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Decorum and experience

essays in ancient culture for John Baines

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Ivory model of a dog from the Hierakonpolis 'Main Deposit'
(photograph by David Gowers)

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Fragment of the 'Battlefield Palette' depicting bound captives
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'Fleishpots of Egypt': rethinking temple economy in the ancient Near East

David Wengrow

Introduction

In this paper I offer some observations on the dual significance of meat – as substance and symbol, commodity and sacred offering – in early complex societies, focussing upon Egypt, but also with reference to neighbouring societies in South West Asia (for more detailed discussions of meat economy, with a mainly Egyptian focus, see Ikram 1995; Arnold 2005; and for meat sacrifice and symbolism, Eyre 2002). Much of what follows is admittedly speculative (an 'essay' in the true sense), and requires further substantiation. It is intended, first and foremost, as an attempt to revitalise the notion of 'temple economy' by modelling the relationship between organised ritual sacrifice and large-scale commerce.

I propose to develop the point that ceremonial redistribution and profit-oriented trade, rather than constituting self-contained or alternative systems of value (as with Polanyi *et al.* 1957; Bleiberg 1996; 2007; see also Lipiński 1979; Warburton 1997), were integrated features of early temple economies (cf. Silver 1985; Sherratt and Sherratt 1991; Bevan 2010). Central to both, I suggest, was the charismatic value generated through sacrificial offerings to deities, as exemplified here by the treatment of edible leftovers from religious feasts: a sensitive point of 'decorum' in many societies. I offer these thoughts in appreciation of an inspirational scholar whose generosity towards me extends back to my undergraduate days, although he has never taught me in any formal capacity. So, this is my first essay for John Baines.

Meat as substance and symbol

A Sumerian poem, composed during the second millennium BCE, tells how the goddess Inanna was drawn into the subterranean world where the dead dwell. Her bodily appearance, before her descent into the netherworld, is that of a divine cult statue, covered and protected with a metallic skin and ornamented with precious stones. On passing below the earth into the kingdom of the dead, she undergoes a tragic change of condition, from immortal to mortal being. The change is symbolised by a transformation in the nature of her flesh. It ceases to comprise an array of precious stones and metals (the flesh of the gods) and instead becomes a haunch of meat (the flesh of mortals). The rulers of the netherworld hang the meat on a peg in the wall, where it starts to rot, until Inanna is eventually rescued

and her divine body restored with cleansing substances – the 'grass of life' and the 'water of life' (Black *et al.* 1998–2006: t.1.4.1).

Meat belongs to the category of bodily substances and phenomena, shared by humans and animals, which is internally known and experienced without first being explicitly defined or externally represented (cf. Fischler 1990; Fiddes 1991). In this it differs from substances that originate outside the body such as wood, soil, stone, or metal. Because our understanding of it is – at a very elementary level – indivisible from our understanding of the body itself (and hence of the person), meat has a symbolic plasticity that it would otherwise not possess. What this means is that the concept of meat can be abstracted, represented, inverted, denied, and violated in all kinds of imaginative ways, without undermining its essential point of reference in the body; its undeniable, yet rarely articulated connection to our sense of self.

But meat is also hidden, at most times, below the skin and hair. Its external appearance, on bodies exposed or opened by injury, constitutes a state of social (as well as physical) vulnerability and incompleteness, auguring sickness, exclusion, and death. Meat also contains other substances, blood and bones, which under ordinary conditions are similarly to be kept under the skin, and exposure to which must be carefully managed to avoid contagion. Meat is, then, a binding material, the positive efficacy of which depends upon life and well-being. Without the force of life, meat loses its energy, and rots away into nothingness, emitting foul odours, and laying the body open to attack by parasites and scavengers. Bad meat, whether ingested or simply by being present, brings illness and death. Meat and its transformations therefore lend themselves readily to a study of social institutions in which 'life' is understood to be a limited commodity (cf. Bloch and Parry 1982), given to humans by gods, ancestors, or other supernatural beings beyond their control; beings that – unlike mortals, or goddesses foolish enough to wander into Hades – possess life in infinite supply.

Meat and 'non-meat': towards a theory of ritual efficacy

If the awareness of meat forms part of our sensory and psychological make-up, without necessarily having to be formally articulated through language or other

external signs, then to evoke the form of the body through representation is also to evoke the presence of the flesh or draw attention to its absence. I would like to suggest the term ‘non-meat’ for types of cultural representation that exploit this perceptual bias for ritual effect (for general observations on the role of ‘counter-intuitive’ representations in ritual, see Boyer 1994; but also salient critique by Keane 2008). Representations of the type I have in mind evoke the solid form of bodily organisms, but in precisely those spaces of the body where we intuitively expect to find meat they insert some other filling or binding substance(s); substitute materials whose properties of transformation and distribution are distinct from those of flesh, but which are nevertheless associated with it through their location on the body.

It is not the mere fact of substitution that is of interest here, but the extension of that substitution within a more encompassing system of ritual symbols and practices. ‘Non-meat’, on this suggested definition, devalues ‘ordinary meat’, ascribing it low value within a hierarchical register of bodily substances that express differences of rank (typically symbolised as varying degrees of bodily purity and duration) among mortals, ancestors, and gods. At the same time, however, bodies composed of ‘non-meat’ always feed on ordinary meat, which must be routinely sacrificed and offered before them as part of their bodily constitution, and in order to confirm their elevated status. Sacrificial meat that has been fortified by passing through the digestive system of supernatural Others (whose manner of consumption is culturally defined and therefore variable) may in turn re-enter the economy of the living as special or blessed food, the ingestion of which brings bodies composed of ordinary meat a little closer to perfection than they would otherwise be (for the cultural logic of this transformative process, and further examples, see Bloch 1992).

Lynn Meskell, for instance, has drawn attention to the Neolithic practice – widely documented in South West Asia – of re-fleshing dismembered human skulls with clay and plaster. These are materials which, like meat, dry out and harden when baked. Such practices, she suggests, are the result of concerns and desires ‘about permanence, restoration and ultimately fortifying or improving upon the fragilities of fleshed matter through a focussed curation of the skeletal remains’ (Meskell 2008: 374). It has been shown in at least one case (from northern Israel) that the extended process of revivifying human skulls in this way also involved the killing and consumption of wild cattle in mortuary feasts (Goring-Morris and Horwitz 2007). At least 500 kg of cattle meat was consumed in one such ceremony, which marked the primary burial of the human

body from which the skull was subsequently removed, in order to be plastered, decorated, and reintroduced into the living community. The rest of the body (the post-cranial parts) remained below the ground, together with remains of sacrificed cattle whose crania had been similarly removed, and were kept in circulation.

Recent studies have considered the methods used to prepare meat (and other foods) for consumption in Neolithic societies. A broad set of contrasts may be drawn between South West Asia and Saharan Africa, in respect of the use or non-use of ceramics, and the presence or absence of fixed ovens (Haaland 2007; Fuller and Rowlands 2009). As has long been recognised, pottery was not a feature of early Neolithic life in South West Asia, where plants and animals were first domesticated around 10,000 years ago. By contrast, across much of inland North Africa, the use of ceramics for cooking long precedes the introduction of domestic plants and animals. From this it has been reasonably deduced that roasting and grilling, rather than boiling and steaming, were the basic methods of meat preparation in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic of the Near East (Fig. 1). In reconstructing the wider social and ritual milieu of meat consumption, these contrasts in methods of cooking have a greater-than-technological significance.

As highlighted by Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant (1989) for ancient Greece, the roasting of meat generates particular flows of substances that serve as an index of human relations to, and distance from, the divine: a point which can be generalised, on the basis of archaeological and ancient literary sources, to other Mediterranean and Middle Eastern societies (Fuller and Rowlands 2009). Roasting meat – as opposed to cooking it in a closed container – produces aromas and fumes that rise into the air, forming a point of mediation between mortals and distant or invisible gods. An Egyptian representation of this process, from the New Kingdom, is preserved in the relief carvings from the temple of Amenophis III at Luxor, which show the king roasting a spitted fowl (and fanning the fumes upwards) before a cult image, which ‘responds’ with a phallic erection (Fig. 2a–b; cf. Nelson 1949: 210, figs. 7–8; Brunner 1977: pls. 140–41; the contextual association of roasting scenes with phallic imagery – a favourite target of later destruction – may account for their generally poor levels of preservation on New Kingdom temples).

As Fuller and Rowlands (2009) point out, sacrificial roasting of meat was a common feature of religious commensality among the first literate societies of western Eurasia, from the Indus to the Mediterranean. In each case the gods were considered to feed upon the intangible fumes (preferably spiced) that rise from an altar, brazier, or spit, leaving the meat as a consecrated

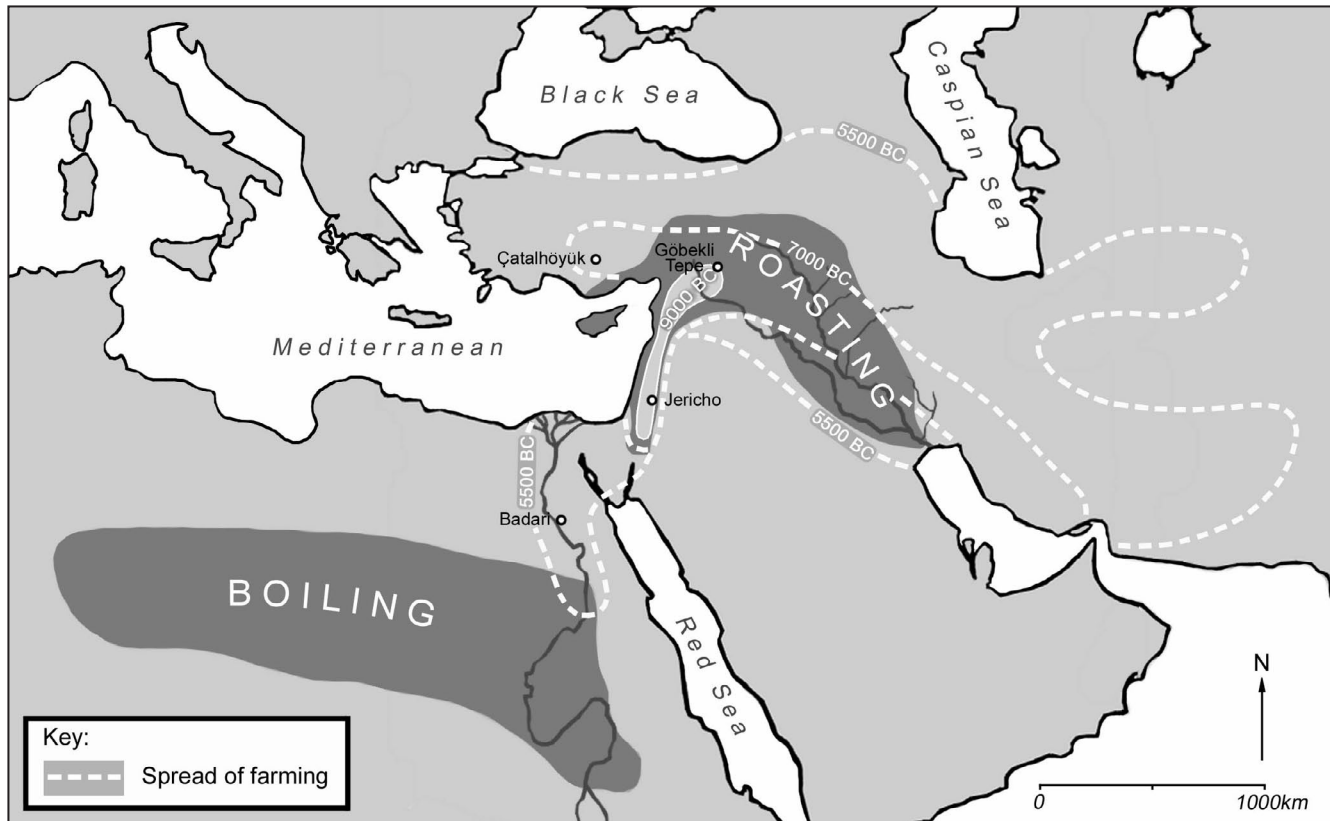


Fig. 1 Prehistoric cooking traditions, and the spread of farming, c.10,000 to 5000 BC (drawn by Mary Shepperson, after original by Dorian Q. Fuller; see Fuller and Rowlands 2009).

residue to be shared out in a communal meal, to which only a select group of initiates was invited (see also Bergquist 1993; for cuneiform sources on roasting for the gods, see Bottéro 2004; Verhoeven 1984 provides further Egyptian sources). They contrast this complex of culinary-cum-ritual traditions with others centred upon East Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, in which boiling and steaming (both of animal and plant foods) take precedence over roasting and baking as canonical modes of ritual commensality (although a binary opposition on this scale is likely to be too simple; e.g. see Keightley 1999: 258). In those alternate cases, the emphasis is not on releasing food substances to propitiate remote and distant gods. Rather it is upon the sealing of meat offerings within a container – fortifying their flavours, softening their texture, and collecting their juices – so that, together with sticky accompaniments (rice or millet, rather than wheat-based), they draw together the living and deceased members of descent groups in a common meal.

Also revealing, in this context, is the inversion of canonical meat-roasting procedures in Mesopotamian and Egyptian literary sources, as a means of signalling proximity between kings and gods. One such inversion comes at the conclusion to the temple hymn of Gudea, when the king achieves (for a short time) a level of direct commensality with the deities whose house at Lagash he has renovated, and prepares for them a banquet comprising foods that are designated as being

‘untouched by fire’ (Black *et al.* 1998–2006: t.2.1.7, l. 881). Another comes at the climax to that part of the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts known as the Cannibal Hymn (Eyre 2002: 7–10, with extensive commentary). The deceased Egyptian king consumes the magic of the gods via the intermediary of a sacrificial bull, which he prepares for slaughter. A series of incantations euphorise the activities of killing, butchery, and consumption; gods then arrive on the scene to assist in decapitating the bull, removing its innards, and building a hearth on which its dismembered parts are cooked in cauldrons. At this point in the composition (Eyre 2002: 9, ll. 405–6), the roasting of meat is notable by its absence. Instead the sacrificial flesh of the bull is boiled in a closed container, which seals its juices, marking the king’s return to the family of the gods, whose female members emerge to stir the stew in the pot (see further, Wengrow 2010: 135–36, 146–49).

Bodily substances and state formation in early Egypt

Before turning to the theme of temple economy, I want to make a short digression in order to consider the relevance of these ideas for understandings of early state formation. Transmutations of the flesh, of the kind I have discussed, were central in various (largely unexplored) ways to the emergence of the dynastic state in Egypt. The flesh in question was that of deceased kin, where bodies – in death – were the traditional focus

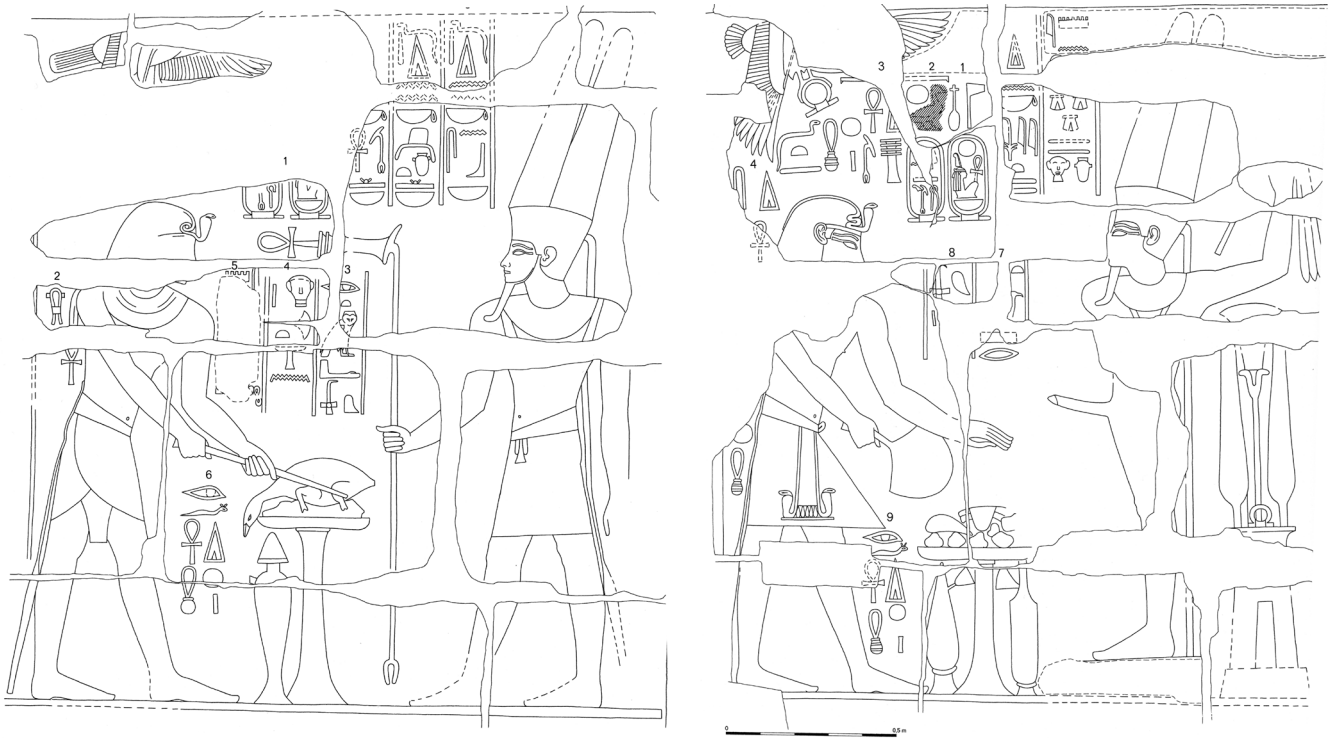


Fig. 2a–b Amenophis III roasting and fanning a spitted fowl on the altar, Luxor temple relief (after Brunner 1977, pls. 140–41).

of elaborate funerary rites, the development of which can be traced continuously from Neolithic to dynastic times (Wengrow 2006). A focussed attention on the treatment of the flesh becomes evident, archaeologically, in the Naqada II period (roughly the mid-fourth millennium BCE), with clear implications for the scope of associated funerary rites, and hence for the community of living participants in the ritual. It is at this juncture in the development of Egyptian burial rites that practices of bodily dismemberment (which imply the development of technical expertise in defleshing) become apparent, as do the first uses of artificial preservative techniques for both human and animal corpses (Wengrow and Baines 2004).

Changes in the flesh of the deceased during Naqada II can be further associated with changes in the types of food that were considered appropriate for the dead, and which now included (for the first time) significant quantities of leavened bread and beer, as indicated by the presence of associated coarse-wares in graves (Wengrow 2006: 94, 122–23; Friedman 1994: 26–28; Buchez 1998; and note the significant absence of similar developments in A-group Nubia to the south, where meat sacrifice may have remained isolated from the centralised production and consumption of fermented cereal products, reflecting the more limited scale of agrarian economy, but also, perhaps, a contrasting complex of ideas relating to food, sacrifice, and the treatment of ancestors; Wengrow 2006: 173; cf. Edwards 2003).

A continuous (although not uncontested) pattern of innovation can be traced in the physical constitution of the dead body (and in the associated refinement

of cuisine for the dead) throughout the Naqada III period, when mummification – and the furnishing of elite tombs with cult statues – transformed funerary rites into greatly extended mortuary rituals (Wengrow 2006: 218–58). Innovation followed the broad path of increasingly complex and exclusive treatments of the body in death – incorporating exotic oils, drying agents, and unguents into the purification of the flesh – coupled with increasingly lavish funerary feasts. As Baines has noted, the recycling of meat offerings (for which sophisticated techniques of preservation were now similarly available) is likely to have been a central feature of these extended ritual occasions:

Preparation of the body for burial could take most of a year, while the processes and materials involved were probably polluting and were discarded ceremonially. A first dynasty tomb belonging to one of the two or three leading people in the country bears a likely reminder of the funeral in the form of hundreds of cattle horns set into the plastered bench of the facade (Emery [1954: 8–9] estimated 300). The most plausible interpretation of this feature is that animals – whether or not these ones or this number of them – were slaughtered at the funeral and their horns were placed there as a token of that event. If so, the meat could have been distributed to vast numbers of people. (Baines 2006: 269)

Ceremonies of this kind were no doubt instrumental in consolidating an extended community of elite groups and individuals (probably recruited at the top end of regional kinship networks, from which wider allegiances followed), cutting across the boundaries of pre-existing territorial and lineage-based alliances. Solidarity within this select group may have resided, to

a significant degree, in their common ingestion of substances that had passed through the ritually fortified body of the deceased king (for a partial parallel, in a more recent African context, see Warnier 2007).

Sanctified leftovers as an aspect of Bronze Age economics

In a study of food production and distribution at Tell el-Amarna, Barry Kemp (in Kemp, Samuel, and Luff 1994) has highlighted the extraordinary scale of meat sacrifice in the city’s major temples, and its implications for a wider understanding of economic life in the Egyptian New Kingdom (1540–1070 BCE). As he points out, there is much about the relationship between temples and the wider economy that remains unclear. The rich evidence from Amarna – combining written and pictorial sources with architectural plans and detailed distributions of artefacts such as commodity jars and labels – nevertheless allows him to make some important observations. The unusual ideological circumstances of Amarna’s foundation should not be an obstacle to informed generalisation on these points, as the city’s foundation represents an extreme, but in no way deviant, example of state-driven centralisation.

Temples in Amarna’s ‘Central City’ were not only places where large numbers of animals were slaughtered and cooked for the gods on festive occasions. They were also the centres of a sophisticated food industry, in which meat and cereal products were the prime commodities. The Great Aten complex was equipped with large-scale facilities for the processing, packaging, and transport of meat, including specialised storage and administrative compounds, and some 1820 offering tables, which filled the open courtyards of the temple enclosure. The temple, as Kemp (in Kemp, Samuel, and Luff 1994: 136) puts it, ‘was clearly designed to suck in offerings on a lavish scale.’ The offerings in question were food offerings, and are depicted in some detail on the walls of private tombs. They include a standard combination of ‘bread, vegetables, whole geese, and joints of beef, topped with bowls of burning incense’ (Kemp, Samuel, and Luff 1994: 136), which were piled high on the altars. Both incense and wine were imported to Amarna on a large scale, from estates distributed throughout the country and, in the case of incense, from more distant sources (see Boivin and Fuller 2009). Meat and cereal products, by contrast, were locally produced in the city’s extensive rural estates, which occupied a continuous 20 km swathe of the Nile Valley, and were administered by high-ranking officials of the Aten cult, who also held high positions in the royal administration.

Excavations at Amarna have also produced extensive evidence for the temple’s role as an arbiter of quality control; a place where the status of organic produce

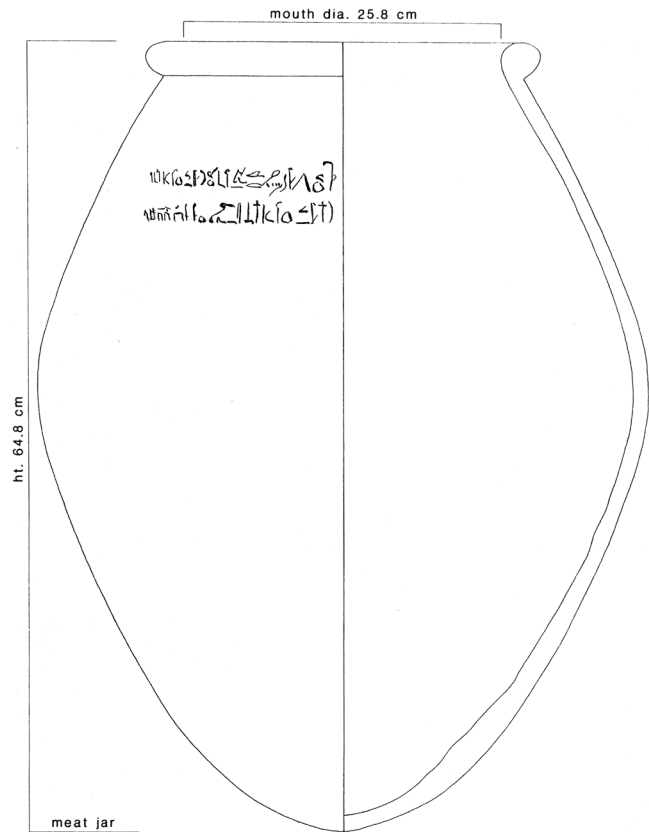


Fig. 3 Ceramic ‘meat jar’ with ink label, from Amarna (after Kemp, Samuel, and Luft 1994: 140, fig. 14.3).

(including bread and wine, as well as meat) was determined and authorised in the form of a label, attached or inscribed directly onto a ceramic container (and for other New Kingdom examples, see Hayes 1951). The information contained on such labels combines elements of bureaucratic notation and symbolic value, in a manner highly comparable to more recent brand labels (cf. Wengrow 2008; Bevan 2010). Beef, in particular, was a major concern, and contemporary temple relief depicts cattle specially bred and fattened to maximise their yield. After slaughter in one of the temples’ butchery courts, dried and salted portions of beef were packed in ceramic jars marked with ink labels, which identify their origin in the performance of a major festival, or in the regular cult of the Aten. Hence, for example: ‘Regnal year 7, 3rd month of summer. The depot “Soul of Ra lives” [an epithet of Aten]. Preserved meat: intestines, of the daily offerings, provided by the butcher Wepet’ (Pendlebury 1951: II, pl. 92, nos. 204–6; and cf. Fig. 3).

From evidence such as this, Kemp draws a number of wider conclusions. The combination of spatial and inscriptional evidence from Amarna strongly suggests that ‘part of the daily meat offering in the Great Aten Temple, derived from cattle slaughtered on the spot, would be preserved and packed into ... jars ... ready either for storage there or for dispatch elsewhere’ (in Kemp, Samuel, and Luff 1994: 142). This implies that the ‘offering’ of meat, as required by the divine cult, did not involve actually cooking it, but was instead

(symbolically) achieved by the burning of incense in proximity to fresh joints, arranged on an altar in the open air. At some point, perhaps when the incense had burned out, and the meat had absorbed the flavours of its sacrificial accompaniments, the joints were carved, hung, salted, or otherwise preserved, and then packed for storage and distribution. As Kemp (in Kemp, Samuel, and Luff 1994: 143) points out, ‘distribution’ may have included commercial sales as well as official disbursements to temple personnel, and this possibility is supported by a slightly later papyrus source from Thebes, which documents the sale of temple meat to ‘traders’ in return for silver (Janssen 1979: 515, n. 28). It is important to note, in this context, that temple meat (which was itself graded along a varying scale) represents only the upper tier of a much wider meat economy, including many private sources, and in which much of what people consumed carried no such official sanction of quality or mark of distinction (Kemp, Samuel, and Luff 1994: 143–45; Ikram 1995).

Conclusion: ‘No takeaway?’

It is instructive to compare Kemp’s interpretation of the evidence from Tell el-Amarna with Leo Oppenheim’s more general characterisation of Mesopotamian temple sacrifice, and its relationship to a wider economic milieu:

The best products of the agricultural holdings, fields and gardens, and of the immense herds of cattle, sheep, and goats, were sent to the temple, to be used in three different ways: as food served to the image as required by the daily ceremonial of the sanctuary, as income or rations to the administrators and workers who supervised and prepared the food for the god’s table, and, third, to be either *stored for future use or converted into export goods and exchanged for raw materials the organization was in need of.* (Oppenheim 1977: 187, my italics)

But Oppenheim then goes on, paradoxically, to assert that:

The large amounts of food, beer, bread, and sweets, and the great number of animals brought in every day from the pastures to be slaughtered, were destined for distribution among the personnel of the sanctuary. A complex cultic terminology was used to characterize the nature, destination, and other characteristics of the incoming deliveries. What was not earmarked for the table of the main deity, his consort, children, and servant gods was distributed, again in a traditionally fixed ratio, to administrators and craftsmen. (Oppenheim 1977: 189)

And then, still more strongly:

The Mesopotamian deity remained aloof – yet its partaking of the ceremonial repast gave religious sanction, political status, and economic stability to the entire temple organism, which circulated products from fields

and pastures across the sacrificial table to those who were either, so to speak, shareholders of the institution or received rations from it. (Oppenheim 1977: 191)

Oppenheim’s account seems to waver between two very different understandings, not only of the place of food in temple ritual, but of Bronze Age economies more generally. On one understanding, the temple operates on the basis of *geschlossene Hauswirtschaft*: a closed household economy, organised around the ritual feeding of a cult statue (compare discussion in Sherratt and Sherratt 1998: 331). Goods of all kinds pass as sacrificial offerings before the god, who takes his or her share, while the edible leftovers (‘transubstantiated’, as Oppenheim puts it, by contact with the sacred) are redistributed to the extended community of cult officials on a hierarchical pattern, and with an implicit divine sanction. Redistributive systems of the kind envisaged by Oppenheim have often been contrasted with market-oriented economies, where only the latter are assumed to be influenced by commercial forces. But lurking within his analysis, and more directly implied in that of Kemp, is an alternative understanding of temple economy as a many-layered system, in which the charismatic power of sacrificial leftovers was not exhausted by the temple community, but carried over into a wider economic arena through specialised processes of packaging and labelling (cf. Kozuh’s 2010 analysis of meat dispensation at the Eanna temple of Uruk in the mid-first millennium BCE).

In many societies, the treatment of leftovers (as opposed to inedible waste) from meals is a central feature of ‘decorum’ (both in Baines’ sense, e.g. 2007: 14–17, and the more vernacular one), and one that is often foregrounded at festive times, when food is prepared in quantities greatly exceeding the possibilities of immediate or even short-term consumption. While many recent studies have considered the importance of food and feasting in early complex societies (e.g. Dietler and Hayden 2001; Bray 2003), few have given detailed consideration to the social construction of exclusivity through secondary and tertiary disbursements of residues that carry (quite literally) the stamp of divine and/or royal approval: a practice that can be traced back to the beginnings of urban life in Mesopotamia (Wengrow 2008; Bevan 2010), and to the origins of the dynastic state in Egypt (Endesfelder 1991; Kahl 1995; Wengrow 2006: 235–39).

Perhaps this theoretical coyness about leftovers is itself attributable in part to the legacy of Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian cultural traditions in which, as Martin West (1997: 41–42) notes, ‘The meat that was to be eaten by the sacrificers had all to be consumed at the feast, or else destroyed. Greek sacral regulations constantly stipulate “No takeaway”, and this is also

the Jewish law.’ It is important to note that the origin and force of those injunctions lies within social movements of the first millennium BCE, which explicitly (and sometimes violently) questioned the role of kings and temple hierarchies as mediators with the divine (Arnason, Eisenstadt, and Wittrock 2005). This is revealing in itself, and points towards the likelihood of a very different set of normative expectations in the temple economies of the Bronze Age, whose basic structure survived – in Egypt and Mesopotamia – well into the Iron Age, providing a cultural foil to the prophets of an ‘axial age’.

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