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PROJEKTBERICHT | RESEARCH REPORT

RESEARCH GROUP (C-III) ACTS. SACRED PLACES –
SACRED LANDSCAPES

**COMMENSALITY AND SHARED SPACE IN
THE CONTEXT OF EARLY STATE AND
URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN MESOPOTAMIA
AND SOUTHWEST IRAN**

Research results of the period from
01.01.2010 – 30.04.2012

Members of the research project

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Description of research question, approach and results

Research question

The project poses three main questions: (1) whether and how the processes associated with the emergence of early state and urban societies in Mesopotamia and southwestern Iran had an impact on commensal practices spatially and socially; (2) how commensality contributed to the production and transmission of collective identities; and (3) how special feasts related to quotidian commensality.

Research methodology and approach

The project examines architecture, features, ceramics, iconographic representations (mostly in the form of seal imagery), and cuneiform sources in order to specify the locations and types of food preparation as well as commensal practices. A systematic examination of architecture and associated features allows locations of food preparation (attested by fire installations, concentrations of artifacts used in processing food, and concentrations of food remains) to be identified as well as possible locations where food was served and consumed. Due to the unevenness of the data sources, this line of investigation is more fruitful in some sites and periods examined. In particular, many sources provide only minimal details on fire installations, making their uses difficult to specify. Nonetheless, it is possible to specify the extent to which particular kinds of food preparation were widespread activities associated with all or most households in particular times and places. The sizes of rooms in buildings, as well as exterior spaces that may have been suitable for commensal occasions is calculated from published plans and used to estimate the relative size of groups who could have eaten together.

In the framework of her doctoral project, Carolin Jauß is undertaking an in-depth examination of pottery vessels from the 5th–3rd millennium BCE. In addition to working with published literature to record form and size of vessels, she has been able to examine collections in museums in the U.S.A., England, and Germany in order to document usewear traces (sooting, abrasion, chipping,

etc.) and to take samples for residue analysis (to be processed at the laboratory of R. Evershed in Bristol in early summer, 2012).

For the later periods examined in the project, cuneiform texts offer important hints concerning the kinds of foods prepared and some of the methods of preparation. In combination with the material evidence, these offer useful possibilities for reconstructing some of the foods and beverages that were prepared and consumed. If it is possible to identify some of these (for example, dairy fats) archaeologically through residue analysis from ceramics, it may enable us to acquire some clues about the extent to which particular kinds of foods were spatially and socially restricted vs. widespread as well as their temporal distribution.

A workshop organized in the summer of 2010 brought together a range of scholars to discuss their research on feasting, quotidian commensality, and their connections to ritual on the one hand and collective identities on the other. The papers, which represented a wide range of temporal and geographic contexts, provide important insights and inspiration into the interpretive possibilities of the data our project is collecting and analyzing.

Results

The first research question – whether large-scale processes of state and urban development impacted commensality spatially and socially – can be answered with a clear “yes.” At the same time, however, project results suggest that the question might better be reformulated to address the political economy of food preparation and consumption. This is due in large measure to the importance of taking a multiscale approach as well as integrating production (food preparation) more fully into considerations of consumption.

In later 4th millennium Mesopotamia and southwestern Iran there emerged new social and spatial contexts of food consumption associated with the growing sphere of institutional labor. What was eaten and drunk as well as how it was prepared also changed: cooked food prepared over open fires seems to have become associated with domestic contexts whereas food distributed in contexts of institutional labor was prepared by other means (discussed in a paper submitted for publication by Jauß). Not only do we see new spatial and social contexts of food preparation and consumption, but elements thereof begin to permeate the household realm: one finds, for example, mass-produced ceramic vessels in household contexts, indicating that the containers used for rations in a public sphere, along with associated forms of knowledge (research question 2), were reinforced and perhaps transformed in other contexts. The effects of these changes on domestic commensality remain to be addressed during the final phase of the project. A major contribution to it will come from the ceramic usewear studies conducted by Jauß, which should enable her to establish the degree of similarity or variability in uses of particular vessel forms as well as their spatial and hence social contexts.

From the discussions and papers in the workshop “Commensality, Social Relations and Ritual: Between Feasts and Daily Meals” (published in: Susan Pollock (Ed.), *Between Feasts and Daily Meals. Towards an Archaeology of Commensal Spaces*, eTopoi. Journal for Ancient Studies, Special Volume 2 (2012), Berlin: Exzellenzcluster 264 Topoi) came an array of important insights into the relationship between feasts and quotidian meals (research question 3). In addition to highlighting the highly variable ways in which feasts differ from daily repasts, the diversity of case studies have helped me to make an important distinction between what I have called “provisioning” (Zuteilung) – itself divisible into an “upward” (to those socially above oneself) and “downward” (to those socially below oneself) – and hospitality. This differentiation, which is not thematized in most of the archaeological feasting literature, points to political economic dimensions of food relations that are not always played out in contexts of co- presence. The provisioning of workers with rations or of gods by people fits neither the classic notion of feasting nor that of daily household-based meals. Those providing the food in these contexts or in the case of state-sponsored ritual feasts rarely eat together with those they feed. Together these insights point to both the limits and possibilities of the concept of commensality and co-presence as a central component of examining social practices of food consumption.

Discussion of the results in the light of current research

One of the most important implications of the project has to do with scalar relations in the realm of political economy. For many decades archaeological research has tried to address sweeping questions – such as the beginnings of urban and state society – at the level of large-scale, generalized approaches. The interpretations and explanations offered have tended to be divorced from the small-scale practices of daily life – the level at which people confront and cope with political, economic, and social changes. The move to Alltagsgeschichte in history is mirrored in the approach of this project, which focuses on daily practices. It thereby contributes to major changes in the ways the past is conceptualized, as we come to acknowledge the essential role of the practices of daily life in the large-scale structures of history. These in turn point to a profound shift in the understanding of knowledge transfers: rather than being principally top-down, this approach strongly suggests that lateral transfers were of comparable significance. The focus on Alltag also shifts the spatial resolution with which we examine archaeological data and places domestic spaces in the limelight.