. These el-

ements were all designed to return a greater final realism, to amaze and to be admired. This accuracy and this vivacity of representation are also reflected in the miniature showing the feast of Richard II of England, from the *Recueil des croniques et anciennes istoires de la Grant Bretagne* by Jean of Wavrin,²⁵ where a crewed nef is depicted. Such models soon spread: to cite two other examples, we cannot forget the nef in the Treasury of the Basilica of Sant'Antonio in Padua,²⁶ dated to the beginning of the sixteenth century, and the one dated to 1527-28 and preserved in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London [fig. 5], the famous and so-called 'Burghley Nef'.²⁷

4 Symbolic and Spatial Dimensions of the Nefs

In our investigation we try to explore what the nefes tell us by focusing on the interconnection between their symbolism, their spatial dimensions and their usage in the context of the banquet ritual. Instead of starting from narrow definitions of 'space', we took into account what tableships suggest about space and power. Among the various symbolic dimensions proper to the nefes, three features lend themselves to be meaningful signifiers: the preciousness of the materials, the craftsmanship and the ship-shape. The first two dimensions are particularly apt for conspicuous consumption, which highlights the economic power of the owner of the object (Veblen 2004). Meanwhile, the symbolism of the ship is linked to the ability to control bad luck. In fact, sea businesses represented a concrete risk and the sea was a symbol of the unknown danger, as testified by Ulysses' character in Dante (Ferroni 2014) or Boccaccio's story of Landolfo Rufolo (Wolf 2017). It is no coincidence that nefes are often supported by sea dragons or mermaids, the same beings that in medieval and Renaissance cartography indicated the risks of navigation (Van Duzer 2014). The reference to the sea is sometimes also made on a material level with the use of shell and nacre, as for the 'Burghley Nef'. There are also some more purely religious objects that resemble the symbolism found in the nef: votive vessels and incense burner shuttles.²⁸ In the former, the idea of rescue from adverse fate and from the danger of the sea is present; instead, the latter are more easily

25 London, BL, Ms. Royal 14 E IV, f. 265v. The manuscript is dated between 1470 and 1480; for the miniature, see <https://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMIN.ASP?Size=mid&ILLID=57372>. See Normore 2015, 144-5.

26 See Oman 1963, 19, 24; Collareta 1995, 156-8; Timmermann 2021, 286-7.

27 See Oman 1963, 56; Timmermann 2021, 276. For object's images and full bibliography, see <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O73113/the-burghley-nef-salt-cellar-unknown/>.

28 For incense shuttles see Collins, Martin 2018.

attributable to a symbolism that sees the ship as the church connected to God through the smoke of the incense rising towards the sky.

The symbolisms of the ship-shape entails a pre-conceptualisation of a geographical space that lives only in cultural trajectories. There is a sedimented and naturalised belief in the existence of a geometric and objective space. However, beyond that, the processes of socialisation to space construct it at the precise moment in which we learn to experience it. Interpretation and experience originate a cyclical movement through which we incorporate space, which is by no means a mere datum of nature, ready to be measured. Instead, it lives in cultural and historical dynamics and it is the subject of contention in affirming its political and symbolic dominion (Merleau-Ponty, Landes 2012). The processes underlying the symbolic construction of space reveal political dynamics, which are more or less hidden in every human group, in every time and in every place. The claim of positivity of the physical-geometric space is an example of this in the contemporary West (cf. Lefebvre 1991); however, to analyse the political dimension of spatial relations from a procedural point of view, it is advisable to exploit the historical distance that separates us from the Middle Ages. The process of cultural construction of space passes through the body. Merleau-Ponty (1968, 248) states that our world is made of the same flesh as our body, and our ideas of space in fact depend on where we 'decide' to draw a boundary between the limits of our person and what surrounds us, on what we include or exclude in our identification process. Even today, as Goffman (2021) observes, we use space or spaces as an extension of our face, of our presentation of the self. Some objects have a social productivity, an agency of their own, precisely because of their ability to connect different spatialities. Nefs are composite objects, often made of precious materials, but often also of 'exotic' materials. The ship models' composite nature connects the perceived virtuality of geographical distance to its own materiality and form. Ship travel as the power of controlling misfortune is part of the object's meaning. This is obtained by the nef being shaped as a ship, by its precious content and by the sea related materials like mother-of-pearl. This is not an isolated case, as the work of Clark (2019) on ceramic vessels in the fifteenth century shows.

Among the topological relationships that characterise nefes, the most relevant is the container-contained one. This relationship is inscribed even in the semantic field of its name. A nef is a vessel model, and the term 'vessel' has an ambiguity that is constitutive of its usage: a vessel is both a ship and a container (Stevenson 2010). A vessel is a container par excellence, but it also gets part of its importance from the contents it carries. The preciousness of the nef serves to reinforce the luxury of the content and vice versa. If the linguistic argument serves only to corroborate our thesis, we also point out that the englobing/englobed relation stands on a deeper level, as shown

in the work of Massimo Leone (2013). The above described symbolic dimensions are proper to the nefes themselves. Differently, when the ship models are presented before the lord on the table, they inscribe those power symbols within the space, while also expanding the spatial reach of the lord's personhood. Let us analyse this in more detail in the next sections.

5 The Role of the Nef. Ritual and Material Culture in the Courts

As we have seen, nefes were placed in front of the most important personalities during banquets or official receptions; eminences such as kings, princes, lords or men of the Church. In the specific geography of power that was performed during court events, nefes could also be placed on the table close to the most important guests. For instance, a nef is illustrated on the left hand side of the table next to the guest in blue dress in a miniature from the *Regnault de Montauban*.²⁹ Nefes, with their 'presence', made reference to the cosmopolitan network of contacts of its owner and played a central role in court ceremonies, underlining prominence and prestige. In this regard, we can recall the illustration with King Richard II of England (1377-99) together with his Court after his coronation ceremony [fig. 6] from the *Anciennes et nouvelles chroniques d'Angleterre* of Jehan de Wavrin,³⁰ where a nef can be identified on a table – the so-called *dressoir* (Helfenstein 2013, 164-5) – set up for the display with vessels of high quality and precious materials: it is a visual marker of status and hierarchy.

In the fourth tome of the *Mémoires d'Olivier de La Marche*, published by Henri Beaune and Jules D'Arbaumont (Beaune, D'Arbaumont 1888), Olivier de La Marche (1425-1502) describes in detail the etiquette of the table and the rituals that had to be observed at the court of Charles the Bold, the Duke of Burgundy (1467-1477). By citing La Marche, in his essay Helfenstein (2013, 162) underlines how a guest who had come to meet the Duke at the table could not actually be able to see him well, due to the size of the nef that was placed next to him. For this reason, we can see how in many contemporary illustrations rulers receive guests on one side, with the nef placed on the op-

29 Paris, BnF, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Ms-5075 reserve, Tome IV, 135r. This is the fourth tome of a popular fifteenth century romance of chivalry named *Regnault de Montauban*. It is a French *chanson de geste* rewritten in prose also known as *Les quatre fils Aymon* that tells the story of four brave knights (Renaud, Aalard, Richard et Guichard) fighting against the imperial power. For the miniature and manuscript's description, see <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b55006678h/f281.item.r=Montauban>.

30 London, BL, Ms. Royal 14 E IV, f. 10r. For the miniature, see <https://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMIN.ASP?Size=mid&ILLID=37356>.



Figure 6 Master of the Vienna and Copenhagen Toison d'Or, *Richard II of England with his Court after his coronation*. 1470-80. Illuminated manuscript page, from *Anciennes et nouvelles chroniques d'Angleterre*. London, BL, Ms. Royal 14 E IV, f.10r. © Wikimedia Commons

posite side. The considerable size of the nef that could have blocked the view of the sovereign may be confirmed by the banquet scene in the miniature with King Syphax receiving Scipio Africanus and Hasdrubal Barca at his table from *Romuleon*.³¹ The function of the nef as a container is reported by Olivier de La Marche in a passage:

et après luy va le sommellier, qui porte en ses bras la nef d'argent qui sert à l'aumosne; et dedans icelle nef sont les trenchoirs d'argent et la petite salliere, et une autre petite nef; ensamble le baston et lycorne dont on fait l'espreuve en la viande du prince. (Beaune, D'Arbaumont 1888, 22)

31 Paris, BnF, Ms. Français 364, f. 197r. The manuscript is dated between 1485 and 1490; for the miniature, see <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b6000786m/f399.image>.

and after him follows the *sommelier*, who carries in his arms the silver *nef* that is used for alms; and in this *nef* there are the silver platters and the salt cellar, and another small *nef*; Together with the staff and the *lycorne* with which the prince's meat is tested.³²

In addition to tableware and a salt cellar, we therefore learn that a *nef* could also contain another, smaller, *nef*. It is interesting to notice how the latter was related to a very specific object, the *lycorne* – a unicorn's horn. The small *nef* and the *lycorne* are connected by a ritual, as La Marche explains later:

et doit le varlet servant prendre la petite nef où est la lycorne, et la porter au sommelier au buffet, et le sommelier doit mettre de l'eau fraîche sur la lycorne et en la petite nef, et doit bailler l'essai au sommelier, vuydant de la petite nef en une tasse, et la doit apporter à sa place, et faire son essai devant le prince, vuydant l'eau de la nef en sa main [...]. (Beaune, D'Arbaumont 1888, 27-8)

and the attendant who serves has to take the small *nef* where the *lycorne* is, and bring it to the *sommelier* at the buffet, and the *sommelier* has to put fresh water on the *lycorne* and in the small *nef*, and he has to give proof of the tasting to the *sommelier*, emptying from the small *nef* in a cup, and he has to bring it to its place, and make the test in front of the prince, emptying the water of the *nef* in his hand [...].

The small *nef* in the ritual space of the medieval table appears necessary for the 'tasting moment'. It had, therefore, the practical purpose of protecting the ruler from poisoning along with the horn of the unicorn, an object sought after by princes and kings for its magical powers as an antidote to poisoned cups.³³

6 The Nef as Element of the Ritual Space

The fact that the *nefs* were used within the specific context of the banquet, and that therefore they were only a part of a larger ritual and symbolic machine, puts the emphasis again on the relational nature of space. As stated by Normore:

With their inventive blend of media and collaborative production, feasts blurred the boundaries between spectator and spectacle,

³² Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the Authors.

³³ On unicorn's horn and its power, see Stark 2003-04, with bibliography.

creator and audience, and in so doing helped form a culture deeply invested in discernment, whether directed toward objects, other humans, or one's own motivations. (2015, 3)

The nef extends and embodies the power of the sovereign precisely because it is in its proximity within an anti-structural space, where all the components 'blend' together. Both spatial relationships previously analysed make table ships a useful resource within medieval banquets. A simple model of a ship could only count on a symbolic reference, but by containing salt, spices and other precious objects it becomes tangible proof of the wide range on which the power of the sovereign can act. If the nef were not placed in front of the person of high rank it could not extend his person.

'To sit above the salt' and 'to sit below the salt' are two expressions of the English language that indicate a respectively high or low status of the subject.³⁴ Both come from the overlap between the geography of power and the geography of the banquet, where the salt cellar - often a nef - is the central element (Plass 1963). Precisely by virtue of the container-contained relationship, the nef divides the space, reaffirming the distinctions of power: here we can find the agency of the object. The banquet participants are socialised to this politicised space precisely because they are part of those conventional interpretations incorporated into the nef. The fact that the precious salt cellars - of which the nef is a fine example - entered an idiomatic expression testifies that they represented power. However, we must not forget that the tabletop ships were only one of the cogs of the ritual machine called banquet. The success of the nef also lies more in its ability to recursively summarise the banquet, which is basically a rite of redistribution, of conspicuous consumption, of potlatch, useful to reaffirm the power of the sovereign. In the banquet ritual, eating becomes a public act of sharing: the seats were counted in bowls, as each bowl and glass was shared by two diners. The bread used as a cutting board was given in alms, the personalities of higher rank chose the courses which they then distributed (Malinverni 2016). The medieval banquet seems to be a historical example of a broader human tendency that we can call the rite of redistribution (Pollock 2015). From the Roman banquets, the Christian Agape feasts, which can perhaps boast a historical continuity with our case, to the *potlatches* of the Kwakiutl, to the feasts for the Trobriand gardens (Mauss 2004), in many human societies the reaffirmation of power comes through the capacity of the leaders to redistribute resources. The nef summarises all these dimensions in their own material symbolisms and symbolic spaces: the ability to procure spices, to possess precious objects and to control

34 See the idiom under the entry salt in Brewer's dictionary (1923).

adversity are displayed at the very moment in which resources are redistributed and the prestige is shared. However, seeing the banquet as a ritual of resource distribution should not be understood as a practice where power itself is distributed; resources are distributed unequally to highlight the power of those who can distribute them, reaffirming an unequal hierarchy. If, on the one hand, nefes divide the space in a hierarchical manner, on the other hand they reconnect the two halves: nefes are placed on the table by a servant and their contents are shared among different society strata, but that is made possible only thanks to the lord.

7 Conclusion

Through royal inventories, miniatures and a series of examples of tabletop ships, we have analysed one of the central mechanisms in the art of the banquet. We have seen how the emergence of nefes from the first half of the fourteenth century constituted a central element in outlining the power relations within the ritual space. The ability and the multi-mediality of the object to symbolise different elements of prestige through the incorporation of travel, preciousness and geographical extension are resources employed in a greater symbolic mechanism, in which the powerful reaffirms the hierarchy by redistributing resources and reaffirming the bonds with his peers. The nef extends the space of the sovereign's person by dividing the ritual space, mediating prestige and power and apodictically naturalising the status of the ruler. The nef invites us to look at space not as an empty vessel but as a sociocultural construct which, by separating bodies through specific devices, draws a hierarchy of power. This takes place through a reworking of symbolic forms and materials that are evident in the case of table ships: in fact, each spatial dimension of nef testifies to a relationship of power.

Abbreviations

BGE	Bibliothèque de Genève
BL	British Library
BM	Bibliothèque municipale
BnF	Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France
Musée Condé	Bibliothèque et archives du musée Condé
Petit Palais	Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-arts de la Ville de Paris

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