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Defining and Transgressing the Boundaries between Ritual Commensality and Daily Commensal Practices: the Case of Late Bronze Age Tall Bazi

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Defining and Transgressing the Boundaries between Ritual Commensality and Daily Commensal Practices: the Case of Late Bronze Age Tall Bazi

Ritual commensality is a well documented social practice in texts and visual arts of the Ancient Near East. However, no information about daily commensality can be derived from these sources. The mere fact that a daily procedure as simple as eating and drinking was depicted hints at the meaning of this scene as a social event with a high symbolic value, while ordinary daily meals never seem to be represented. This paper argues that in everyday life, the boundaries between ritual and daily commensality were often floating. In order to acquire information on daily commensal practice and on the differences to ritual commensality, the architectonic and the more unspectacular archaeological remains at the Mesopotamian site of Tall Bazi are investigated.

Near Eastern archaeology; commensality; temple; house; Tall Bazi; Syria; beer; ritual.

Ritueller Kommensalität ist eine soziale Praxis, die in den Texten sowie in der Kunst Altvorderasiens gut dokumentiert ist. Jedoch bieten diese Quellen keine Information zu alltäglicher Kommensalität. Allein die Tatsache, dass ein so alltäglicher Vorgang wie Essen und Trinken dargestellt wurde, weist darauf hin, dass der dargestellten Szene die Bedeutung eines sozialen Anlasses mit hohem Symbolwert zukam, wohingegen gewöhnliche Alltagsmahlzeiten scheinbar nie abgebildet werden. Dieser Beitrag will zeigen, dass die Grenzen von ritueller und alltäglicher Kommensalität im Alltag häufig fließend waren. Um Aufschluss über tägliche kommensale Praxis und deren Unterschiede zu ritueller Kommensalität zu erhalten, werden architektonische und andere – unspektakuläre – Befunde des mesopotamischen Fundortes Tall Bazi untersucht.

Vorderasiatische Archäologie; Kommensalität; Tempel; Häuser; Tall Bazi; Syrien; Bier; Ritual.

1 Daily and Ritual Commensality at Tall Bazi

It goes without saying that the interpretation of excavated domestic contexts is only fruitful, if we deal with houses the inventory of which was well preserved and well documented in order to be able to reconstruct the former activities within the houses. One of the rare settlements which has delivered a large amount of primary inventory

This paper profited considerably from numerous discussions with Walther Sallaberger, and from the inspiring round table, which was organized by Susan Pollock in Berlin. Berthold Einwig and the team at Tall Bazi, our late friend Mohammed Miftah, our representative Walid Abd-el-Karim, the students and the workmen of our beloved village have done much of the painstaking work over all the years which made these results possible. First the DAI and then the DFG have funded our work over the years. My thanks go to all of them. Finally, I thank Susan Pollock for correcting my English.

in a series of contemporary houses,¹ is the site Tall Bazi, situated on the eastern bank of the Euphrates valley in modern-day Northern Syria.² It is a multi-period site, but in this context we are only concerned with the Late Bronze Age settlement, dating to the 14th/13th centuries BC. It consisted of a citadel and a lower town, which was destroyed and burned so suddenly that the inhabitants had to leave most of the inventory behind. Due to heavy burning of the houses and the temple, a part of the material was quite well preserved. However, the archaeological inventory is but a small part of the systemic inventory of these buildings. In order to fill these blanks, we are in the lucky position that additional help in the process of interpretation is offered by complementary, contemporaneous texts. Relevant texts of the same period were found at several nearby sites, but for the questions of commensality mainly texts from Meskene/Emar, a city about 60km downstream from Tall Bazi, are of interest.³

The western lower town (the so-called *Weststadt*) consisted of approximately 80 houses, 50 of which have been at least partially excavated. Not all of them contained significant material, because some houses were already abandoned before they collapsed, and others were too heavily eroded to deduce the ways they were utilized. In only about 30 houses was enough material connected to preparation and consumption of food preserved in order to investigate commensal practices in the houses. The Citadel, the core of which consisted of a 60m high natural hill, was dominated by a big temple. Various other buildings surrounding the temple, seem to have had economic or other connections to it. The Late Bronze Age structures on top of the Citadel collapsed in the same major event and were likewise burned. Both the houses and the temple offer—with certain reservations⁴—a snap-shot of intensively used rooms, the features of which are revealing for the activities which took place shortly before the final catastrophe.

2 Commensality in Private Houses at Tall Bazi

2.1 Evidence for Preparation of Food in the Houses

The houses of the *Weststadt* have been investigated at in an activity zone analysis.⁵ The highly standardized form (one main room with a row of secondary rooms on one side, above these a room in the second storey) and equipment of most houses allow comparisons, with the help of which it was possible to determine the ideal-typical form, installations, and equipment of a house. With additional help of the contemporary cuneiform texts from nearby Emar and Ekalte as well as ethnographic analogies, it was possible to define the ideal-typical functions of the rooms. If we then compare the inventory of each house with the ideal-typical one, the individual variations become evident.

The functions of the rooms range from social gathering to various domestic, cultic, economic, and handicraft activities. In the frame of this paper, only the domestic activities connected to preparation and consumption of food are of interest. They can be summarized as follows: the main room served for various purposes, including processing and production of food, such as cooking on a hearth and in an oven. The oven was of oval

1 For the definition of inventory and refuse in general, see Schiffer 1987; Sommer and Mattheußer 1991; in the case of Tall Bazi, see Otto 2006a, 25–29.

2 Excavations have been conducted there since 1993, until 1997 in the name of the German Archaeological Institute (DAI) Damascus, from 2000–2009 by the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, financed by the DFG and directed by B. Einwag and myself. For preliminary reports see Sallaberger, Einwag, and Otto 2006; Otto 2008; Einwag 2010.

3 I am grateful that Walther Sallaberger agreed to discuss with me the relevant texts (see Sallaberger this volume).

4 For various forms of disturbances and bioturbations, see Schiffer 1987, 206–208.

5 Otto 2006a.

shape, approximately 50cm high and 70cm long, consisted of the same clay as the tannour, and had a narrow opening in the front. Frequently associated with it was a shallow mud platform, roughly oval, round or rectangular and often lined with stones, the so-called hearth. Its surface shows traces of fire, and in several instances there were three supports still found on top or close to it. It is widely assumed that cooking pots were supported by them.⁶ In several instances cooking pots lay close to the hearth, sometimes still containing food. In other instances remains of the food were found scattered around the hearth.

A bread oven or tannour, an installation which has not much changed for thousands of years, was present in nearly every main room. It was frequently placed close to the outer house wall, presumably due to the heavy smoke it produced, and points to the existence of a chimney. In analogy to the function of today's tannours, one may suppose that they served mainly for baking bread, although an additional function for grilling meat and fish cannot be excluded. The tannour has a small opening at the bottom, just large enough to remove the ashes, but it would be impossible to put a loaf of bread into it from below. Therefore it is quite certain that the technology of bread-making in a tannour is similar to the one used today, where the flat bread is stuck onto the hot inner side of the tannour from the opening above.

Indeed every house had his own tannour which indicates that every household produced its own bread.⁷ Some houses even had a second tannour outside the house that may be interpreted as a summer tannour in contrast to the winter one inside. A further domestic activity, which regularly took place inside every house, was brewing beer in large vats—presumably one of the tasks of the female members of the household.⁸

Other activities connected to food preparation such as grinding of barley or malt took place mainly in the upper storey, either on the open roof or in the room of the second storey, presumably because these locations were better ventilated. Only exceptionally was the grinding installation placed in a secondary room (House 17, House 44). Usually, the smaller side rooms on the ground floor level, most without windows and therefore with little light and air, served only for passive use, i. e. storage. Knowledge about the preparation of food is important in order to deduce commensal practices, which are more difficult to recognize.

2.2 How to Trace Commensality in the Archaeological Record

The pivotal question is how commensality can be perceived in archaeological remains.

- Pottery vessels are usually subdivided into use classes on the basis of their form, size, quality, use traces, and contents (if preserved), in order to define at least for some of them the main use, e. g., storage, transport, food preparation, serving, eating and drinking, etc.⁹ Yet the find spot of functionally identifiable vessels is not necessarily identical with the locations of their use, because they might no longer be in use, or be stored or otherwise used.

6 Skibo 1992. The way of cooking on three supports is very much the same as in the nearby village today.

7 Contrary to what P. Pfälzner suggested for the 3rd mill. houses at Tell Bderi, where he supposed that a tannour was not present in every household but was used commonly by the kin (Pfälzner 2001, 146–147).

8 For brewing as a female activity in many societies, see Beek 1978; Egli 1999. For brewing in the Bazi houses, experimental brewing of the Bazi beer, the cold mashing procedure, and residue analyses, see Otto 2006a, 86–93; Zarnkow et al. 2006a; Zarnkow et al. 2006b.

9 Rice 1987; Skibo 1992.

- Animal bones or botanical remains do not necessarily point to active commensal practices at their find spots, because they might not be the remains of a recent meal, but could have been stored or thrown away there or be there because of the preparation of a meal.
- Even easily identifiable instruments such as the drinking tube, which served for drinking beer, may be found far away from where they might have been originally used.
- As we have seen above, the pictorial representations of commensality are not very revealing, because they do not illustrate daily commensal practices. But even the few Neo-Assyrian reliefs that show people sitting on the ground, eating all together with their fingers from a large plate, must not necessarily depict the ordinary daily form of commensality, but this way of eating could be due to the special situation (deportees on their way to a new place).

Yet, there are certain basic conditions which can be postulated for an area where commensality could have taken place:

- the area must have been sufficiently well lit and ventilated,
- the area must have been devoid of immobile installations (such as ovens, containers set firmly in the ground, etc.) and large enough so that several people could assemble. This is valid whether people sat on the floor or used chairs.

However, negative evidence in an excavation—an area without any archaeological inventory—can also result from other factors: that the objects were temporarily cleared away, or that they had completely perished, e. g., textiles, objects from leather and reed, and even wooden furniture, if it was not carbonized. Yet, to judge from the contemporary inheritance documents from Emar, there is little probability that the houses contained more than one bed, one table, one chair and one stool.¹⁰ This, in my opinion, speaks very much in favor of the possibility that the usual habit was to sit on the ground or on the benches.

2.3 Commensality Derived from the Archaeological Evidence of the Tall Bazi Houses

Following the above defined criteria, all the houses of the *Weststadt* at Tall Bazi were investigated. The small rooms on the ground floor level were certainly not sufficiently well ventilated to serve as locations for commensal activities, because they were frequently built against another house and cannot have had any window. Only the main room is a possible location for commensal purposes on the ground floor level. Yet the room in the upper storey could have had windows facing every direction and thus may have been a second, agreeable area for assembling.

Inside the main room the area in front of the benches was often the only free space that was not filled with installations, large jars, or tools. The bench along one side of the main room, made from mudbrick, mud, and stones and covered with plaster, indeed may

¹⁰ Only 1/6 of the inheritance documents from Emar mention furniture at all. A few texts seem to indicate a gender-specific distribution of furniture, i. e. a table and a chair for the man and a bed and a stool for the woman of the house; *Emar* 6: 176, 186; RE 56. For a hypothetical reconstruction of possible perishable objects in the houses of Tall Bazi, see Otto 2006a, 142–147.

have served for sitting. This is supported by the remains of furs, which were found in the area of the benches and either covered the benches or the floor close to them.¹¹

In sum, it may be concluded that daily commensality in the lower town houses of Tall Bazi generally took place in the main room of the house, that the participants sat on the benches or on the floor near the benches, and that at least a certain amount of tableware was used during commensal practices.

But even then it is a difficult task to answer even the simplest questions concerning commensality, such as what was consumed, in which way it was consumed, where commensal practices took place, and who were the actors:

1. *The diet*: Prepared foods would not have been preserved in the archaeological record, thus we have to rely on the refuse (mainly animal bones) and carbonized remains of vegetables. The botanical remains consisted nearly exclusively of barley; peas, lentils, and fruits were rarely found. Some of the pottery vessels still contained various foodstuffs, especially carbonized grain. From residue analyses that examined evidence for oxalate or tartaric acid we know that some of the other vessels contained wine and beer, i. e. that people drank and stored these liquids in the houses. Yet, what other liquids and solid materials were stored in the other bottles and pots remains unclear, because no other analyses (e. g., of fat) have been so far conducted.

In a few houses the remaining animal bones testify to the consumption of a single animal (sheep or goat), others show a small selection of meat from different animals, not only of sheep/goat (from which stems by far the largest amount of meat), but also of cattle, donkey and dog, turtle and fish, mussels and gazelle. For example, in the small House 22-S the animal bones that were lying next to the hearth may be interpreted as the remains of the daily diet. They show an astonishingly mixed diet of goat/sheep, donkey, cattle, pig and dog. The evidence from the houses is too slender to be representative, but it may be that the less prosperous households (e. g., House 22-S) were given a share of meat from other households, while the more prosperous ones consumed the meat of one whole animal (e. g., House 18, see below). In sum, only few houses contained remains of meat meals at all, which corresponds quite well to the image derived from the Emar texts that the normal daily diet consisted mainly of barley products, essentially bread and beer (see Sallaberger this volume).

2. *The presumed area of commensality*: In many houses, the area of the benches was the only free space within the main room, devoid of installations, large jars or tools. If any objects were found in front of the benches, these consisted mainly of small or medium-sized ceramics of fine and plain ware, most commonly plates, bowls, bottles, and small beakers. Because some of them were even painted—exceptional in the ceramic inventory and indicating a special valorization of the object (Houses 7, 17, 18, 19, 29, 41)—it seems as if this pottery served as fine tableware. Bottles with trilobe spout, sometimes found together with their stands, may have been used to serve wine or beer (e. g., House 23-SW).

There is some evidence that commensality also took place in the room on the second storey. In the houses, which were preserved up to the height of the debris of the collapsed upper storey, fine tableware speaks in favor of this possibility (e. g., Houses 17, 32). Certainly this room was much better ventilated and thus more agreeable in summer times, because it could have had openings on every side.

3. *The actors*: If we accept that fine tableware, when found elsewhere than in storage rooms, indicates the place of commensality, this area seems to have been in many houses close to the location of food processing, cooking, baking, and brewing. That these were mainly female activities may be further supported by the fact that textile working took

11 Otto 2006a, 75.

place in the same area, as is indicated by spindle whorls near the hearth. Therefore it may be assumed that the female and male members of the family were generally eating together. What has been describing so far may be labelled private daily commensality.

2.4 Ritual Commensality of the Household Members in Private Contexts

There is often found a variety of exceptional pots, jewellery, and bones at the small end of the main room. Among these unusual vessels there may be, for example, two *kernoi* (hollow ring vessels with attached beakers and a spout in animal form) in House 5; a mobile vessel depicting the storm god on a wagon who is torn by his bulls in House 9; two mobile vessels in animal form in House 14; and other unusual vessels in seven more houses.¹² All may be interpreted as cultic vessels, probably serving for libation. Most were found close to a table-like protrusion or a real stone table at the end of the main room. If we look more closely at the area around this installation, we note other unusual features that enable us to name it an “altar”: in two houses (H. 28, 29) small pits in the floor were found near the altar, and beside the altar of House 43-S there was a small jar set into the ground and covered by a bowl, certainly intended for libation purposes.

This altar may be interpreted with the help of the Emar texts: they mention that the head of the household was obliged to invoke, honor and feed the “gods and ancestors” of the house regularly.¹³ With high probability this was the area where ritual veneration of the deceased kin and the gods took place.

The remains of bulls’ heads were found near the altar in five houses. Because this part of the bull can only be partially eaten, the question arises whether they had been hung on the wall and collapsed, or if they had been placed there. Several texts from Emar mention: “They place the ritual portion of beef, the ritual portion of mutton, the head of the ox, the head of the ram before the gods.”¹⁴ Concerning the special care which is given to the animals’ heads in ritual commensal practices, see below Section 4 as well as the contribution of Sallaberger, this volume.

A cooking pot (the normal device for cooking food) lay near the altar in 13 houses, animal bones in six houses, and at least one beaker lay close to the altar in most of the houses.

Apparently drinks were offered at this altar in ritual vessels or plain beakers, and meals containing meat in common cooking pots. Offering means sharing, which is why this action may be understood as commensality with the gods and ancestors.

House 18 illustrates how a share may have been divided: a sheep/goat seems to have been slaughtered shortly before the collapse of the city.¹⁵ One part of the animal had been eaten (or processed?) near the hearth, another part was contained in a cooking pot in a secondary room, and a third part lay close to the altar. In contrast, in House 31 the mixed remains of fish, sheep/goat, and cattle bones lay close to the altar.

Although the evidence from the houses is slender, it seems as if it was not necessarily a certain animal or part of it that was offered, but rather a share of every meal. This varied, and consisted either of a mixed diet or the exceptional consumption of a complete animal. In a way, the gods of the house and the deceased ancestors in the male line were additional household members who were also served food and drinks and got their appropriate share. This may be considered ritual commensality in a private context.

12 Otto 2002; Otto 2006a, 99–102.

13 Toorn 1996.

14 *Emar* 369: 28; Fleming 1992.

15 Otto 2006a, 242.

2.5 Ritual Commensality of Non-kin Members in Private Contexts

Presumably still another form of ritual commensality can be traced in the private houses. If we compare the installations of the houses, we see in nearly every main room a table or altar and along the long side a bench, which may have served for seating. However, there are distinct differences in the other installations and the equipment of some houses.

Let us have a look at House 7: it is one of the largest (213 sqm at ground-floor level) and one of the earliest houses of the *Weststadt*. In the main room, there is an extraordinarily long bench, 13m in length, running along one long side. If we accept that these benches served for seating, this main room was prepared to allow many people to be seated. However, it is questionable if the long bench was designed for the members of a large household. Although the main room is larger than in most other houses, all the activities linked to food processing (cooking, baking, brewing) took place in the attached room to the north.¹⁶ Apparently, the main room was deliberately separated from these activities. However, in front of the bench was found some tableware for eating and drinking, and near the altar lay a bull's head. If we interpret these as remains of commensal practices, who, then, assembled here, and who may have offered the bull's head on the altar?

One peculiarity of the society of the Middle Euphrates region is an extended body of kin, which was designated "the brothers."¹⁷ They are distinguished from real brothers, i. e. sons of the same parents, by a different writing ("lú.meš ah^{hi.a}" instead of "šes"). They assemble on the occasion of private-law transactions. Apparently, this assembly took place in the house of one of the brothers involved in the affair, as can be deduced from the formula: "PN let enter the brothers" and "PN let the brothers take a place." On the occasion of some of the property sales, a ceremony took place that is described as "the hukku-bread has been broken and the table anointed with oil."¹⁸

If we combine this evidence, it is tempting to suggest that the main room of House 7 was indeed where the brothers assembled and performed their ritual commensal practices, while the daily meals of the family took place in the annex-room. Apparently there existed a gender-specific splitting of commensality on special occasions when non-kin members were present in the house.

3 Communal Ovens for Enhanced Demands for Bread?

As we have seen above, every household was able to bake bread in its own tannour. What is then strange is the existence of an additional large oven in the *Weststadt*. It measures 3.4m in diameter, is built from mudbricks with a floor of bricks, was probably domed, and served most probably as a bread oven.¹⁹ It was situated in a plot along the main road, but not belonging to any specific house.²⁰ But why did the domestic quarters of the *Weststadt* need a large bread oven, if every house produced its own bread?

There is a similar oven in the contemporary and in many respects closely comparable site of Tall Munbaqa/ancient Ekalte, approximately 30km downstream from Bazi. The oven is situated in very much the same context in a domestic quarter between many houses.²¹

16 Two spindle whorls and a bracelet are additional arguments for a strong female presence in this room.

17 Beckman 1996; Démare-Lafont (in press).

18 Beckman 1996, 59.

19 Otto 2006a, 223. No other remains except ashes were found there. This is in contrast to other ovens of the *Weststadt*, which served for melting of metal or firing of pottery, inside and beside which slag, metal, and ceramic wasters were found.

20 Otto 2006a, 223.

21 Machule et al. 1993, 91-92 Abb. 12-13.

Other similar ovens are attested in a Middle Bronze age settlement context in Tall Brak²² and in at least two contemporary palaces, the “Grand Palais” at Mari²³ and Samsi-Addu’s palace at Tuttul.²⁴ Concerning the question of what sort of bread was produced in these large ovens, the Mari palace offers some hints for loaves, on the basis of a number of baking moulds. Even more revealing, however, is the evidence at Tuttul: in this phase the palace disposed not only of the large oven, but also of several tannours nearby. In my opinion this should be interpreted to mean that the large oven either was intended to make it possible to respond to an enhanced demand for bread or for a different kind of bread.

As the Emar texts show clearly, different kinds of bread were offered during rituals: “flat bread,” bread “for meals,” “dry bread,” and the same with fruits (a cake?).²⁵ Quite certainly not all kinds could have baked in a tannour, especially the bread loaves and the sweet cake with fruits.²⁶ Furthermore, the quantity of bread demanded was considerable, e. g., at the yearly festival for the city goddess Išhara, 1500 liters of flour was made into bread, and these 1500–3000 portions of bread were distributed to the inhabitants (see Sallaberger this volume). If we combine this information, the large ovens could indeed be explained by the fact that they served to prepare a special kind of bread on certain occasions or to meet an increased demand for bread, as was the case during festivals.

But even if we interpret these large ovens as communal ovens for the preparation of bread on ritual occasions, and if we suggest that this was the duty of professional bakers (see Sallaberger this volume), everybody must have contributed in the preparation of bread by delivering the flour. At least this may be concluded from the fact that every house disposed of one or two mills for grinding, but none were found in the area of the large oven.

If we follow this idea a bit further, we remark that there is another building situated among the domestic houses of the *Weststadt* that may have served for communal purposes. This one-room building (House 2, unfortunately quite eroded) contained several mills, several large stone basins, and several large vats, which we interpret as containers used in brewing. This concentration of tools and containers used in the process of malting and brewing is found in no other building, and it made me propose that this could have been a communal place for brewing beer in cases of enhanced demand.²⁷ The new analysis of the Emar rituals, from which one can conclude that the city contributed bread and beer, may be a further argument in favor of this hypothesis.

4 Commensality in the Temple?

The temple of the city is situated in the center of the citadel, which rises 60m above the Euphrates valley. The temple, 38m long and 16m wide, consisted of two rooms, was built in the Middle Bronze Age (19th century BC), and underwent several changes in groundplan and use, until it was violently destroyed at the same time as the lower town (during the Late Bronze Age). During the last phase, only room A was used for ritual purposes. Its floor was found covered with pottery that had been buried under the collapsed roof when the temple was burned. A part of the inventory was lost due

22 Area HH level 10, accordingly the period of Samsi-Addu: Oates et al. 1997, 22.

23 Margueron 2004, 492.

24 Miglus and Strommenger 2007, 62–63 Taf. 22, 4–5.

25 See Sallaberger, this volume, section 4.1.

26 If at least a certain kind of bread was indeed made of 1 liter or ½ liter of barley (Brunke 2011), this would yield not a thin bread that could be baked in a tannour, but a loaf.

27 Otto 2006a, 151.

to intentional plundering and destruction at the time of the hostile attack as well as to Roman-period pits, but still hundreds of vessels remained. Their amount increases considerably from the entrance towards the altar, in front of which several layers of broken vessels were found one above the other.

4.1 Quantity and Quality of the Remains in the Temple

Due to the visibly intentional destruction of the inventory and its scattering all over the room, it was a difficult and only partly successful task to restore the vessels. B. Einwag, who is presently preparing the final publication of the temple, estimates the total number to amount to several hundred vessels.²⁸ This is amazing, if we take into account that Room A is not larger than the main room of some houses in the *Weststadt*, where seldom more than about 20 vessels were found. Especially striking is the high number of medium-size jars and small beakers. In a single house generally between two and six beakers were found, in the temple at least 40.

The same is true for the considerable quantities of meat, the remains of which were found in the temple, while in many houses no animal bones were present at all. In Room A, among the sherds and with a high concentration in front of the altar, there was an enormous amount of animal bones.²⁹ On top of the altar were found the remains of a bull's head and some barley. Furthermore, a considerable amount of barley and smaller quantities of sesame, olives, peas, grapes, and pomegranate, some of them still in containers, were found in Room A. This variety of botanical remains was not recovered from any of the houses.

Not only the quantity, but also the quality of the remains differs. Indeed, many vessel types found in the temple show no differences to those in the houses: there were a few large storage jars, numerous medium-size pots, jars and plates, and many small bowls and beakers. But the vessels in the temple are a bit more frequently decorated, especially large potstands. Also, vessels of foreign origin, clearly not produced at the site, are more numerous. A rectangular basin decorated with figurative applications lay scattered in front of the altar; comparable containers were never found in the houses. On the other hand, vessels associated with food processing or brewing were not found in the temple, except a few cooking pots which could have contained prepared dishes.

4.2 Offering and Commensal Practices in the Temple

The most striking difference between the vessels in the temple and those in the houses is shown by the beakers. Several miniature beakers, only about 6cm high, were found in the temple. On the other hand, the variability in the beakers is astonishing: they differ considerably in size (from 6cm to about 15cm in height), ware, and form (tall, globular or squat, high or short-necked, etc). In my opinion this individual variation of the shapes and sizes of each beaker points to the fact that they were originally not part of a single pottery set. In principle, such a set could have existed, if we suppose commensality in the temple.³⁰ But one gets the impression that the beakers' variety derived from the number

28 The exact number of vessels is hard to tell at the moment. In our 2009 study season, Berthold Einwag and his team succeeded in restoring several hundred vessels from thousands of sherds.

29 The palaeozoological and palaeobotanical investigations have not yet been fully conducted.

30 E. g., in Palace B at Tuttul/Tall Bi'a (Strommenger and Kohlmeyer 2000, 26–28 Taf. 39, 3.4.6) there were found approximately a hundred bowls of nearly identical shape and size stored on shelves along a wall of courtyard 5, evidently a set, centrally produced and designed for large-scale commensal occasions.

of individuals who brought them here. If we interpret the vessels as simple containers for offerings, this would be a strong argument against commensality in the temple. Because there is a high concentration of beakers close to the altar, one could interpret this as offerings of a substance to the god. But what was offered in the beakers?

The results of the first residue analyses of the vessels from the temple indicate that many of the analyzed beakers contained beer.³¹ But especially the miniature beakers' capacity is quite low, at about 0.08–0.16 liter. This equals a small glass of schnaps, but it does not seem to be a reasonable amount of beer for consumption. However, there were several large jars and small bowls, which, according to the residue analysis, also contained beer. Additionally, between the sherds were found several bronze filter tips, the remains of drinking tubes, which point strongly to the consumption of beer in the temple. A hypothetical interpretation of these facts shall be offered here: at least some people inside the temple consumed beer, either from bowls or through tubes out of medium-size jars that were placed on potstands. A tiny share of the beer, the capacity of the beakers, was offered to the gods. This interpretation of little beakers as offering devices is further corroborated by the so-called *kernoï*: these sophisticated vessels consist of a hollow ring to which a spout in ram's form and several miniature beakers, similar to those in the temple, were attached.³²

Another argument in favor of commensal practices in the temple is the similarity between the temples and the main rooms of the houses: they have a similar layout, similar installations such as benches, podia, and altar, and even similar size, which in turn could result from similar function of the rooms.³³

It is difficult to push the results from the archaeological material alone much further. Luckily we have contemporary texts at our disposal, mainly from Emar, which refer to the actions in the temple area. They tell us that at the occasion of religious ceremonies, e. g., the installation of Baal's high priestess, numerous people, including the inhabitants of the city assembled in the temple area and received food, wine, and beer. Meat, bread, and beer for other people, e. g., the deceased priestess, were laid out on several tables set up in the temple area. As Sallaberger points out (this volume, section 6), during the *kissu* festival 70 beakers were filled with beer "in the gate of Ea's temple," four beakers were given to Ea. And while only a certain group of people consumed their share inside the temple room proper, others enjoyed it in the open-air part of the temple compound. In this way, ritual commensality involving a considerable number of the inhabitants took place in the temple.³⁴

The use of the courtyard in front of the holy abode as a place for slaughtering the offered animals and consuming them is also mentioned in the "Text for six months" from Emar, concerning the city's rituals for a period of half a year. It is said³⁵ that "in the temple" of Išhara (or Ninurta) a bull is slaughtered, the leaders (*lú.meš.gal*) and all the people (*lú.meš.gamari*) eat the breast in front of Išhara, and the temple of X (or the house of the gods?) and the diviner receive the bull's head.

Quite certainly the animals were not slaughtered in the main room, but in the open-air areas of the temple compound, as "in the temple" also designates the temenos area. Indeed, in front of the temple of Tall Bazi, south of the entrance to room A, heaps of

31 We thank Dr. Dipl.-Ing. Martin Zarnkow of the Technische Universität München-Weihenstephan for the analyses.

32 Two of those *kernoï*, widely distributed ritual vessels for libation (Bignasca 2000), were found in the main room of House 5 (Otto 2006a, 100).

33 Otto 2006b.

34 As I have shown elsewhere [Otto (in press)], a temple in late IIIrd and IIrd millennium Syria consisted not only of a small shrine, but of an additional open space in front of it – an area large enough to allow the assembly of a considerable part of the community.

35 *Emar* 446, Msk 74280a+74291a, Col. I 30–38; Fleming 2000, 268–280

animal bones and sherds were found, clearly not intact vessels, but refuse which accumulated there over time. A small wall separated the area from the entrance, which was covered with slabs and kept fairly clean. Several bulls' heads and the antlers of the Mesopotamian stag remind one very much of the bones inside and point to slaughtering nearby with the ritual discard of the offerings outside the main temple building or *Allerheiligstes*, but still in the temenos area.

We cannot be sure if the meal “in front of the god” took place in the cella or elsewhere in the temple compound. But the restricted space inside the cella speaks in favor of the second. The same should be postulated for the events during the Installation of Baal's High Priestess, when a crowd slaughters, offers, eats, and drinks “in front of the gods:”

They will offer the one ox and the six sheep before Ba'al ["ana pani ^dIM"]. They will place before the gods a beef ritual portion[?] and a mutton ritual portion[?]. They will place before the gods seven dinner-loaves, seven dried cakes, [and] two cakes [with] fruit. They will fill goblets with wine. The officials, who give the *qidašu*, the *hussu*-men, [and] seven [and seven *hamša 'u*-men(?)] will eat and drink at the temple of Ba'al ["ana É ^dIM"], and the men of the *qidašu* will get one dinner-loaf each [and] one *hizzibu* of barley-beer each. (*Emar* VI/3, 369: 11.³⁶)

Bread, meat, wine and beer were consumed nearly exclusively during this important ritual event. How, then, to explain the variety of rare food and fruits such as sesame, olives, or pomegranate which was found in the temple? This mixed diet recalls more closely the texts of the daily offerings to the gods, which are mentioned in two texts from Emar: on the 27th day of the month, the god Dagan gets barley mash, one vessel of beer, one vessel of wine, a sheep, a dove, honey, oil, butter, meat of cattle and gazelle, fish, apricots, sour milk, figs and other fruits, and some birds.³⁷

5 Comparisons of Commensal Habits in the Temple and the Houses

One further difference between commensal practices in the houses and in the temple is the way in which people consumed food and drink. The texts mentioned above concerning the installation of Baal's High Priestess from Emar, which are treated by Sallaberger in this volume, mention tables set up in the temple area. The depictions from banquet scenes show all the participants seated on elaborate chairs. However, the houses seem not to have contained much wooden furniture. First, some of the main rooms have little empty space where chairs and tables could have stood. Second, the inheritance documents from Emar mention little to no furniture (see above, 2.2).

The way in which the beer was drunk may also have differed. In several houses at Bazi, bronze filter tips were found to which formerly long straw tubes must have been attached—typical devices for drinking beer over the millennia. However, only rarely was more than one filter found in a house, which is strange, because we know from the written evidence that every member of the household, including women and children, regularly consumed beer. Additionally, in most houses they were found stored in the secondary rooms between tools and vessels. Only in House 25 were two filters found in the main room, but not in the area east of the small wall, where a goatskin covering the bench, cooking pots, animal bones, and tableware indicate an area of food processing and consumption, but rather at the western edge near the altar. Additionally, the remains of

36 After Fleming 1992, 50.

37 Fleming 2000.

two bucrania, one cooking pot, and some beads were found there. This may indicate that drinking tubes were either kept or used at this place of private cultic rituals, but were not used during daily drinking by the household members. It may as well suggest that only certain persons possessed and used these drinking tubes, perhaps (due to the small number) the father of the family? In many African populations, collective beer parties are a most important social event during which men drink beer through drinking tubes, while the women, who brewed the beer, and the children would drink the beer from bowls, as do the men during daily consumption.³⁸ In the temple, however, five filter tips were found among the vessels. This is not many, but it is more than in any house. It seems to indicate that at least some people drank beer with the help of tubes inside the temple room.³⁹

6 Conclusions

Differences between everyday commensal practices and ritual commensality on special occasions are evident at the site of Tall Bazi. However, the boundaries between ritual and daily commensality are often floating. One could have supposed that daily practices were bound to houses and ritual practices to temples. But daily commensality as well as ritualized commensality among household members, who regularly shared food with the “gods and ancestors,” took place in the houses. The gods’ and ancestors’ daily ration seems to have been similar to the daily diet consumed by the humans, probably because it was a share of it. Distinct from this was the ritual commensality of a small group of non-kin members on the occasion of legal transactions in the houses.

Ritual commensality of a large part of the community during the major religious festivals played a considerable role in the establishment of group identities. We know that it took place in the temple area, and we can deduce that the open space surrounding the temple was amply used for this purpose. The main differences between commensal practices during these events and commensality in the houses seem to consist in what was consumed, how it was prepared, how it was consumed, and who participated.

The daily diet consisting of grain products (bread, groats, and beer), small amounts of meat of various animals (including donkey, pig, and dog), mussels, and vegetables stands in contrast to the fairly homogenous food consumed during the large festivals, which consisted exclusively of meat from cattle and sheep/goat, bread and beer. These animals were visibly and ritually slaughtered in front of the community in the temple compounds. The bread and beer were produced in the lower town, either in every single household, or in additional communal large ovens and brewers’ workshops. The participants (at least part of them) in the large festivals probably sat on chairs, the food was placed on tables, and the beer was drunk from large vessels with the help of tubes, or the beer was filled in small beakers (“they fill the cups”). In the houses the floor and the benches may have served for sitting, while the beer was drunk from bowls or pots.

Male and female family members participated in daily commensality, but gender-specific ritual commensality can even be observed in the houses on special events such as the assembly of “the brothers.” In the public commensal events a large part of the community was involved, but apparently mainly male persons. High-ranking female persons such as priestesses were certainly present, but it cannot be excluded that a few more female persons, who were male in juridical terms,⁴⁰ attended the big commensal events.

38 Karp 1980.

39 The low number of filters in the temple can perhaps be due to the thorough plundering of precious materials in the temple.

40 “Women are the principal parties in a significant number of documents from Emar in the LBA ... In particular, wives and daughters are often the primary heirs named in testaments. In those instances

The events and rituals accompanying commensality in the temple, such as music and dance, the smell of the meals and the perfumed participants, the notion of neatly dressed people wearing special attributes and weapons—all this was evidently a considerable factor, if we trust the texts, but is unfortunately beyond the scope of archaeology.

where they are thus placed at the head of a household, however, they must be formally endowed with male gender. Thus the testator may declare his wife to be 'the father and mother,' or his daughter to be both 'male and female'" (Beckman 1996, 60). Furthermore, daughters are often adopted as sons at Emar and Nuzi (Beckman 1996, 60).

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