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Towards an Archaeology of Commensal Spaces. An Introduction

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Toward an Archaeology of Commensal Spaces*

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Towards an Archaeology of Commensal Spaces. An Introduction

The centrality of commensality—eating and drinking together in a common physical and social setting—in people’s everyday lives makes it a particularly important location from which to explore social relations and the working of politics. The recent focus in archaeology and related disciplines on feasting and other special commensal occasions needs to be balanced by attention to daily commensality, in which crucial elements of social reproduction take place. I highlight two particular forms of commensal practices, hospitality and provisioning, that resonate with many of the cases discussed in the papers in this volume. Finally, I point to a largely neglected area of study in archaeology, that of hunger and its implications for the politics of commensality.

Archaeology; commensality; co-presence; hospitality; daily meals; provisioning; hunger.

Kommensalität — das gemeinsame Essen und Trinken in einem gemeinsamen physischen und sozialen Rahmen — spielt eine fundamentale Rolle im menschlichen Alltagsleben. Diese zentrale Bedeutung macht Kommensalität zu einem besonders wichtigen Ausgangspunkt für die Erforschung sozialer Beziehungen und politischer Mechanismen. Um die in jüngster Zeit in der Archäologie und verwandten Disziplinen zu beobachtende einseitige Fokussierung auf Feste und andere besondere kommensale Anlässe zu relativieren, sollte der Blick auf Alltagskommensalität gerichtet werden, in deren Rahmen sich entscheidende Prozesse sozialer Reproduktion abspielen. Ich werde zwei besondere Formen von kommensalen Praktiken hervorheben, Gastfreundschaft und die Zuteilung von bzw. Versorgung mit Lebensmitteln (“provisioning”), die in vielen Facetten in den Beiträgen dieses Bandes diskutiert werden. Schließlich erörtere ich den in der Archäologie weitgehend vernachlässigten Forschungsbereich Hunger und dessen Implikationen für die Nutzung von Kommensalität als Machtinstrument.

Archäologie; Kommensalität; Co-Präsenz; Gastfreundschaft; tägliche Mahlzeiten; Versorgung; Hunger.

1 Introduction

Food and food consumption as topics of contemporary popular discourse confront us at every turn. Food stands at the center of many current debates: is there too much or too little, fast food or slow food? Which food is safe to eat: only organic or also genetically engineered crops? How does food become contaminated with dioxin and other carcinogens, and who decides what are the “acceptable” levels of such poisons? Food prices on world markets fluctuate with breathtaking speed, due at least in some measure to speculation on “futures,” while riots break out in many places when governments cut subsidies on staples. In a world where (some) people are as hungry for cheap energy and consumer goods as for food, prime agricultural land is rapidly turned over to the production of bio-fuels in a panicked attempt to counter rising oil prices and the ever more undeniable risks associated with atomic energy. At the same time “fresh” fish are flown half way around the world to appear on the tables of those affluent enough to afford them. Nearly one billion people out of an estimated world population of seven billion are hungry, according to statistics for 2010 compiled by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization; more than 20% of the populations of the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Greece,

Slovakia and Mexico are considered obese, and the figure for the United States stands at more than 30% (OECD data for 2003: http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/hea_obe-health-obesity). Against this background it is only appropriate that academic research, even in seemingly out-of-the-way fields such as archaeology, has also turned to the study of food.

In certain respects archaeology's interest in food is not new. Long-standing preoccupations with subsistence practices have been particularly closely associated with research on the Neolithic origins of food production—agriculture and animal husbandry. In studies focused on periods following this 'revolutionary' development, food has tended to recede to a shadowy presence in the background, discussed primarily in terms of catchment areas, population sizes, or the technological and social conditions that permitted greater or lesser degrees of 'freedom' from agricultural activities in favor of more specialized forms of craft production. Some researchers have emphasized the nutritional elements of food choice and health outcomes, placing the analytical burden on the individual or the population.¹ Others, including the authors of the papers published here, devote their attention to the intersubjective: the social rather than the biological body, food preparation and consumption as integral aspects of the building and maintenance of community, and symbolic elements of food.²

The papers collected in this special theme issue of *eTopoi* are the products of a two-day, international conference held in Berlin on 31 May–1 June 2010 and sponsored by Topoi.³ The conference brought together scholars from a range of disciplines, including ancient and modern history, archaeology of Western Asia, South America, and Europe, and Assyriology. Among the themes underscored in the invitation to participants, two played a prominent role in the papers and discussions: foregrounding the central role of commensality in social life and investigating the relationships between feasts and quotidian meals. In this essay I explore these two themes as well as their implications for hospitality, provisioning, and hunger in the past.

2 Commensality

A fundamental element of meals, whether spectacular feasts involving numerous invited guests or humble repasts shared by family members, is commensality. The word derives from the Latin *com* = together with, and *mensa* = table. On the most basic level, commensality is about eating and drinking together, but it is far more than just a physical act: it also comprises the myriad social and political elements entailed in those occasions.

Underpinning commensality is co-presence, the relevance of which is central to an understanding of the sharing that is at the heart of the commensal act. As pointed out by Georg Simmel, people cannot actually share food—what one person has eaten, another

1 e.g., Larsen 2006; Ungar 2007.

2 e.g., Elias 1977; Mintz 1996; Dietler and Hayden 2001; Atalay and Hastorf 2006; Twiss 2007.

3 The conference forms part of a larger project, "Commensality and Shared Space in the Context of Early State and Urban Development in Mesopotamia and Southwest Iran," that I am conducting within Topoi Area C-III "Acts." I am grateful to Topoi for the financial support and intellectual climate that makes such projects possible. I would particularly like to thank the many staff members at Topoi who helped with the conference organization, most especially Dr. Henrike Simon. I am also grateful to Ms. Jana Eger, Mr. Jannik Korte, and Mr. Kilian Teuwsen for their help with various aspects of conference logistics. I would especially like to express my appreciation to all of the conference participants. In addition to those who have contributed papers for publication, participants included Dr. Liliana Janik and Dr. Astrid Möller, and as discussants Dr. Robin Nadeau, Dr. Sabine Reinhold, and Prof. Joanne Rowland. For critical and constructive comments on this introductory essay, I am indebted to Reinhard Bernbeck and Carolin Jauß.

cannot.⁴ However, by being together in the same space, in both a physical and social sense—in other words being co-present⁵—people share in a different way in alimentary consumption. Acts of shared consumption consist of partaking together of food or drink, while at the same time a separation occurs through the apportionment of food or drink to others. Commensal acts are an integral part of sociality, which must be continually reinforced through practice; the giving and taking of food and drink represent an archetypal form of social practice.⁶ From a *physiological* essential for survival of the newborn, the sharing of food becomes transformed into a *social* necessity.

For Erving Goffman⁷ co-presence is an integral part of the routinization of specific social gatherings that are crucial to the existence of social life.⁸ Habitual forms of social interactions allow people to deal with each other on the basis of a fundamental, implicit trust. This trust rests, in turn, on the assumption that through some degree of shared experience actors understand enough of each others' actions and motivations to be able to anticipate responses to and outcomes of their participation in a social encounter. This leads to expectations that are based on "common ground" and are seldom contradicted in daily life, hence usually going unnoticed. Routine and trust do not just happen, however; they must be worked on via mundane conversation that often lacks any apparent goal because means and ends of an action coincide.⁹ They result as well from a "reflexive self-monitoring"¹⁰ of the minute details of one's own and others' gestures, movements, and body language and from a mutual coordination of interaction that is based on this monitoring.¹¹

Conversation as well as extra-linguistic communicative acts are integral elements of co-presence in general and of commensality in particular. Although conversation may range from the apparently banal to highly stereotyped forms of politeness, its role in establishing, reinforcing as well as modifying social relations cannot be underestimated.¹² Coming together around a meal or a drink is not limited to the actual act of consumption; rather, the entire social act, from presentation of food or beverages to the seating and serving order, the utensils used, the setting, time of day, conversation, smells, sounds and tastes¹³ all contribute to the perpetuation of as well as changes in social constellations and political relations. They comprise a *fait total social*¹⁴ with ramifications throughout society.

It is exactly at the level of the micro-social and micro-political that commensality plays an essential part. In the same way that the *Alltagsgeschichte* ("history of the everyday") movement in history has drawn attention to the importance of the minutiae of everyday practices in understanding recent history, so, too, can the everyday-ness of commensality contribute to deep time archaeological and historical accounts that begin to unravel the intricate webs by which ordinary people's mundane acts constitute history. Tracking the flow of food and drink as well as the ingredients and the labor that go into producing them offers the potential to chart networks of established and shifting social relations. Through myriad, more or less repetitive acts of quotidian life, culture and social

4 Simmel 1957/1910.

5 Goffman 1963.

6 Därmann 2008.

7 Goffman 1963.

8 Giddens 1984, 72.

9 See also Habermas 1981.

10 Giddens 1984, 78.

11 Lenz 1991.

12 Goffman 1967; Habermas 1981.

13 Sutton 2001; Parker Pearson 2003, 6–7.

14 Mauss 1967/1925.

relations are reproduced. In the case of commensality, these acts are framed by the form and content of daily meals as well as their physical and social settings. Out of them comes an (implicit) expectation of stability in social relations.

Alltagsgeschichte is not, however, about the blind repetition of meaningless routines but rather incorporates wider or more restricted *Handlungsräume*, which in turn permit some degree of latitude for experimentation, variation and small acts of subversiveness or *Eigensinn* that ultimately shape history at multiple levels. Practices may often adhere to expectations, but they also always contain the potential for negotiation and change, however incremental, that can ultimately transform them and their contexts in the long run. Histories of daily commensality that link the micro-level with larger-scale political changes remain as yet largely unexplored, but they represent one of the particularly promising possibilities for connecting multiple spheres of life and scales of analysis by drawing on fundamental aspects of labor organization and consumption practices across the political economic spectrum.¹⁵ Similarly, the development of new tastes—for different kinds of foods, ways of preparing them, as well as the contexts in which they are consumed—represents an important and little examined research area, one that is situated at the intersection of micro-practices of food preparation, serving, and eating on the one hand and macro-political and economic shifts on the other. Research that investigates the reproduction of tastes cannot be simply predicated on the assumption that food tastes tend to be conservative. This is clear from even a brief reflection on Bourdieu's study of social distinction,¹⁶ in which he demonstrates how socialization into particular class positions shapes tastes—in food, but also in a wide range of cultural activities—that then take on the *appearance* of being “natural.” Studies of tastes must pay equal attention to the possibilities for intended and unintended changes that arise through daily practices associated with commensality.

As the papers in this volume demonstrate quite clearly, the question of who takes part in commensal occasions is highly significant. Whereas daily meals may form around a relatively stable core of participants, special commensal occasions encompass persons who do not usually eat or drink together. Widening the social circle brings with it a variety of other effects. Twiss proposes that commensality involves the “incorporation—embodiment—of social norms” that are ingested together with the food and drink that are consumed. When undertaken in a setting that includes more or different participants than the usual, the act is reinforced by being witnessed and shared by others outside one's regular social circle. This incorporation of social expectations and norms may also take place in a more durable material fashion. The appearance of mass-produced ceramic vessels, initially used for institutional food distribution, in elite as well as non-elite residential contexts at Late Chalcolithic Arslantepe in northern Mesopotamia points to their adoption as part of domestic tableware. With their incorporation into different physical settings came their social connotations as containers for distribution of food in contexts of socioeconomic inequality (D'Anna, Balossi Restelli). Sutton discusses a related example from modern day Kalymnos,¹⁷ where home-baked bread is taken to the church to be blessed and then distributed to other members of the community, thereby bringing an element of the sacred into the realm of daily life (see also Appadurai for a south Indian example¹⁸).

Commensality is clearly about creating and reinforcing social relations. The principal question is then, what kinds of social relations and what sorts of occasions? It is to these questions that the literature on food consumption and feasting has much to contribute.

15 Pollock (in press).

16 Bourdieu 1984.

17 Sutton 2001, 33–34.

18 Appadurai 1981, 506.

3 Feasts and Daily Meals

In the last 15–20 years as archaeologists have begun to direct serious attention to food consumption, many scholars have become enamored by the issue of feasting.¹⁹ For most scholars the focus on feasting goes hand-in-hand with a rediscovered interest in ritual, understood as a particular form of practice or performance.²⁰

Studies of feasting in archaeology have directed attention to the social and political contexts of the consumption of food and drink as well as their roles in fostering and reproducing identities and social relations. In doing so, they draw on the pathbreaking work of cultural anthropologists and historians, including Douglas, Elias, and Appadurai.²¹ While this archaeological work has resulted in many fruitful engagements with elements of the “micro-politics”²² of feasting, it often leads to a one-sided emphasis on the extraordinary to the neglect of everyday commensality. People do not just feast; they also—and much more frequently—take part in quotidian meals that are eaten in the company of particular sets of commensal partners. In the realm of the mundane and ordinary, “gastropolitics”²³ also play a central, if often muted role. Here Foucault’s contention that power—and thereby politics—is everywhere is clearly apposite.²⁴

It is no small irony that archaeologists, who are particularly well positioned to examine general patterns of quotidian food consumption (*contra* Parker Pearson²⁵), have instead devoted their attention primarily to the unusual in the form of feasts. Feasts often produce an array of durable and sometimes spectacular remains that may be easy to identify as the products of special occasions, although as Twiss this volume notes, the archaeological identification of feasts as something other than the ordinary means that the more they resemble everyday meals, the less we are likely to be able to distinguish them. “Ordinary” archaeological contexts commonly yield quantities of cooking and serving utensils (in particular pottery) as well as hearths, ovens and food remains in the form of faunal and floral elements. These speak to the multiplicity of situations in which people engaged in the often arduous tasks of acquiring and preparing food, the social contexts in which it was consumed, and the double form of reproduction—of the biological and the social body—that is thereby at stake.

Recentring the mundane and (seemingly) ordinary rather than giving pride of place to the unusual and spectacular harks back to the admonitions of early feminist anthropologists as well as practice theorists and historians pursuing the study of the everyday. Feminist scholars have pointed out that the common tendency to neglect the seemingly unspectacular productive and reproductive labor of women has led to a skewed picture of social and economic relations in the past and underpins the continuing devaluation of women’s work in contemporary western societies.²⁶ In a related fashion scholars concerned with histories of the everyday have drawn attention to the historical relevance of elements of daily life that are often ignored in large-scale, structural histories.²⁷ Unpacking the ‘black box’ of domestic labor—to which food preparation and consumption are often assumed to be closely linked—sheds light on those elements of daily life that have been frequently downplayed or ignored in the writing of histories. These are principally

19 Dietler 1996; Dietler and Hayden 2001; Bray 2003; Jones 2007.

20 Bell 1992; Kyriakidis 2007.

21 Douglas 1966; Douglas 1975; Elias 1977; Appadurai 1981.

22 Dietler 2001, 6.

23 Appadurai 1981.

24 Foucault 1980/1976; Foucault 1995/1975.

25 Parker Pearson 2003, 10.

26 Sacks 1974; Moore 1988; Brumfiel 1991; Watson and Kennedy 1991.

27 Le Roy Ladurie 1993/1975; Ginzburg 2002/1976; Lüdtke 1989; Iggers 1996; Brooks, DeCorse, and Walton 2008.

the practices and the labor that contribute to social reproduction and thereby to continuities in social life, rather than to the transformative events associated with politics writ large that are often privileged in traditional historical accounts.

One of the principal aims of the Berlin conference was to encourage authors to re-center everyday commensality as an essential element of daily practice. In this way explicit attention is devoted to the micro-politics of *Alltag* (“the everyday”) rather than solely to special occasions, and the existence of a fundamental relationship between ‘ordinary’ and ‘extraordinary’ commensality comes to the fore. From a semiotic perspective, the unusual—in this case the feast—must invariably make reference, even if indirectly, to the usual—the everyday meal—if only to allow the feast to distance itself from the ordinary repast.²⁸ Without the ordinary, it is impossible for something to be extraordinary. Against this background it is clear that studying feasts cannot ignore everyday meals, any more than consumption studies can ignore production. That we nonetheless routinely do so in archaeology may be connected to a long history in Western thought in which eating and drinking have been functionalized as purely physiological necessities, base needs that link us to (other) animals²⁹ or to the “primitive”³⁰. However, such approaches neglect the sociocultural role of tastes (*sensu*)³¹ that can never be reduced solely to physiological bases.

3.1 Rethinking Feasts and Daily Meals in Archaeological and Historical Case Studies

Using a wide variety of different case studies and theoretical reflections, the authors in this volume refer to many of the frequently cited characteristics that distinguish feasts from daily meals. In doing so, their focus is often directed to the special and unusual, as an analytical step in distinguishing the usual. Importantly, however, the definition and exploration of forms of everyday commensality play a significant role in the discussions of commensal occasions, in contexts that range from Neolithic Çatalhöyük (Twiss), to Neolithic and Chalcolithic communities in northern Mesopotamia (Balossi Restelli, Kennedy), Late Bronze Age Tell Bazi (Otto), Formative Andean communities in the Lake Titicaca Basin (Hastorf), as well as Neolithic and Bronze Age Greece (Halstead).

The authors identify a wide range of ways in which daily commensal events are distinct from special occasions. These include the kinds and quantities of foods and drink prepared and consumed, the culinary equipment used in different kinds of meals, the settings in which people consumed food and drinks, performative elements such as singing, dancing, or elaborate rhetoric, as well as the participants. Unsurprisingly, the relative importance of these elements varies depending on the specific historical and cultural context.

Different kinds of foods may mark feasts as distinct from daily meals, with meat being a prominent feasting food, for example at Neolithic Çatalhöyük in Turkey (Twiss) and in mid-20th century rural Greece (Halstead), in contrast to a common emphasis on plant products as everyday staples. In the Andean case discussed by Hastorf, it is also the ways in which foods were prepared, in particular the use of boiling versus steaming, that distinguish daily from special meals. Another kind of differentiation is evident at Late Bronze Age Emar in northern Syria (Sallaberger). There bread was a staple, but it

28 Douglas 1975; see also Dietler 2001, 69; Pollock 2003; Wills and Crown 2004; Twiss 2008, 419; Twiss this volume.

29 Lemke 2008, 9.

30 Sutton 2001, 4.

31 Bourdieu 1984; see also Sutton 2001.

was also transformed into a food suitable for religious festivals by creating elaborate types that required substantial investments of labor to prepare. Only certain kinds of foods were appropriate for religious festivals in Emar: in addition to breads, these included beer, fruit, wine, and meat. Whereas onions and garlic were widely eaten and treated as delicacies in other contexts, they were considered impure and hence had no place in temple-based rituals.

Otto notes that at Late Bronze Age Tall Bazi everyday meals tended to be more varied in composition than ritual ones. The former included bread, beer and groats, as well as different kinds of meats (albeit in small quantities), along with shellfish and vegetables. In contrast, ritual offerings at temples were restricted to beef, mutton or goat, bread and beer. Intriguingly, however, the ritual offerings to gods and ancestors that were performed within houses—in the same rooms where the residents ate their meals—consisted of small portions of the same foods and beverages consumed by people in their own meals.

Several authors point to the symbolic importance of drink, often primarily discernible in the form of the vessels used for consuming beverages. The special importance accorded to acts of drinking, in many cases associated with specific kinds of beverages, offers an interesting case in which the most fundamental form of consumption—drinking, without which it is nearly impossible to survive for more than a few days—is elevated into a carefully marked and ritualized practice. Balossi Restelli demonstrates that in the late Neolithic in the northern Levant, it was ritual drinking that helped to connect communities across substantial geographical distances. In Late Neolithic northern Greece, similarly decorated drinking sets consisting of ceramic bowls and jugs are repeatedly found in communities at some distance from one another, suggesting a shared, standardized ceremonial drinking (Halstead). Halstead notes a similar emphasis on drink, in this case in combination with special foods, for palace-based banquets in the Late Bronze Age in Greece.

Although culinary equipment is often considered a key element that differentiates everyday tableware from that used in feasting contexts, some of the studies presented here suggest that this may take unexpected forms. In Late Chalcolithic northern Mesopotamia (D’Anna, Balossi Restelli, and Kennedy) as well as in Late Bronze Age Greece (Halstead), vessels used in feasts consisted of undecorated and often relatively coarse mass-produced bowls that to some extent were also used in daily meals, although these might sometimes be accompanied by finer wares as well. In Tall Bazi culinary equipment in the temple was very similar to that found in everyday use in the houses, but with a somewhat greater tendency to be decorated. Vessels recovered in association with household altars were often unusual in one way or another, thereby expressly indicating the special nature of the offering. In the Formative Period in the Titicaca Basin of Bolivia, Hastorf notes the tendency for burnished and decorated ceramic vessels to be more frequently associated with ceremonial contexts than with domestic spaces where plainer containers were used.

The settings in which different kinds of commensal occasions take place may also be distinctive. In a consideration of late 5th millennium sites in northern Mesopotamia, Kennedy proposes that the standard argument for painted pottery being associated with elites or special commensal occasions should be turned on its head. Instead, he suggests that fine painted wares were everyday dishes used in domestic contexts, whereas the coarse ware bowls were utilized in cooperative work events involving non-household members. In other words, the more public form of commensality was associated with plain pottery, whereas the more restricted domestic meals employed finer wares.

In Late Bronze Age Greece palaces become the locations for special banquets, with access to and circulation within them carefully controlled, and an accompanying iconography that indicates the existence of a specific “toasting’ etiquette” (Halstead).

Structured depositions of animal bones in these palatial sites point to the large-scale butchery of cattle, which would have provided substantial quantities of meat for numerous guests. At Neolithic Çatalhöyük, feasting was spectacularly memorialized in the houses through the display of bucrania (Twiss). This contrasts markedly to the concealment in side rooms of stores of plant foods, which formed the basis of the everyday diet, pointing to a clear distinction among the settings in which feasts and quotidian meals took place.

Feasts may incorporate performative or “dramaturgical elements” (Bray). In Late Bronze Age Emar (Sallaberger), processions of people who brought prepared foods and sacrificial animals to the temple were accompanied by musicians and singers. Musical instruments found in association with a stone *huaca* in the Andean site of Tucume similarly point to the role of music in ritual commensality (Bray). The uses of tobacco at the Middle Formative site of Kala Uyuni, Bolivia (Hastorf) may also have been a way to enhance specific performative aspects of ritual meals. The memorialization of feasts at Çatalhöyük by placing bucrania so that they would have been immediately visible to people entering a house (Twiss) may have been intended to evoke dramatic elements of past feasts or the ways in which food was acquired for them. The prominence of tangible reminders of lavish feasts may be an indication of the importance of memorializing past feasts as a kind of “social storage.” Sutton has made a similar argument in terms of witnessing: by talking about a past festive occasion, the good name of the host would thereby be perpetuated.³²

The emphasis on dramaturgical components of feasts leaves unaddressed questions concerning the performative elements of daily commensality. Following Butler,³³ performances incorporate repetitive acts. These acts, performed in ways that are consistent with specific disciplinary regimes (in the Foucauldian sense), are crucial means by which subjects are constituted. In examining commensal practices it is not enough to focus on elaborate processions and associated rhetoric, dance, and music; rather, we must also explore the performative elements of everyday commensality. These performative acts may range from appropriate forms of conversation during a meal to acquiescing to the accepted protocols of seating, serving, and table manners. Such quotidian protocols have their own histories that need to be explored.

The question of *who* participates in communal acts is addressed in various ways in the papers assembled here. The number of participants may itself be important, as noted by both Kennedy and Halstead, since a larger-than-usual gathering requires more food, more labor, and more time to orchestrate than the everyday meal. Otto draws attention to the presence of a large communal oven as well as a building seemingly dedicated to brewing, both of which she suggests were used in times of increased demand that could not be satisfied by baking bread and brewing beer in individual households. In these considerations the everyday tends to serve as a backdrop against which the unusual is framed. More direct attention to the labor and material requirements of everyday production is clearly called for, in order to foreground the basis of daily commensality in its own right (see Otto, Twiss, Halstead).

The specific social relations among those taking part in a commensal event form another crucial element in distinguishing the special and the ordinary. Balossi Restelli and Twiss mention encounters that take place beyond the household or outside one’s group. D’Anna focuses on the status of being a guest, that is, someone who is not usually present at quotidian commensal events.³⁴ She demonstrates that a person may be included in or excluded from a commensal event to varying degrees. The Arslantepe temples were not fully closed off to those outside the elite-ritual sphere, as attested by windows located between the entrance room and the main chamber, with the effect that the smell and

32 Sutton 2001, 45–52.

33 Butler 1990; Butler 1993.

34 Barlösius 1999, 191.

sights of cooking food may have reached those who were outside. Some of the food may even have been passed out from the temple cooking area to those privileged to be able to wait immediately outside, as hinted at by the presence of some vessels on the window ledges.

Bray suggests that ritual and quotidian commensality are distinguished principally by the types of persons who take part. Daily commensality reproduces social relationships in the domestic context, whereas ritual commensality establishes or reinforces “social relations with external others,” thereby turning them into social beings or persons who are then, at least temporarily, brought into one’s social circle. In the Andean case she discusses, this transformation involves *huacas*—which may include unaltered things, objects or places in a landscape—which are thereby turned into “other-than-human persons.” This “animation” of physical objects is reminiscent of mouth-opening ceremonies in Mesopotamia that served to bring statues of deities or their symbols to life by applying particular substances, such as ghee, in an appropriate ritual context; subsequently the statues were able to eat, drink, and smell.³⁵ The transformation of non-humans into social persons by means of commensality is similarly implied when commensality takes place with ancestors or deities.

Taking a very different context than the other authors, Shore traces the history of the restaurant in western Europe. He demonstrates that a particular kind of commensal setting emerged that was at once public but that also, at least in its early history, served as a way to create a specific kind of private sphere. Eating in a restaurant was and is intentionally distinct from everyday meals at home, in terms of location, the protocol of serving and eating, and the particular participants who are present. Nonetheless the early development of restaurants was not about creating a kind of feast but in fact was a way to escape an increasingly oppressive form of commensal ritual at home.

Ultimately, the emphasis on feasting in archaeological and related research has left the unmarked category of daily commensality understudied. As Shore demonstrates, eating at home is not invariably a desideratum characterized by harmonious and straightforward relations. Histories of everyday commensality that do not consign these mundane practices to an unproblematic, unchanging background to the real drama of special feasts remain, for the most part, to be written.

4 Hospitality

Questions about who takes part in commensal occasions are also linked closely to the matter of hospitality: sharing of food and/or drink with those who are not ordinarily one’s commensal partners. In this regard, hospitality may be understood as a kind of special commensal occasion beyond the ordinary and the daily.

The invitation by a host(s) to a guest(s) to partake of hospitality appears at first sight to be a straightforward notion, yet it has been the subject of philosophical reflections since at least the writings of Kant. Jacques Derrida has emphasized the relations of power and sovereignty that underline our widely accepted notions and practices of hospitality, which appeal to established customs regarding the definition and behavior of a guest. Except in what he calls pure or unconditional hospitality,³⁶ a situation Derrida considers to be an unreachable ideal, an offer of hospitality is always both inclusive and exclusive.³⁷ Even an ‘open invitation’ to everyone in a village, for example, effectively excludes those who are not part of the broad rubric of village members.

35 Walker and Dick 2001/1997.

36 Derrida 2001/1997; Borradori 2003, 128–130.

37 Därmann 2008.

Hospitality is a prototypical Maussian gift.³⁸ As with other gifts, associated obligations entail not just offering hospitality (“hosting”) but also accepting the gift and at some point reciprocating it—that is, partaking in specific kinds of commensal occasions. To reject proffered hospitality and thereby refuse to engage in commensality is an offense, implying that the potential guest does not wish to uphold social relations with the would-be host.³⁹ Through this combination of intertwined obligations as well as the myriad variations on inclusion and exclusion, hospitality contributes in important ways to the micro-politics of commensality.

Having accepted an invitation the person who is a guest at someone else’s table is obliged to return it by hosting the person who invited her or him. In some cultural contexts, however, those who offer food to others must be of a particular social status in relation to the receivers of the food.⁴⁰ That reciprocity in the form of commensality can be made socially, economically, or politically impossible is one of the fundamental bases of hierarchical relations of superiority and inferiority.⁴¹

Being a guest involves more than the right to observe or even to consume some of what is being served. This is perhaps most evident if one considers people who are physically present at a feast but who are nonetheless not considered guests. These may include those who serve or prepare the meal or musicians and dancers who stage performances, but there are also others who are even less visible around the margins, such as artisans who make tableware and other culinary equipment. Participating in a feast is in this way more than a matter of resources, such as time, labor, and materials: it is also very much a question of perspective. For whom is an event a feast, for whom is it a form of drudgery? To what extent may it be both?

Like commensality more generally, hospitality ranges from the relatively altruistic to the highly competitive, with participation being anything from a special privilege to a foregone conclusion. Even the ‘right’ to supply provisions for a commensal occasion may be bound up with the social position of the donor and the nature of the event,⁴² thereby constructing yet further arenas for negotiation and competition.

4.1 Archaeological Approaches to Hospitality

The papers in this volume demonstrate that exclusion from and inclusion in commensal events need not be absolute categories. As D’Anna argues, some people may be partially excluded: they may be able to see, smell, and hear the sounds of a feast while having only limited access to the food and drink that are partaken by others. The distribution of food in communal spaces within the ritual-administrative sector at Arslantepe but without the possibility of the recipients being able to enter the actual halls of power (in this case, the temples) might be best described as a gesture of hospitality (Balossi Restelli), a “fake” inclusion of the populace into an elite sphere rather than the “real thing.” In Late Bronze Age Emar the food for specific temple-based festivities was provided by important individuals and institutions: the palace might supply fruit, the city sheep, and the king more sheep, but also cattle and wine, whereas common people furnished their labor to make bread and beer (Sallaberger). By topping up the provisions, the king was, according to Sallaberger, “fulfilling the duties of vertical solidarity, the care by the powerful for the

38 Mauss 1967/1925; Därmann 2008; *La Revue du M.A.U.S.S.*: <http://www.revuedumauss.com.fr/Pages/ABOUT.html#Anchor-49575>.

39 Ito 1985, 311–312.

40 Appadurai 1981.

41 Cf. Mauss 1967/1925.

42 Sallaberger this volume.

poor, by the patron for his clients.” From a less charitable perspective, one might see this as a way of ideologically binding the populace into the service of the elite through participation in community festivals, in which they contributed substantial amounts of labor in return for a share of the food.

Generous hospitality may also be an important way to attract needed labor, as Halstead demonstrates for modern Greece. In an intriguing twist on conventional arguments concerning the beginnings of *corvée* labor in Mesopotamia, Kennedy proposes that the “flint-scraped” (or *Coba*) bowls characteristic of the Late Chalcolithic 1 period in northern Mesopotamia were not an early development of a ration system but rather were used to distribute food during work feasts. These feasts took place as part of cooperative work events involving labor of non-household members and would have been a way to attract extra labor needed for particular tasks.

5 Provisioning

A consideration of the nuances of hospitality suggests the need for a further distinction among commensal occasions, one that I propose to call “provisioning.” Provisioning may be used to refer to occasions that imply specific kinds of asymmetrical relationships among participants. In contrast to those who take part in other forms of commensality, the recipients of provisioning do not consume the food or drink they are given in the same place and/or at the same time as the donor of the provisions. In this way provisioning emphasizes the separation between provisioner and recipient rather than that which they have in common, as well as the act of serving or presenting rather than a shared social space of consumption.⁴³

In “downward provisioning” the receiving party *cannot* reciprocate, as happens, for example, in cases of ration distributions. In “upward provisioning” those receiving food or drink *should* not reciprocate or at least not in a direct fashion; here, one can think of offerings of food and drink presented to the gods. What is received in return—supernatural good graces, for example—is an imaginary that cannot be directly equated to what has been given. In contrast to provisioning, reciprocal invitations to commensal occasions may consist, at least in principle, of more or less equivalent meals.

Provisioning may be thought of as a kind of partial or skewed commensality. While acts of provisioning may involve the transfer or sharing of an ‘essence’ incorporated in the food, drink, or tableware used (see discussion in Section 2, above), it is not equivalent to a situation in which social relations are (re)produced via a sustained face-to-face interaction that takes place while eating and drinking together. By taking home a vessel in which rations were distributed or a piece of the offerings brought to the gods, a substance is transferred. However, there is no *acknowledgment* or *recognition*⁴⁴ as a guest, as someone who is thereby entitled not just to the material components of the feast but also to participate actively in the communicative aspects of the occasion. In a meal partaken face-to-face there is always the possibility that social relations will be altered, however slightly. When the other persons are not present, the possibilities of negotiation are more limited; one may repeat habitual actions and thereby uphold existing relations or seek to overturn them (for example, by means of a hunger strike). But the nuanced interplay among those who engage with one another face-to-face is not possible.

43 I am indebted to Carolin Jauß for drawing my attention to this last point.

44 Honneth 2005.

5.1 Archaeological Evidence of Provisioning

Downward provisioning is clearly evident in the cases of ration distributions described by Balossi Restelli and D'Anna for 4th millennium northern Mesopotamia. Balossi Restelli proposes that two distinct kinds of commensality arose in the Late Chalcolithic period. One of these continued a pattern of shared consumption by those who were of similar social standing, the other emphasized inequality among participants. The presence of the first coarse, mass-produced bowls is taken as an indication of the distribution of ration allotments in the context of institutional labor (for a different interpretation, see Kennedy). Balossi Restelli argues that these vessels were intended to produce a sense of unity among those who ate from them, while at the same time demonstrating the clear superiority of those who provided the food.

D'Anna contends that the ration system not only provided sustenance for laborers working in institutional contexts but also bridged the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary commensality. Rations were distributed and consumed in repetitive, quotidian rhythms, making them in many ways ordinary, but they were also something distinct from everyday commensality because their distribution and consumption occurred in formalized, institutional contexts.

An intriguing insight into downward provisioning comes from Late Bronze Age palatial feasting in Greece, discussed by Halstead. The palaces provided a luxurious venue and social milieu for large feasts, whereas the actual resources used to conduct the feasts, in the form of food and drink, derived mostly from diverted ration allocations and gifts given to the palace. Most of the feasting equipment consisted of undecorated, mass-produced vessels rather than sumptuous tableware. Halstead suggests that ultimately the palace hosts were able to make a significant net gain from the feasts they hosted, on the basis of the resources they were able to mobilize for them. In addition, if one assumes that only some guests were treated to the most lavish food and finest dishes and that many others had to be satisfied with lesser quality and amounts of food and drink served in mass-produced vessels, then it is a short step to proposing that only the former had direct contact with the host(s). Others may have remained "partial guests," similar to those in late 4th millennium Arslantepe discussed by D'Anna.

Upward provisioning is illustrated in the Emar texts analyzed by Sallaberger as well as through the evidence for offerings to the gods and ancestors at Tall Bazi (Otto). At Emar temples were the focal points of feasts, and it was to them that members of the community brought offerings for specific festivals and from which food was redistributed. Baking bread, brewing beer, and raising sheep all involved substantial investments of labor, which constituted significant, if somewhat hidden parts of the offerings to the temple. Sallaberger suggests that to be appropriate for these ritual occasions, foods and beverages had to be pure, but they also had to require substantial labor to prepare. Presentation of the offerings involved processions to the temple as well as the careful arrangement of cups of wine and joints of meat before the deity. This elaborate and, in part, widely visible presentation offered a marked distinction to everyday meals, which were principally prepared and eaten separately in each house. At contemporary Tall Bazi special vessels used for libations were found in houses in connection with altars and, in some cases, special meat offerings. Otto interprets these as the remains of acts of sharing with the ancestors and gods. It is noteworthy that in temple rituals the gods seem to have received minute quantities of beer in comparison to the amounts that the people who attended the ritual drank.

In the Andes offerings to *huacas* as well as meals and libations for the ancestors (Bray, Hastorf) are other examples of upward provisioning. Here, too, the receiving parties are not directly present and are not expected to reciprocate in kind.

6 The Production of Plenty, Problems of Hunger

A focus on commensality should not lead to the neglect of the production and distribution of food and drink as well as the raw materials out of which they are made. What we eat and drink, with whom, and under what circumstances all presuppose that someone procures, prepares, and serves food. These may be in part the same people who then consume the products, although it is most often the case that there are distinctions based on age, gender, commensal occasion, social position, and so on. Food preparation in non-industrial and especially agricultural societies is often labor-intensive and time-consuming—something that is all too easy to forget in the contemporary world in which those of us with means can buy almost any kind of food at any time of the year, much of it already processed to a point that its preparation requires limited effort. These issues are of far more than peripheral importance. In addition to the intricacies of cooking on an everyday basis, the preparations for a feast require special planning, extra labor, and greater than average storage capacities (both physical spaces and prepared foods that *can* be stored). The extent to which those partaking of a feast also engage actively in its preparation is a revealing line of enquiry that is often overlooked, especially in archaeological accounts, but which is clearly present in many papers in this volume (Halstead, Hastorf, Kennedy, Sallaberger). In a wide range of cases, from feasting in the Formative Period in the Titicaca Basin (Hastorf) to Late Bronze Age Emar (Sallaberger) and Greece (Halstead), it is clear that large-scale feasting draws heavily on provisions supplied by the populace, who thereby effectively “fund” the occasion through their goods and labor.

When discussing the preparation of feasts but also the consumption of a daily meal, we tend to assume implicitly a condition of plenty or at least of adequate provisions. The flip side of eating, drinking and feasting is, however, hunger, a topic that archaeologists too rarely address.⁴⁵ Indeed, we seem to shy away from thinking about hunger. In a discussion of a figurine recently found at Çatalhöyük, which depicts a well-rounded female from the front but a back on which the vertebral column and ribs are clearly visible, Hodder and Meskell propose that it was meant to depict the fleshed and alive body versus the skeleton and death.⁴⁶ It could be equally argued, however, that the frontal depiction is that of a well-fed individual, the back a person who is hungry to the point of severe undernourishment. As Hastorf demonstrates in her contribution, isotopic analyses of human skeletal remains can distinguish the extent to which people in the past had access to similar or different kinds of foods. Bioarchaeological studies can also contribute to an understanding of health and disease, both of which are to some degree related to diet. But skeletal studies are not the only avenues for examining hunger in the past. Microstratigraphic and microarchaeological analyses demonstrate the possibilities for investigating the short term, including the fluctuations—whether in weather patterns or politically driven abundance or scarcity—that may have posed frequent risks of not having enough to eat to make it through to the next harvest.⁴⁷

Hunger is not only a physiological issue of under- or malnutrition but a condition that results from and has implications for social relations and the content of social encounters. To what extent do people alter their usual commensal routines in situations of hunger? Do feasts and hospitality disappear when stocks of food run low,⁴⁸ or do they take on renewed importance? If commensality is a part of the constitution of personhood and reproduction of social relations, does it mean that allowing some people to go hungry amounts to a reduction of their personhood, as it excludes them from the very possibility

45 But see Parker Pearson 2003, 17–18.

46 Hodder and Meskell 2011, 248.

47 Wright, Miller, and Redding 1980; Wright, Redding, and Pollock 1989; Pollock 2008.

48 Halstead and O’Shea 1989; Wills and Crown 2004, 156.

of participating in fundamental social relations afforded by commensal acts? Many of these questions remain not just unanswered but also unasked in archaeological and other historical research. By continuing to ignore them, we promote a very one-sided view of commensality in the past.

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