

POLITICS OF FOOD IN EARLY MESOPOTAMIAN CENTRALIZED SOCIETIES

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ABSTRACT – *My focus in this paper is on the place of commensality in the small-scale of everyday life as well as in long-term history during the Uruk period (4th millennium BCE) in southern Mesopotamia and neighboring lowland southwestern Iran. I use the term commensality in a broad sense to include the social contexts of eating and drinking, the foods and beverages consumed, and the labor and knowledge that went into their preparation.*

In recent years scholars in a variety of historical and social science disciplines have drawn attention to the fundamental role of mundane, unspectacular, and routine practices in constituting history. Food-related practices are one of the most central elements of daily life, in which the interplay of the ordinary and extraordinary, the routine and the unusual can be fruitfully studied. I examine the contexts of commensality; where and how food and drink were prepared; and discuss the largely neglected issue of hunger.

KEYWORDS – food; hunger; commensality; Uruk-period Mesopotamia

The emergence of early state and urban societies in Mesopotamia has been primarily studied in terms of large-scale political, social, economic, and ideological transformations that went hand-in-hand with the decisions of newly minted leaders. Recent perspectives in archaeology, based in practice theories as well as *Alltagsgeschichte*, call into question these top-down approaches and point instead to the central importance of changing rhythms and practices of daily life. Far from constituting a uniform and predictable backdrop to what are perceived as the important questions of state growth and management, urban development, or colonial expansion, the small-scale, unspectacular, and contingent actions of the everyday have a profound part to play in the writing of long-term histories. Not the least of this is the potential to reclaim a place in history for

those who were not history's "winners" (D'Anna, Guarino, this volume). A focus on the daily and the small scale is not meant as a substitute for research that addresses the grand scale. Rather, it highlights the necessity of examining the *relationship* between the spectacular and the ordinary, between the overarching processes and the small-scale actions and decisions of people going about their daily lives.

My focus in this paper is on food-related practices. The realm of food and drink connects the level of global politics and economic decisions to the local and intimate spheres of life, the top-down to the bottom-up. Food is an important basis of state power in emerging centralized societies (Frangipane 2010) as well as being a pivotal element in the micropolitics of everyday life (Dietler 1996). Food is something people fight

for and fight over. It is tied to the rhythms of everyday life and to the ways in which we interact with each other, as numerous historical and ethnographic studies have shown (see, for example, Aguilar-Rodríguez 2011; Wise 2011). Practices centering around food contribute to the shaping of new subjectivities, precisely because they enter people's lives at the level of day-to-day routines: in the social contexts of eating together, in terms of what was eaten and drunk, and how it was prepared (Pollock ed. 2012*a*; Pollock in press *b*).

In some respects, the study of food has deep roots in the scholarship on early Mesopotamian states and urban societies, as scholars have long been concerned with ecological conditions and their implications for food production, with agricultural/productive capacity and the need for tribute (Adams 1966, 1981; Johnson 1987; Nissen 1988; Wright 1998; Pollock 2001). For the most part, however, these topics have been treated as a relatively uniform background against which political leaders took decisions and to which producers reacted. What was eaten and drunk, how and by whom it was prepared, and the social contexts in which consumption took place have received much less attention (but see Bottéro 2004 [2002]). A notable exception has been the interest in beer production, drawing especially on studies of the proto-cuneiform texts, which contain considerable detail on the types and amount of ingredients required to produce specific kinds and quantities of beer as well as the disbursement of the finished products (Nissen *et al.* 1990: 66-75; Damerow 2011).

In my research on food and food-related practices, I take as my focal point

commensality, a concept that places the social contexts of eating and drinking, together with the kinds of foods and drinks consumed, at the center of investigation (Simmel 1957 [1910]; Douglas 1975; Elias 1977; Mintz 1996; Derrida 2007 [1997]; Sutton 2001; Därmann, Lemke eds. 2008; Pollock 2012*b*). A study of commensality draws attention to the social and political relationships that are built, sustained, altered, and broken down through the ways in which food is shared, apportioned, consumed, and discarded – as well as the contexts in which it is *not* shared, in which food inequalities are constructed, based on gender, social or economic position, and on shortages that may be environmentally related but also constructed politically and socially. Behind consumption lie the labor, knowledge, and socio-economic relations that go into the preparation of beverages and meals: the ways in which plant and animal products are processed and prepared in order to turn them into food and drink; how they are gathered, stored, and allocated; and how these practices are interwoven with demands for tribute, the restructuring of production, and the ways in which women and men balanced time devoted to different activities, including food preparation and consumption (e.g. Brumfiel 1991).

Archaeological examinations of commensality have focused heavily on feasts (Dietler 1996; Dietler, Hayden eds. 2001; Bray ed. 2003; Jones 2007; Twiss 2008). However, more comprehensive understandings of the place of commensality in daily life demand that we pay attention to the everyday and the humble worker as much as to the festive occasion and the luxurious meals of the elite (Pol-

lock in press b; cf. Bottéro 2004 [2002] for a near exclusive focus on the latter).

In this paper I examine several facets of commensality in the Uruk period in the southern Mesopotamian lowlands and neighboring southwestern Iran¹. Due to the constraints imposed by the available data, I will concentrate principally on the later part of the Uruk period. I begin by considering the contexts of commensality and then turn to questions of where and how food and drink were prepared. I will argue that there were connections between specific kinds of beverages and foods and the ways they were prepared on the one hand and the contexts in which they were consumed on the other. Finally, I will consider an element that has been almost entirely missing from archaeological discussions of the Uruk period – and many other historical contexts – that of hunger. Its absence in most archaeological studies contributes to a romanticized picture of the past, in which we reproduce our own contemporary reality – well stocked supermarket shelves and the money needed to purchase as much food as we want – in the ways we think about the past.

CONTEXTS OF COMMENSALITY

At least two distinct contexts of commensality can be recognized in Uruk-period southern Mesopotamia: house-based² and institutional commensality.

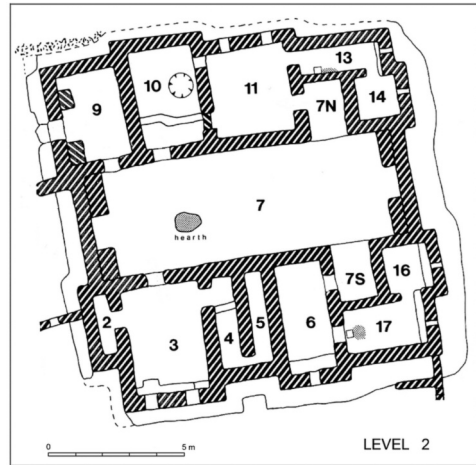


Fig. 1 – A well preserved Ubaid-period house from Tell Madhhur. The central hall (labeled number 7) was used for food preparation (but not necessarily cooking) and consumption. Cooking took place in the side rooms 6, 11, 13, and 17 (plan after Roaf 1989: fig.1).

The former is an inheritance of preceding Ubaid (6th-5th millennia BCE) traditions, in which the locations of fireplaces, cooking pots, grinding equipment, and ceramics used for serving and eating indicate that the spacious central halls of many Ubaid houses were places where people ate together as well as engaged in some aspects of food preparation (Pollock 2010; Kennedy 2012; see also Forest 1987*a*) (fig. 1). Sometimes the side rooms just off the central hall were also used for cooking and other food preparation activities. House-based commensality presumably involved in the first instance those living in the

¹ My work on this theme is part of a research project funded through TOPOI. It includes a comprehensive study of pottery vessels and their uses, which is the subject of Carolin Jauß's PhD research.

² There are good reasons to be cautious about equating a building – a house in this case – with a household in the sense of a discrete socioeconomic and reproductive unit. For this reason, I use the term “house-based” rather than the more familiar “household-based” commensality. See in this regard Lévi-Strauss's “house societies” as recently discussed in archaeology by Gillespie (2000) among others.

house, but it may also have included guests.

The second context of commensality, that associated with major institutions, appears to be new in Uruk times, or at least novel in the specific form in which it is attested by the later Uruk period. This is the sphere of rations and allocations of food and drink in the framework of labor performed for institutions. In this context workers received food and/or drink disbursed to them as ‘compensation’ for their work. The appearance of the ubiquitous beveled rim bowl in Uruk times is widely understood as a concrete indicator of these institutional allocations to workers. What was distributed in the bowls remains highly debated; how and where the contents were consumed has been largely unexamined, but I have argued that it was likely something that was immediately consumed (Pollock 2003: 31; see also Bernbeck 2009; Pollock 2012). I will come back to the beveled rim bowls, rations, and related allocations later in the paper.

Other spheres of commensality are less clearly documented in the archaeological and textual record but can nonetheless be postulated to have existed. Whereas in the Ubaid-period temples at Eridu an array of unusual pottery vessels with elaborate decoration is attested, presumably used in cultic offerings of food and drink (Safar *et al.* 1981: 154-160), there is little in the way of elaborate ceramics from the Uruk period that could have played a comparable role, although elaborately carved stone vessels (Winter 2007: 123;

Lindemeyer, Martin 1993) may have taken on this role to some extent. Elaborate, diacritical feasting, a prominent theme depicted in imagery and in burial contexts in subsequent Early Dynastic times, is only indirectly visible in Uruk material remains, as I will discuss later.

HOW AND WHERE WERE FOOD AND DRINK PREPARED?

To begin to try to identify the locations of food preparation and the ways in which it was conducted, an examination of fire installations is a useful place to start. Hearths were present in many houses, as far as the constraints of available evidence allow us to say³. These are mostly relatively small (generally no more than 0.7 m in diameter) and informal in their construction, consisting often of little more than an ashy depression, occasionally lined with bricks (LeBrun 1978; Wright ed. 1981; Wright 1985; Delougaz *et al.* 1996; Alizadeh 2008). Fireplaces are also typical of major public buildings, including many of those in the Eanna precinct at Uruk (Lenzen 1974: 119-120) as well as the “protoliterate” Sin Temples at Khafajah (Delougaz, Lloyd 1942: 6-40). In non-domestic buildings these vary from circular hearths of approximately one meter diameter to round or occasionally rectangular fireplaces with ramp-like extensions (“pan-shaped”) that typically range from more than one meter up to two meters in diameter. Overall, the fire-

³ The limited excavations of residential structures in southern Mesopotamia makes it difficult to base too much on that evidence alone. In southwestern Iran small areas of domestic architecture were exposed at several sites, including Chogha Mish, Susa, and Farukhabad.

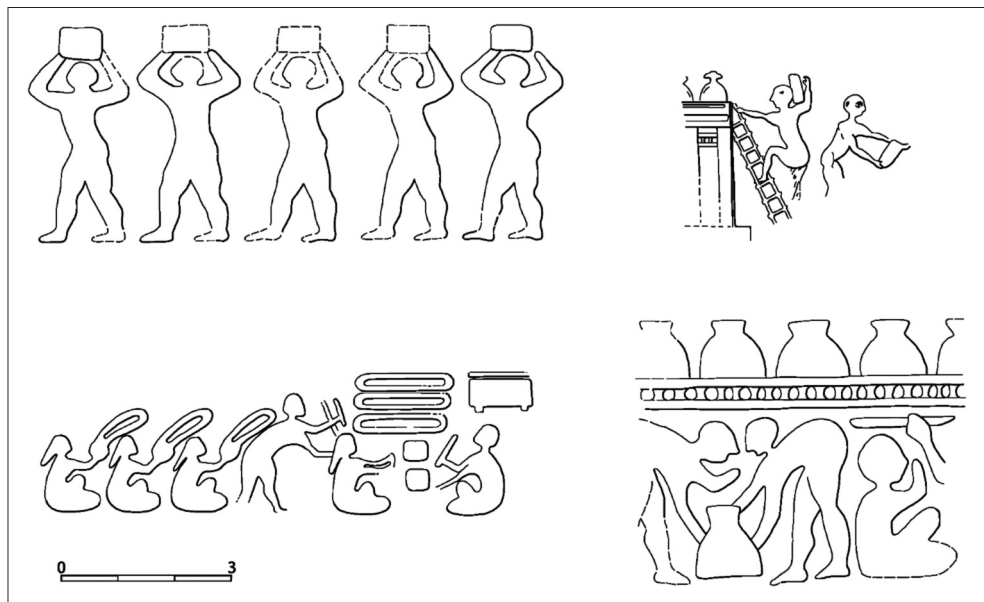


Fig. 2 – Work scenes on Late Uruk seals (after Amiet 1980: pl. 16, no. 268; LeBrun, Vallat 1978: fig. 6, no.11; Delougaz, Kantor 1996: pl. 149B, 152F).

places associated with non-domestic buildings tend to be larger than those in residential buildings, as one would expect if they were meant to be used to prepare food for a larger group of people. Fire installations may, of course, have provided warmth and light as well as or even instead of being used for food preparation.

In contrast to the frequency of hearths, ovens are quite rare⁴, a rather surprising observation given the common assumption that bread was an important staple from early on (Millard 1988; Chazan, Lehner 1990; Bottéro 2004: 47-51, see also Englund 2001: 32, GUG_{2a}). There are several ways to explain this situation. Bread ovens may have been clustered in locations away

from the main residential areas and thereby not be encountered in excavations. Bread may have been baked over open fires, or, alternatively, some of the fire installations reported as (pottery) kilns in the literature may rather have been used as ovens for baking and/or roasting; the limited detail published on most fire installations makes it often difficult to assess their use.

Visual imagery from the later Uruk period, primarily in the form of seals and sealings, is unique in Mesopotamian history in terms of the frequency with which scenes of work are depicted. These included numerous depictions of processing and storage of plant and animal products, including filling of silos, tending animals, preparing something in and

⁴ This is in contrast to the more frequent occurrence of (pottery) kilns.

with vessels, as well as textile production (see, for example, Amiet 1980: pl. 15-16, 18-21[fig. 2]). There is a notable absence of portrayals of cooking, roasting, or baking.

The pictorial emphasis on processing and storing rather than cooking, roasting, or baking corresponds well to the testimony of the proto-cuneiform texts. In the so-called "Vessels List", vessels are represented first and foremost as containers for processing or storing ingredients, but not necessarily for cooking or baking (Englund, Nissen 1993: 31-32; Englund 1998: 95-98). Different shapes and attributes, such as the presence or absence of a spout or a handle, indicate contents, especially varieties of beer and animal fats. Based on the context in which they have been recovered, it is generally assumed that the proto-cuneiform texts record transactions that took place in large institutional contexts. The emphasis on beer and beer brewing, with at least nine different types represented, goes hand-in-hand with archaeobotanical evidence, which shows an increasing dominance of barley among the crops raised in southern sites (and, to a lesser degree, in northern Mesopotamian settlements). Barley was a major ingredient in beer, although it was also used for bread and for animal fodder. In addition to beer, bread, and dairy products (fats, including clarified butter, and cheeses), the proto-cuneiform texts mention such foods as soups or stews and porridges (Englund 1998: 94-98, 181-204).

A final source of evidence regarding food preparation comes from the vessels

themselves. In Uruk times these were principally ceramics. Uruk pottery assemblages are characterized by a proliferation of new vessel shapes (fig. 3), presumably designed for specialized purposes, in comparison to the much more limited repertoire in Ubaid times. Despite the wide variety of shapes, only a very restricted set of ceramic containers was used in direct association with fire, judging by the occurrence of sooting or interior carbonization⁵. The most frequently reported forms with signs of use as cooking vessels are the so-called strap- or rope-handled jars, characterized by squat bodies, low necks, and either flat or rounded bases, and jars with round, often everted rims, and somewhat elongated globular bodies. The squat jars with handles tend to be relatively small. From Chogha Mish, Jauß reports that vessels with sooting traces reach a maximum size of nine liters, but many hold one liter or less; the round-rimmed jars without handles are larger, up to 14 liters in capacity. The different shapes display distinct sooting traces and interior carbonization, indicating that they were placed differently and perhaps also handled in distinct ways in relation to the source of the fire (D'Anna, Jauß n.d.). The small size of most cooking pots implies that limited quantities of food were cooked at one time (see, for Susa, LeBrun 1978: fig. 28). The frequency of cooking vessels, however, may in some contexts, be quite high. This is the case at the small village site of Sharafabad, where excavation of a large, trash-filled pit yielded a relatively high density of

⁵ I would to thank Carolin Jauß for discussing her on-going work on the cooking vessels with me and for her and M. Bianca D'Anna's permission to cite their as-yet unpublished paper on the subject.

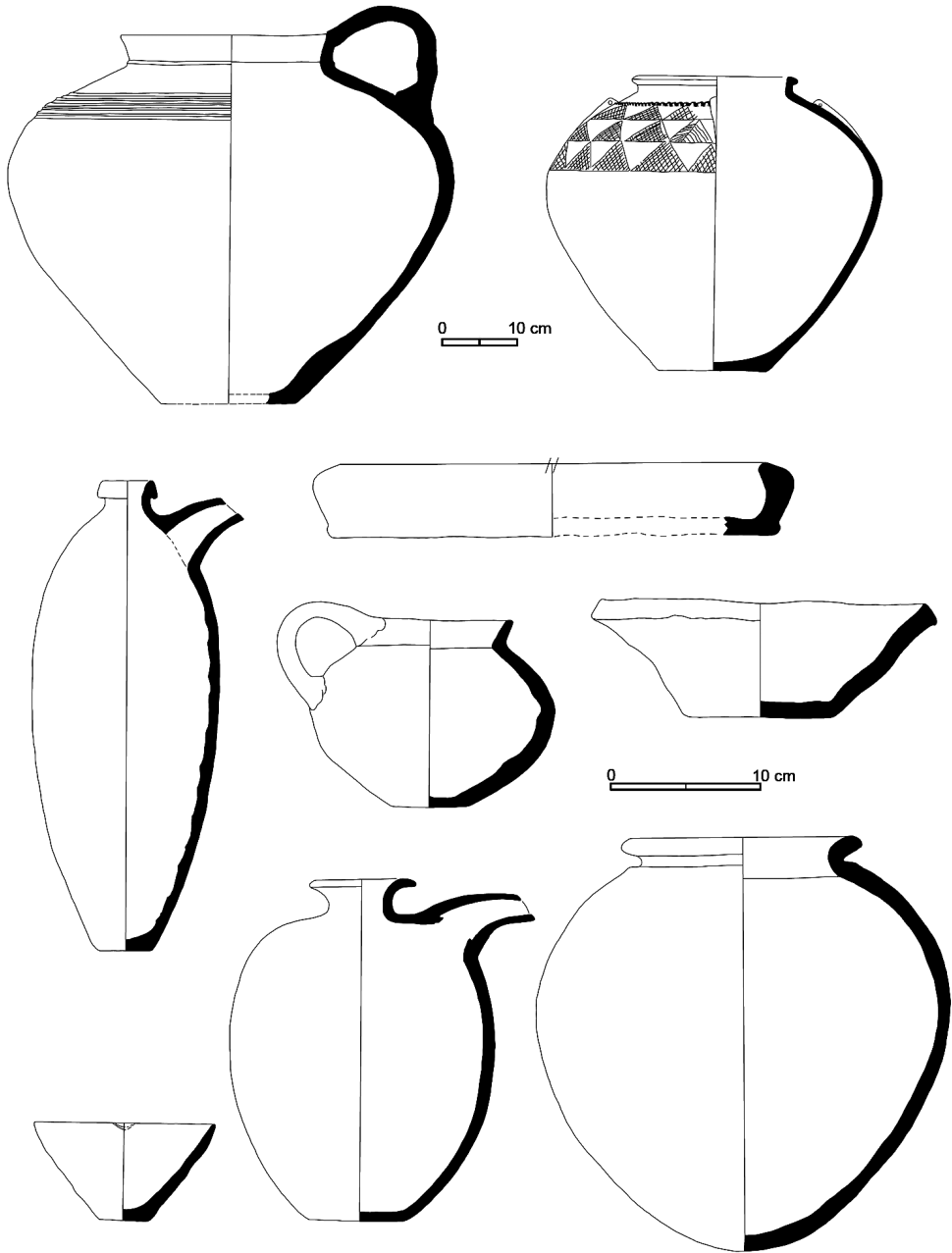


Fig. 3 – Array of Uruk vessel forms; scales approximate (after Weiss and Young 1975: fig. 1a; Le Brun 1978: fig. 32(15), 34(8); Boese 1995: Abb. 6e, 21f; Delougaz *et al.* 1996: pl. 83P, 90G, 95G,N).

cooking jars with fire clouding and charred cooking debris (Wright *et al.* 1980: 272-273, Tab. 1). Nonetheless, the overwhelming majority of Uruk ceramic vessels at Sharafabad and elsewhere does not show signs of having been used in direct contact with fire.

The implications of the ceramic evidence confirm the picture drawn from the texts and imagery, namely that most vessels were used for storage, transport, and preparation of food but not over a fire. On the basis of this evidence I would suggest that we must consider the possibility that only a limited range of foods was *cooked*; instead, the testimony of the texts and imagery points to the possibility that the emphasis in institutional contexts was on brewing beer (Damerow 2011) and probably baking bread as well as to a more limited extent on fermenting, drying (fish, cheese – see Englund 1998: 128-142; Brunke 2011: 169), and preparations for storage that sometimes involved heat (dairy products, including clarified butter – see D’Anna, Jauß n.d.). *Cooked* foods, such as soups, stews, or porridges, were in contrast more closely associated with food prepared and consumed “at home.” Notably, presentations of offerings to deities, mentioned in texts dating to the mid-3rd millennium, list bread and beer, but otherwise primarily foods in uncooked and semi- or unprepared forms – fruits, milk, oil, flour, and live animals (Beld 2002: 108-129).

COMMENSAL CONTEXTS, ONCE AGAIN

For many people in Uruk times the consumption of food and drink in institutional contexts involved the receipt of

rations and/or allocations of food or drink in compensation for labor performed. Ration distribution has often been associated with the ubiquitous Uruk vessel form, the beveled rim bowl. A huge literature has been devoted to the question of whether beveled rim bowls were indeed ration vessels and what their contents were, and these arguments do not need to be repeated in detail here (Nissen 1970; Johnson 1973; Beale 1978; Forest 1987*b*; Millard 1988; Chazan, Lehner 1990; Goulder 2010). I begin, however, with the widely accepted interpretation of them as connected, in one way or another, to the institutional distribution of food/drink in return for labor performed. That they were put to a variety of secondary usages is clear but need not concern us further here.

The distributional contexts as well as the open and often asymmetrical morphology of beveled rim bowls suggest that their contents were something that usually was consumed on the spot rather than transported to another location for processing or consumption. The contents did not require direct contact between the vessels and fire, as there are virtually no indications of sooting or internal carbonization on beveled rim bowls. Moreover, the bowls do not make sense in terms of a simple analogy to rations that are known from later, especially 3rd millennium texts, which consist of goods that were distributed on a *monthly* basis. The volumes of the bowls – typically less than one liter – are much too small for that purpose. Rather, I have suggested elsewhere that they were probably used to distribute food and/or drink to be consumed at the point of distribution as part of the provisioning of workers la-

boring for institutions (Pollock 2003: 29-31).

In recent years several scholars have proposed that beveled rim bowls were used as forms for preparing bread (Millard 1988; Chazan, Lehner 1990; Goulder 2010). This suggestion conforms with the mentions of bread in the proto-cuneiform texts, but it begs the question of where the large bread ovens are to be found. Furthermore, barley does not lend itself well to the production of leavened bread (Lyons, D'Andrea 2003: 524), which would presumably be the type to be baked in molds such as beveled rim bowls. While wheat was cultivated, it seems to have been far less frequently grown than barley, making it an unlikely candidate to be the primary ingredient in the food prepared and distributed by major institutions. An alternative worth considering is that the beveled rim bowls were used to distribute beer to workers (Bernbeck 2009; Pollock in press *b*).

Beer is commonly mentioned in the proto-cuneiform texts, and it seems to have played a substantial role in the late 4th millennium political economy (Damerow 2011). The texts do not, however, enlighten us as to the contexts for which beer was brewed and in which it was consumed. Given the quantities produced and the need for liquid sustenance during intense physical labor in a hot and dry environment, it seems reasonable that the beveled rim bowls were used to distribute something in a liquid or semi-liquid form, possibly a beer. Beer would have provided a nutritious beverage that did not require cooking and hence obviated the need for the large quantities of fuel necessary to cook substantial amounts of food or bake bread.

The proto-cuneiform sign for ration allocation, GU₇, has generally been associated with eating rather than drinking, due to its meaning in later periods (but see Bernbeck 2009). However, in the early texts it seems to have had a more generic meaning of consumption that is not necessarily specific to eating, and it occurs relatively frequently in texts with the sign for beer (a CDLI search yields 15 texts; Englund, pers. comm.). If correct, this would mean that what was distributed to workers, apparently in massive quantities at least in the aggregate, was not cooked food (such as a porridge) or baked bread, but rather a beverage prepared by sprouting and drying, grinding and fermenting of grain.

Given the indications that more and more people were engaged in tribute labor connected to state institutions over the course of the Uruk period (Johnson 1987; Nissen 1988: 83-85; Pollock 2001), people would have been increasingly confronted with a commensal environment that differed markedly from a familiar and familial domestic setting. Even if the content of what was consumed was not new, the frequency and the social context of its consumption most likely were: instead of eating with family or other co-residents, an ever larger portion of meals were eaten/drunk together with others who were linked in an alienated work environment (Pollock in press). These occasions were clearly distinguished from “ordinary” meals through what was consumed and how it was prepared, as well as by the social context in which the consumption took place. The fact that beveled rim bowls, minimally reused if at all by issuing institutions, are present in a host of other contexts including domestic ones, sug-

gests that certain elements of institutionally based commensality found their way into the domestic sphere. These elements may have included certain types of food or drink, thereby altering, even if only incrementally, facets of house-based commensal practices.

Regardless of what the beveled rim bowls held, significant proportions of food consumption for increasing portions of the populace took place in institutional contexts rather than in those of host and guest relations or among co-residential kin. A graphic illustration of what this may have meant comes from Chogha Mish, where in a variety of contexts beveled rim bowls were found lined up, upside down, in rows, in some cases on shelves (Delougaz *et al.* 1996: pl. 15 A-C). They appear to be laid out so that they could have been quickly filled and handed out, in an assembly-line or cafeteria-like fashion. In another example Wright has suggested that beveled rim bowls discarded in a pit within a well maintained building at Susa derive from meals eaten on the job by workers who were repairing the building, who then discarded the waste in the pit they had dug to obtain clean sediments (Wright 1998: 186-188). Such ways of serving and consumption in the company of other workers hint at the likelihood that food/drink distribution contributed to the forging of new kinds of social links and relations, related to class and possibly to single-gender work groups, and at the same time potentially weakening old ones.

Institutionally based ration distributions and food allocations followed a decidedly instrumental logic, in which the calculation of quantities of ingredients and amounts disbursed played a central

role (see discussions of bookkeeping in Englund 1998). Portions were individual and carefully measured, rather than making use of communal serving dishes around which people could gather and out of which they could serve themselves. In contrast, communal consumption would have been possible using the larger bowls characteristic of the earlier Uruk period or the large casseroles and hammerhead bowls found in northern Mesopotamia (e.g., Pollock, Coursey 1995; Pearce 2008). The emphasis on small, often individual-sized servings in Uruk ceramic assemblages is also evident in the relatively modest quantities that could have been cooked in the strap-handled jars, in comparison to the much larger cooking pots used in contemporary northern contexts (D'Anna 2011; D'Anna, Jauß n.d.). This represents a deliberate turning *away* from an ethics of sharing as implied in large, collective vessels and *toward* a developing habitus of individualization and reduction of food to a matter of sheer survival (Bernbeck 2009; Bernbeck, Costello 2011: 680-681).

All in all, then, we see marked changes in the context of commensality in the Uruk period, with the emergence of an institutional ('public') sphere in which increasing numbers of people spent increasing amounts of time. What was consumed as well as with whom and under what circumstances differed markedly from house-based commensality. The accent on effectivity in preparing and serving food/drink in institutional contexts changed the meaning of commensality in ways that impacted people's lives far more profoundly than the simple question of where one ate a meal in the midst of the workday would suggest at

first glance (cf. Gabaccia, Pilcher 2011). These changes represented profound interventions in the fabric of everyday life, which contributed in essential ways to the emergence of class society (Zagarell 1986): new kinds of social relations were constructed at the expense of kin ties, based on the social contexts in which people typically ate: it was in these contexts that “community” was fundamentally formed, maintained, and reinforced through the act of “sharing a meal” and engaging in the banal talk that accompanies it (Simmel 1957).

Feasting, abundance, and hunger

In marked contrast to the Early Dynastic period, when elaborate feasts are portrayed in so-called banquet scenes on seals and plaques and in which feasting remains are regularly found in graves in the form of ceramic, stone, and metal vessels, there is little visual or other direct evidence of elite feasting in Uruk times. The typical Early Dynastic banquet format is only occasionally found on Uruk seals⁶. Instead, on Uruk objects visual emphasis is placed primarily on depictions of the preparations and deliveries for feasts (for example, on the Uruk Vase: Winter 2007: 125-129), and on the work involved in food processing and storage. In other words, what was highlighted through visual representations were the labor and products that went into feasts and ritual offerings, as well as the production and storage of food for redistributions in the form of rations and related disbursements, rather than the outcome of that labor. By not portraying

food consumption and the contexts in which it took place – especially elaborate feasts in which the elite were clearly distinguished from the masses – there was a reduction of emphasis on those commensal practices that served to separate and distinguish people and instead an implicit statement of commonality (Pollock 2003).

Although feasting played at best a minor role in visual media in Uruk times, an important motif, both in images and in texts, was abundance. As persuasively argued by Winter (2007), leaders of early Mesopotamian states drew close associations between abundance in the natural world – food, water, fertility – and their qualities as rulers. These were, in turn, understood as closely linked to humans’ relations to the deities as the ultimate providers of abundance. Processions of people bringing votive offerings highlight the place of abundance in the connections between the world of mortals and that of the deities. The Uruk political elite apparently wished to show themselves as great providers rather than distinguishing themselves from others through elaborate feasts. This does not, of course, mean that there were in reality no feasts restricted to elite segments of Uruk society. Perhaps such feasts were less exclusive than in later periods, or the elaborate protocol that seemingly accompanied Early Dynastic feasting was not yet so rigidly set as to require regular “reminders” of how participants were supposed to behave. What was likely new in Uruk times – the crass social and economic distinctions among people –

⁶ The exceptions include a sealing from Sharafabad (Wright et al. 1980: fig. 6(9)) and possibly a scene from Chogha Mish (Delougaz et al. 1996: pl. 155 A).

was perhaps too risky to display in an “in-the-face” manner, whereas by the mid-third millennium a starkly class-based society may have come to be felt as so “natural” that there was little danger in emphasizing it through material displays.

Up to this point I, like so many other modern-day researchers, have taken an implicit stance in which food and drink are assumed to be ever-present. But what about the flip side of abundance – hunger? Although archaeologists have calculated agricultural productivity as a way to determine how much land a community would need in order to feed its members, we have much less often addressed directly the question of how many people were hungry, and how often. This is not just a matter of “forces of nature.” There is every reason to pose the question of the extent to which hunger was a result of political economic decisions, in which strategies to extract tribute as well as the ability to demonstrate abundance came at the expense of the well-being of some segments of the populace. More concretely, if beveled rim bowls supplied the daily allocation of food or drink to a labor force, it is very likely that many people were hungry “on the job.” By the sheer fact of standardizing disbursements, physiological differences among people were largely ignored, ensuring that some people would have been hungry. Similarly, by constructing a system in which food allocations were kept to an effective minimum, any further shortages – the results of poor harvests or distributional problems – would have been enough to tip the balance to a condition of hunger. What

might be cynically referred to as a “democracy of the stomach”⁷ was another dimension of a political economic system that was predicated on conformity achieved through disciplining the body, in this case via the stomach.

Although hunger has received little attention in the scholarly literature, a few mentions that draw on 3rd millennium texts point directly in this direction. In the texts from the *emunusa* (“house of the lady”) in the late Early Dynastic city-state of Lagash, there are mentions of shortages of grain shortly before the New Year’s festival (Beld 2002: 121). From the Ur III period, at the end of the 3rd millennium, Gomi (1984) documents the likelihood of famine on the basis of the marked increase in the price of grain at Ur, and Janssen (1991) discusses a case in which the family of a *nadittum* fails to provide for her. These are little more than occasional hints, but they demonstrate the importance of posing questions about hunger and famine as much as those about feasting.

CONCLUSION

Far from being a set of conservative practices that form a uniform backdrop to “real” societal transformations, commensality and the labor and knowledge that underpin it are fundamental and dynamic elements of social, political, and economic change. The extent to which food-related practices were deliberately and cynically altered, on the one extreme, or gradually modified in response to demands in other spheres of life, on

⁷ I owe this turn of phrase to Reinhard Bernbeck.

the other hand, is a question that cannot at present be definitively answered for the Uruk period. Nonetheless, the profound consequences of changing contexts of commensality, together with the kinds of foods and/or drink consumed, are clear. I have suggested that cooked food may have been “marked” as something specific to meals “at home” or special festive occasions, as opposed to that which workers consumed in the course of labor performed for major institutions (cf. Hastorf 2012). The latter form of consumption seems, however, to have made its way increasingly into daily life beyond the institutional workplace, as shown by the widespread distribution of beveled rim bowls. Quite likely hunger

was an ever-present threat that also became a way to discipline an emerging workforce whose members no longer controlled either their own labor or the food they ate.

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