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Festivals at Late Bronze Age Emar

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Home-made Bread, Municipal Mutton, Royal Wine. Establishing Social Relations during the Preparation and Consumption of Food in Religious Festivals at Late Bronze Age Emar

In the urban culture of the ancient Near East religious festivals offer a major occasion to present and to re-establish the social networks of a city. An analysis of the ritual texts from the Late Bronze Age city of Emar (13th century BC) reveals how various groups in the urban society were involved in the preparation and consumption of food. Feasting meant the participation of persons from different households at urban localities such as a temple. Most interestingly the meaning of the foodstuffs consumed in urban festivals was already established during their preparation, in which various organizations were involved.

Ancient Near Eastern studies; city of Emar; religious rituals; temple; sacrifice: food preparation; meaning of food; festival; urban space.

In der urbanen Kultur Altvorderasiens bieten religiöse Feste einen bedeutenden Anlass, soziale Netzwerke in einer Stadt sichtbar zu machen und zu produzieren. Die Analyse der Ritualltexte aus der spätbronzezeitlichen Stadt Emar (13. Jh. v. Chr.) lässt erkennen, in welcher Weise verschiedene Gruppen der urbanen Gesellschaft in die Zubereitung und den Verzehr von Lebensmitteln eingebunden waren. Das Feiern von Festen bedeutete, dass Personen aus verschiedenen Haushalten in städtischen Institutionen wie dem Tempel partizipierten. Besonders interessant ist, dass der Bedeutungsgehalt von Lebensmitteln, die im Laufe von Festen in urbanen Zentren konsumiert wurden, bereits während der Zubereitung festgelegt war. Hieran wiederum waren unterschiedliche Organisationen beteiligt.

Altorientalistik; Emar; Religiöse Rituale; Tempel; Opfer; Nahrungszubereitung; Bedeutung von Nahrung; Fest; Urbaner Raum.

1 Representation of Cultural Essentials at Festivals

Religious festivals were key events in the ancient Near East: their dates marked the calendar and the accounting of time; their deities, representing the main symbols of a community's identity, stood in the focus of the ritual, and the participation of the population with its leaders involved a presentation of the socio-political organization at work. Furthermore, considering aesthetic aspects, for example the festivals' staging at the most prominent buildings and places of a city, the view of works of art and artisanry or the performance of poetry, music, and dance, the short period of a festival meant a condensed presentation of the essentials of a given culture.

This contribution was originally designed as a philological counterpiece to the paper of Adelheid Otto, focusing on the archaeological evidence for food consumption in private houses and the main temple at Tell Bazi/Başīru. I am grateful both to her and to Susan Pollock for the invitation to join the discussion on commensality and their input of stimulating ideas.

Food played an important role in these public events, and the example of Late Bronze Age Emar investigated in this paper is no exception. A close reading of the ritual texts concerning the preparation, presentation and consumption of food reveals that at Emar's festivals more was at play than simply the abundance and exceptional quality of food that mark festival events in contrast to everyday routine. The specific semantics attributed to various edibles was an expression of different economic values: the preparation of bread involved labor, sheep were bred by communal organizations, and delicacies belonged to the ruler's court. In a subtle way the handling of food marked various social relations within the urban setting and thus indicates socio-economic stratification as well as the distinction of specific groups or the cooperation of the city's population. In addition, no occasions or institutions are known other than the religious festivals that displayed these urban social relations in a similar way.

2 The City of Emar in the Late Bronze Age

This investigation is based on data from the ritual texts found at the ancient Syrian city of Emar from the Late Bronze Age. Emar, situated on the Middle Euphrates in Syria, was an important hub in the Bronze Age networks. The French rescue excavations in the early 1970s uncovered the last pre-classical inhabitation level of the city, the Late Bronze Age city. At this period, the 13th century BC, Emar had become part of the Hittite empire, and Hittite officials controlled the relationship of the city with the Hittites' Syrian capital Karkemiš. Besides this political dependence, city life seems to have been little affected by the Hittite occupation, and the urban inhabitants, most of whom spoke a Semitic tongue, performed their daily business as ever, observed legal traditions similar to those existing prior to the Hittite occupation and venerated the gods of their city.¹

The nuclear family that inhabited the private houses, sometimes with a few more dependents, was the basic unit of society.² The "brothers" (*abḫū*), probably composed of representatives of neighborhoods, met for legal decisions. The local affairs of the city were managed by an assembly of city elders (*šībūtu*) that decided legal cases in the name of the god of the city, Ninurta. The institution of a city assembly was a basic and widespread feature of Mesopotamian cities, and at Emar and elsewhere this body also represented the city in dealings with a royal overlord or a foreign king. The internal organization of the city Emar was based on a long urban tradition; former claims for a strong nomadic component and a clan structure have proven to be unfounded.³ The prominent role of urban institutions is, however, well comparable to the situation in Mesopotamian towns.

The local king of Emar appears as subordinate to the local institution of the elders,⁴ but under Hittite rule the king became more relevant in the city's internal legal matters.⁵ Politically, Emar's king always depended on mighty sovereigns such as the kings of Mitanni or Ḫatti. A part of the male population was obliged to fulfil duties for the Hittite state and earned the respective benefits.⁶ A "palace" appears in early texts from Emar, but during the 13th century to which most tablets belong a royal court with its courtiers and officials does not seem to be attested at Emar.⁷ Finally, nothing like a scholarly elite or guilds emerge from the sources.

1 On Emar in general see e.g. Adamthwaite 2001 or the contributions in d'Alfonso, Cohen, and Sürenhagen 2008. A useful bibliography is provided by Faist, Justel, and Vita 2007.

2 Otto 2006 combines archaeological and philological evidence for a Late Bronze Age city in the region.

3 Fleming 2004, 212–214; Viano 2010.

4 Pruzsinszky 2008.

5 Démare-Lafont 2008.

6 Yamada 2006.

7 Pruzsinszky 2008.

This sketch of social stratification and grouping has been mainly drawn according to the testimony of the legal texts that were found in many private houses. The absence of more varied features of social stratification has led to an impression of a “relatively egalitarian society of traders and small producers”, especially if seen in contrast to the palace economy at Ugarit or Alalakh.⁸ And concerning the highest offices of king and diviner it seems that “at Emar, collective institutions stand above various private persons endowed with civic responsibilities”.⁹

3 Emar Ritual Texts as Source for the Transaction of Foodstuffs

The bulk of cuneiform texts from Emar, perhaps more than a thousand tablets, stems from the house of the “diviner” (*bārû*) of the city.¹⁰ As in any other family archive, the diviner’s family also stored their most relevant legal documents for generations, including documents on immovable property or on specific rights granted by the Hittite king. Moreover, the diviner disposed of an impressive library comprising manuscripts of Mesopotamian scholarship of all genres, lexical lists, omen texts, and literary works. And finally he kept those documents that were relevant for his duties as a “diviner of the gods of Emar.” Divination, the observation of portentous signs, left hardly any traces in his written record. But he was apparently the person in charge of the cultic affairs of the whole city. Since the cult had to be kept in accordance with the will of the gods, the title “diviner of the gods of Emar” goes well together with his documented duties.¹¹

The ritual texts¹² note the most important actions at special religious festivals, indicating the gods that were venerated, the persons present, or the sequence of events. The ritual texts were clearly intended as a guideline for the diviner himself, who was well aware of the basic facts, and therefore little effort was spent for a more nuanced description of the cultic ceremonies. There is one aspect, however, which is noted in a very detailed way, namely the goods that were transferred during the ritual. In these cases the texts indicate qualifications, for example the breed of sheep or various kinds of bread, they give exact quantities, and they note quite often what is done with the goods, and which persons are involved. This preoccupation of the ritual texts with the transaction of goods becomes more apparent if compared to other aspects; thus, for example, the ritual texts do not offer exact time indications, neither in absolute nor in relative terms, or more precise descriptions of places and ritual itineraries.

What is largely a disappointment for the historian of religion becomes most interesting in the context of a study on the practice of food consumption: the ritual texts note the exact quantities and kinds of foodstuffs consumed during a religious ritual. Despite this generally favorable source situation, the modern researcher often faces enormous difficulties in grasping the exact sense of a concise prescription in the ritual text that allowed the diviner to act correctly and to manage the acquisition, preparation, presentation, consumption, or distribution of foodstuffs. Furthermore, whereas clay tablets have the great advantage that such mundane matters as documents on the distribution of bread and beer are preserved at all, they nevertheless tend to break in tiny pieces, and this leaves us with broken tablets and many tiny fragments with little relevant information.

The understanding of the ritual texts as manuals mainly destined for the correct distribution of goods fits well into the general picture of the cuneiform documentation on cultic rituals. There the distribution of goods in sacrifices often features prominently, and

8 Beckman 1997, 107.

9 Démare-Lafont 2008, 217.

10 Fleming 2000, 13–47; Cohen 2009.

11 Sallaberger 1996, 142; Démare-Lafont 2008.

12 For editions see primarily Arnaud 1986; Fleming 1992; Fleming 2000; Cohen, d’Alfonso, and Sørenhagen 2008.

thus the *offering* demands a central place in the *practice* of ancient Mesopotamian cult.¹³ Whereas at a conceptual level the sacrifice meant the feeding of the gods, on the level of practice—and in fact this is the main concern for the historian of religion—the meal as a literally vital act was considered the appropriate moment to remember the cultural and cosmic order represented by the gods. The practice of offerings did not elaborate on the aspect of feeding the gods, but it regularly presented a symbolic pattern determined by variables such as time, place, occasion, or the agent of the sacrifice. The amount and quality of goods presented to a deity depended on occasion and calendar, thus monthly festivals required larger offerings than daily meals or at the main festival of a deity his or her share was increased; the main god of the city was presented more sheep, bread and beer than his spouse or his son or minor deities, but a woman might offer more to a female deity than to the male main god.

Offering practices can thus be understood as sophisticated patterns that regularly *represent* the complex orders intrinsically linked to the pantheon. Correspondingly, the central act of the sacrifice in Mesopotamia was the *presentation* of the offerings, and not, for example, their transformation (such as slaughter, burning) or consumption. It is in a transferred meaning only that offerings keep gods alive: as long as people were involved day by day in constructing the highly complex pattern of sacrifices, their practice testified to the relevance of their religion. Seen in this context, the focus of the Emar ritual texts on the correct distribution of offerings is not only a reflection of the duties of the diviner to care for the materials used in rituals, but it also highlights the role of offerings as central acts of religious practice. Any study of the persons involved in the regime of offerings has to keep in mind these basic principles.

4 Food and Beverages at Emar

The goods presented to the gods in offerings apparently correspond largely to the meals of the mortals. One did not offer unprocessed grain, but bread and beer, and mostly specific parts of meat were selected for the presentation to the gods. Since cultic offerings resembled human food in so many respects, it is worth considering briefly the main dishes that were available at Emar, especially since this local cuisine did not differ too much from other areas of Syro-Mesopotamia. In the following, I concentrate on information drawn from cuneiform texts, whereas the archaeological evidence has been aptly presented by Adelheid Otto for the contemporary settlement of Tell Bazi.¹⁴

4.1 Grain Products

As everywhere in Mesopotamia, grain products constituted by far the most important part of the offerings, and we can be sure that this also held true for the meals of the inhabitants.

The dominant crop at Emar was barley, emmer played an absolutely minor role only, bread wheat is not attested.¹⁵ Barley is extremely robust and resistant, and its very short vegetation period made it the preferred crop in a region with scarce rain. This cereal was used both for bread and for beer; there is no unequivocal evidence that other dishes, for example a kind of porridge, were prepared from barley.

¹³ Cf. e. g., Oppenheim 1977, 183–193; Mayer and Sallaberger 2003; Maul 2009; Sallaberger 2011a.

¹⁴ Otto 2006.

¹⁵ Emmer appears only once in a ritual text, namely the *kissu* for Ninkura (*Emar* 388: 7); it is also listed as a provision for the high priestess (*ettu*, *Emar* 369: 87, line count according to Fleming 1992). Attestations of words are checked in Cohen, d'Alfonso, and Sürenhagen 2008.

Bread was baked in various different forms which were given local names.¹⁶ Dough made of barley flour was not suited for very thin layers, so even the “flat bread” (*ruqqānu*) cannot be conceived of as thin as modern *hubz* made of wheat. In the rituals one meets often a combination of bread “for meals” (*naptanu*) plus a similar amount of “dry bread” (NINDA UD.DU) and a smaller addition of “dry” bread with an addition of fruits (*inbu*), probably a sweet dessert.¹⁷

Almost always the final product, bread, was presented to the gods; a dedication of flour remains a rare exception.¹⁸ When flour appears in the ritual texts, it was usually provided when intended for later use, for example as provision for trips.¹⁹ The preparation of bread is mentioned only once in ritual context, namely in the festival for the city gods (*Emar* 388) to which I will return later (in section 7).

The standard beverage of ancient Syro-Mesopotamia was beer, which was equally made from barley. At contemporary Tell Bazi every single household produced beer, and a similar situation has to be envisaged for Emar.²⁰ Beer served as a daily, healthy and valuable component of the meal and as the main source for vitamins and micronutrients. “Beer concentrate” (*billatu*), a pre-product of beer, basically dried draff of the mash, was given as a provision in the same way as flour, so that the recipient might easily prepare his or her meal.²¹ Brewers are never mentioned as participants in the ritual texts.

4.2 Wine, Fruit and Other Foodstuffs

Wine is known at Emar as well, although it occurs much more rarely than beer. In the ritual texts it is only offered to the gods, but not given out to humans. Beer and wine, which were delivered in voluminous jars, were poured into drinking cups (*kasātu*, *tašātu*) standing in front of the deities, a situation archaeologically attested at Tell Bazi’s main temple.²²

The appearance of fruit in ritual texts could suggest that fruit was a normal component of ancient Near Eastern meals. However, the general cuneiform evidence indicates that fruit and vegetables hardly belonged to the daily meal, but were met regularly only at the royal court. At Emar, fruit was largely confined to two festival occasions,²³ which were probably related to each other and where for some reason fruit may have served a specific purpose. The texts mention figs, pomegranates, raisins, a species of nuts, pistachio, and spices (? ŠIM). Fruit without any specification appears as an ingredient of bread, which was regularly served in small quantities (see 4.1 above). Even figs, the most common fruit, never appear in everyday contexts at Emar; but this can hardly be taken as evidence for the distribution of fruit at private meals given the erratic nature of the textual documentation.

16 Cf. Tropper 2001, 560–563.

17 Frequent combinations are 7 “meal breads” + 7 “dry breads” + 2 “dry breads with fruit” in installation of the high priestess (*Emar* 369) or 4 “meal breads” + 3 or 4 “dry breads” + 1 “dry bread with fruit” in the *kissu* festivals (*Emar* 384–388 etc.).

18 *Emar* 463: 9: “grain groats[?] for the drinking vessels” (*pappasu ana tašāti*).

19 e. g., *Emar* 463: for bread for offerings; *Emar* 452 flour and beer extract as materials intended for the ritual.

20 Otto 2006, 86–93.

21 e. g., *Emar* 369: 53–54: The cultic personnel gives flour and beer concentrate to the high priestess as a provision.

22 See Otto (in press).

23 *Emar* 388, the *kissu* festival of Ninkur; *Emar* 452, the *abû* festival (see Fleming 2000, 280–289); cf. also frgts. 462, 464, 465, 466.

At Emar, vegetables, onions and garlic seem to be missing from the ritual offerings. This fact may be related to the specific connotations linked to cress and onions in Mesopotamian culture: these vegetables were considered impure and were therefore not permitted as food for a person going to the temple.²⁴ The strong smell may have been a reason to ban onions or garlic from the sacred precincts; but they were considered a delicacy at the courts and were presented to high dignitaries.

Thus edibles were evaluated differently according to the respective contexts. This heavily affects our interpretation of the foodstuffs dedicated at offerings: they cannot simply be taken as a direct reflection of ordinary meals or even of valuable feasts, since we do not deal with a uniform hierarchy of foodstuffs, but various sets of norms were active at the same time and place, such as economic value and cultic purity.

Oil, usually made from sesame, was generally used for anointing, but hardly for food. It occurs rarely, as do aromatic substances, which were added to oil for anointing or as an incense.

4.3 Meat

Offerings of meat were confined to special occasions, the main days of the main festivals. The ritual texts deal exactly with these rare moments in the year, thus suggesting that animals were slaughtered in great numbers for the cult. Mostly sheep and lambs were sacrificed, the more valuable oxen only rarely, hardly ever goats and kids. The presence of meat constituted perhaps the most important difference between daily meals and ritual food offerings.

The ritual itself underlined the high value of animals for slaughter. Some texts mention that they were brought to the temple in a procession that could include singers or musicians. The throne festival (*kissu*) for the god Ea may serve as an example:

1 ox, 6 sheep and 1 lamb, the sacrificial [animals], go from the house of the ‘master of the temple’ [*bēl bīti*] to the temple of Ea together with the singers.²⁵

Also the divine weapon could join the procession leading to the temple (*Emar* 369: 29–30). Since a greater part of the ceremony was conducted in the interior of the temple, processions were the main occasions for public demonstration. The regular presence of the singers or musicians leading the processions underlines this aspect and, even more to the point, musicians are not mentioned in the context of rituals conducted in the interior of the temple.²⁶ The procession comprised as human actors the ritualists and the musicians, a divine symbol, and the sacrificial animals as representatives of the offering that would include bread and beverages as well. So in the ritual setting grain products were treated differently than animals. The former were delivered as finished products and consumed in the interior of the temple, but the animals were conducted to the temple in an ostentative procession and prepared there. Although the offerings seemingly resemble the daily food of the Emarites (perhaps with some delicacies added), the presentation distinguished clearly between religious festivals and private use. This implies different forms of participation at daily meals and ritual festivals. Upon their arrival at the temple the animals were “sacrificed” (verb *naqû*). So the text on the throne ritual of Ea cited above continues as follows:

24 Sallaberger 2011b.

25 *Emar* 386 // *ASJ* 14 49: 24–27.

26 On singers/musicians in rituals see Fleming 1992, 93, there occurring at the central rites of the installation of the high priestess: *Emar* 369, 73.

One offers [*inaqqû*] [1] ox and [10] sheep to Ea. (*Emar 386 // ASJ 14 49: 27–28*)

Other examples include:

In the temple of Išhara, one offers [*inaqqû*] these two sheep to Išhara and Ninurta. (*Emar 387: 11–12; see below*)

One offers 1 ox and 6 sheep in front of the Stormgod. (*ana pani Adad inaqqu*, *Emar 369: 11*²⁷)

More rarely animals were slaughtered before they were brought to the temple, and this seems to have been one of the duties of the “master of the house [i. e. the temple]” (*bēl bīti*), apparently a priest responsible for the upkeep of the temple:²⁸

1 ox and 4 sheep: one slaughters [literally “cuts down”, *inakkisū*] them in the house of the ‘master of the house’ [*bēl bīti*]. (*kissu festival Emar 385b // ASJ 14 49: 5*)

1 sheep: the ‘master of the house’ slaughters and cooks it at his house [*bēl bīti ana bītīšu inakkis ušabšal*, and its parts are distributed on the tables of the honorables: high priestesses, kings]. (*Emar 369:14–15*²⁹)

The animals could be prepared even without (mentioning) a presentation to the gods:

An ox and 2 sheep: one slaughters [*iṭabbabū*] them and the men of the holy matters (*qidāši*) eat and drink. (*Emar 446:119*³⁰)

A part of the meat, called “ritual [portion of] meat” (UZU GARZA), was offered to the gods and placed in front of them.

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. (e. g. *Emar 369: 28*³¹)

5 Social Aspects of Food Preparation

5.1 The Institutions and Persons Delivering the Offerings

In the preceding paragraphs I pointed to some subtle variations in the presentation of foodstuffs to the deities. Considering the relevance of festivals in the ancient Orient (as outlined in section 1 above), the notation of various persons and institutions as suppliers of the offerings deserves our full attention. They appear in some ritual texts,³² prominently several times in the prescription for the most elaborated and most richly equipped

27 Fleming 1992.

28 This interpretation of the *bēl bīti* office that appears in Emar ritual texts is due to Otto (in press); the office can thus be compared to the Mesopotamian *šangū* “master of the temple” (German “Tempelherr,” see Sallaberger and Huber Vulliet 2005, 628–629). Fleming 1992, 97–98 interpretes the *bēl bīti* as the representative of a household or clan who supplied the offerings.

29 Cf. Fleming 1992.

30 Cf. Fleming 2000, 268ff.

31 Cf. Fleming 1992, similarly *Emar 369: 49* with heads, but more often the heads are not mentioned. In *Emar 388: 62* the animal head serves as share of the king, in *Emar 369: 77ff.* as share of the diviner. The specific treatment of the heads becomes more interesting in the light of the evidence of the Tell Bazi temple [Otto (in press)].

32 *Emar 373* and related texts (*zuku* festival), mensual texts *Emar 452* (month *abū*), *Emar 446* (six months) and related texts; all these texts were treated as urban calendar festivals by Fleming 2000.

festival of the city of Emar, the *zuku* festival that took place every seven years.³³ The offerings were provided by the king (*šarru*, LUGAL), the palace (*ekallu*), the temple (*bīt ili* “house of the deity”), and the city (*ālu*). The following example is taken from one of the many processions that took place in the course of the large *zuku* ritual, when the city god’s parhedra, Šaššabētu, left her temple for the betyles situated at the gate:

Šaššabētu of Ninurta’s temple goes out to the gate of the betyles.

One calf, six sheep: from the king; 1 sheep: from the city; 11 liters of bread of groats, 1 liter of barley bread, 1 *jug*(? KIR₆) and 1 pot of wine: from the king; 11 liters of bread of groats, 1 liter of barley bread, 1 *jug*(?): from the house of the god—one offers this to Šaššabētu. (*Emar* 373: 25–29³⁴)

In order to evaluate the combination of suppliers and the various kinds of foodstuffs, it is useful to present them in a table:

king	city	temple
1 calf, 6 sheep, 11+1 liters of bread, 1 vessel (of beer), 1 vessel of wine	1 sheep	11 + 1 liters of bread, 1 vessel (of beer)

This distribution basically agrees with all similar entries. At first sight the deliveries correspond to the economic capacities. The king alone presented cattle and wine, and he contributed the largest share of sheep, thus the most expensive meat. In a comparable ritual context the palace provided fruit.³⁵ The city sent one sheep. In similar texts members of a specific profession, called *nupūhānū*,³⁶ contributed sheep; so it is reasonable to assume that these were the city’s shepherds. The temple itself provided only cereal products, namely bread and beer.

But the distribution of the ritual foodstuffs offers more insights than a simple mirror of economic wealth. The temple provided the daily meal made of grain as every household would have done. This implied first of all an effort of human labor, but less an expenditure of valuable goods. The community of the city presented one of those sacrificial animals that were presented in the public procession that led to the temple (see section 4.3 above). And the king made the meal an exception by adding wine and more meat, thus fulfilling the duties of vertical solidarity, the care by the powerful for the poor, by the patron for his clients. In this way all social groups active in the ritual, the temple personnel, the community, and the political leader, cooperated to provide the religious rite with food. The common people, represented by the temple, contributed their labor,

33 Fleming 2000.

34 See Fleming 2000, 236–237.

35 In *Emar* 452, ritual for the month *abū*, see Fleming 2000, 280–289; e. g. ll. 3–5, third day, offerings for Ištar of the *abū*: flour and vessels (of beer) from the temple, 1 she-goat from the herdsmen (*nupūhānū*), i. e. from the city; sesame oil scented with cedar, ghee, spices, one vessel (of wine), a string of figs, ten pomegranates, and an unknown amount of raisins “from the palace” (*ša ekalli*). On fruit at Emar festivals see above, note 23. In *Emar* 373: (*zuku* festival) the palace provides 50 liters of bread and 4 vessels (*pūhu*, of beer concentrate *billatu*) stem from the palace, but they are destined “for the people” (*ana niši*). This constitutes another example for the cooperation of social groups expressed in the provision of food for offerings.

36 See on this group Fleming 2000, 146 fn. 23. Compare especially *Emar* 452, ritual for the month *abū*, Fleming 2000, 280–289, cited in the preceding note. In *Emar* 446, ritual for six months, cf. Fleming 2000, 268ff., and in *Emar* 463, ritual for an unknown month, Fleming 2000, 290ff., both *nupūhānū* and the “city” appear as suppliers of offerings. On the probable noun formation *purūs*- see Pentiuć 2001, 136, the suffix is taken here as *-ānū*, although a non-Semitic *-ann* is equally possible (thus Pentiuć); a convincing etymology is missing.

to which the king added from his wealth, and so the religious rite formed the setting for a powerful demonstration of the unity of the community. Already from the start the food handled, presented, and consumed in a religious ritual thus symbolized the *cooperation* of different social groups.

6 The Preparation of Food

As already mentioned, in ancient Mesopotamia food had to be prepared for presentation as an offering, and in this regard Emar participates in the large Mesopotamian cultural tradition. So each sacrifice has to be viewed not only as a gift and delivery of goods, but it included the investment of human labor as well. In this regard the rituals' long lists of diverse varieties of bread become more meaningful, since their preparation involved more care and effort than a mass production of the same kind of bread.

At Emar, the grain products were not prepared within the central sanctuary of the temple precinct.³⁷ This differs from the situation in Babylonia and Assyria, where the temple complexes were equipped with kitchens and other installations to allow the preparation of food. This service was already considered a part of the religious service, since the participants had to care for ritual purity. In Babylonia, the duty to provide bread, beer, and meat was met by prebend holders. These were inhabitants of the respective city, often coming from wealthy families, who held an office of baker, brewer, or butcher. The time-table was extremely well organized and detailed, and as a consequence, not only the personal time planning of these prebend holders was dictated by their periods of office in the temple, but also their time of duty was split in tiny portions so that the presence in the temple was more evenly distributed. The prebend holders could participate in the distribution of food from the offerings, but apparently it was also an honor to hold more prebends.³⁸

At Emar the situation is in a way comparable since also there people were involved in the preparation of bread and beer. We do not know who actually handled the food supplied by the "temple" in the *zuku* and related festivals treated in the preceding paragraph, and where this work took place, whether at their homes or in one of the secondary buildings of the temple precinct. In other contexts citizens apparently prepared the food destined for offerings at home. Those delivering the bread and beer for offerings are designated as "the lords, the donors of the holy matters" (*šarrū nādinū qidāši*),³⁹ so often mentioned in Emar ritual texts (see below). In one "throne festival" (*kissu*) both the "donors" and the "temple" appear side by side as suppliers (*Emar* 388). A further indication in this regard is offered by the administrative texts from the diviner's archive. Lists of personal names kept in the house of the diviner, the superintendent of the city's

37 Otto (in press) argues that a temple complex in Syria and Upper Mesopotamia encompasses the main sanctuary, the actual temple, and a temenos including various secondary buildings.

38 For the important topic of temple prebends, documented from the late third to the first millennium with an especially good documentation for the Old Babylonian and the Late Babylonian periods, see the survey of Driel 2005; the recent monumental work of Waerzeggers 2010 treats all aspects of prebends in the 7th to 5th centuries BC.

39 Often abbreviated forms like *nādinū(t) qidāši* or even *ša qidāši* are used; they appear especially frequently in the main festivals of the sanctuaries of the city, the so-called *kissu* festivals (*Emar* 385–388, *ASJ* 14 49, plus various fragments). Schwemer 2008 (236 Anm. 15) assumes that these people only contribute financially: "Wahrscheinlich ... diejenigen, die die Materialien für die Riten der Heiligung (*qaddušu*) finanzieren." The distribution of the suppliers treated in the preceding paragraph and the comparison with the prebends in Babylonia indicate that the responsibility of the "donors" involves more than financing. On the contrary, the actual involvement of the people, in this case that bread and beer are to be prepared at their homes, contributes to the social effect of the religious rituals. On the term *qidāšu*, related to *qaddušu* "to sanctify" (which is a standard preparatory rite before a deity regularly appearing in the ritual texts, see below the *kissu* ritual for Ea), see Pentiu 2001, 142–143.

religious matters, at least to some extent reflect the correlation of persons with religious duties.⁴⁰ So it appears that the preparation of food for the temple took place both in the secondary buildings of the temple and in private houses all over the city. In this subtle way the religious rite was more deeply rooted in the society and it acquired a publicity beyond the ritual procession of the sheep and cattle destined as victims.

One exception to the rule confirms this understanding of the practice of food supply. At the “throne festival” (*kissu*) of Ninkur, one of the rare occasions when fruit was offered, which identifies this festival as an occasion for a different treatment of food, the bread was formed by the bakers, who baked it at the “door of the master of the house”, that is the person in charge of the temple.⁴¹ Also in this case the preparation of food became a public event, though by conspicuous preparation and not by participation in the production.

7 Food Consumption in Rituals

7.1 The Presentation of the Offerings

Mesopotamian religious practice was focused on the sacrifice, and above I have pointed to some aspects of this basically simple act of feeding the gods that offered so many options for embedded meanings at various levels. After the grain products had been delivered to the temple and the animals slaughtered, the presentation of the food to the deity followed as the main act of the offering ceremony. The Emar ritual texts concentrate on this aspect and in this way implicitly underline its relevance. The pieces of bread were arranged in front of the deity, the cups were filled with beer and wine and placed before the deity, the “ritual portion” of the meat was placed there as well. The Emar ritual texts, however, do not address additional actions such as the burning of incense, which in Mesopotamia served as a signal to start the offering, with the intended meaning of inviting the deity to accept the food offered. As an example for a standard ritual sequence, I cite again the throne festival (*kissu*) for the god Ea (see already above, *Emar* 386 // *ASJ* 14 49: 24–27):

<i>First day:</i> Purification rite	^{20–23} On the sanctification day of the throne festival of Ea: With ritual <i>hukku</i> bread, (a) vessel of barley beer and one ‘dried’ bread one sanctifies Ea.
 <i>Second day:</i> Procession	 ²⁴ On the second day: ^{24–27} 1 ox, 6 sheep and 1 lamb, the sacrificial (animals), go from the house of the ‘master of the house’ (<i>bēl bīti</i>) to the temple of Ea together with the singers.

40 The various administrative lists are published as *Emar* 305 to 360, a general survey is given by Faist 2008, who summarizes the evidence as follows: the “archive mainly contains records concerning cult supervision and festival organization” (Faist 2008, 202). Here, a few notes on the relationship between rituals and the lists may suffice. In *Emar* 306, a list of *ku’u* vessels with personal names, the superscript calls them *lú.meš ta-ḥa-zi*, lit. “persons of battle,” but these persons appear in the installation of the *mašartu* priestess *Emar* 370: 62’ etc. *Emar* 366 lists 50 “bronze vessels” with seven personal names, described as the “men of veneration” (*LÚ.MEŠ ku-ba-dī*); the same seal, seal A.62 after Beyer 2001, is rolled on the small documents *Emar* 363 and 364 on the delivery of beer and wine to the deities; seal A62 bears an inscription of “Dagan-aḥu” (reading thus correct?), but it was used by the diviner Ba’al-qarrād.

41 *Emar* 388: 10: “and the bakers [lit. cooks, forming bread] bake at the door of the master of the house [*lú LÚ.MEŠ MUHALDIM NINDA DÙ.DÙ ana bāb bēl bīti ušabšalū*].” According to lines 10–13 the bakers later offer to the deity Assila and eat and drink in the temple; on the meal of the suppliers of the food, see below.

Sacrifice	27–28 One offers (<i>inaqqû</i>) (1) ox and (10) sheep to Ea.
Presentation of offerings to Ea	28–29 One places the ritual parts (GARZA.MEŠ) ⁴² in front of Ea. ^{30–32} One offers to [Ea] 4 pieces of bread for meals, 4 pieces of dry bread, including one dry bread <with fruit> and one fills (the beakers with) wine and barley beer.
Presentation of food in the gate of Ea	33–34 One fills 70 <i>jugs</i> (?) in the gate of Ea's temple. 34–35 One places 4 pieces of ritual <i>hukku</i> bread, meat of oxen and of sheep in front of them.
Offering to Ea at the gate	36–34 One gives 4 <i>jugs</i> (?) [to] Ea.
Gift by the cultic personnel to Ea	36–34 The [lords], the donors of the holy matters give [a gift of silver] to Ea in the house of the master of the temple.

The offerings included sometimes impressive numbers of dozens of different kinds of bread that had to be distributed according to the prescriptions. The seventy drinking cups for Ea in the cited ritual passage had to be filled,⁴³ but usually the number of cups was not indicated. The care to arrange and to present the divine meal is significant, since the investment in rituals depends not only on the value of the goods offered, but on the diligence and time devoted. Such an arrangement of tiny beakers in the central room of the sanctuary was excavated in the temple of Tell Bazi.⁴⁴ Considering the material value alone it would not matter if ten liters of wine were offered in a large vessel or in dozens of cups, but it matters in terms of time and number of persons involved, and therefore this handling contributed essentially to distinguish a ritual sacrificial meal from everyday food consumption.

Usually it is not indicated in the ritual texts who placed the food in front of the deities, but without doubt this was taken over by the groups of cultic personnel mentioned in the context of offerings. In one exceptional case, however, the human agent is identified, namely the high priestess of the weather god, a most prestigious religious office of the city. At her inauguration she finally entered the temple of her future master, the Storm god:

She (i. e. the future high priestess) goes to the temple of the Storm god, she offers a lamb; seven breads for meals she places before the god. She fills the drinking cups with wine. (*Emar* 369: 66–67⁴⁵)

The human priestess, conceptualized as an earthly wife of the god, honored the god by filling the cups for him. The installation of the priestess was organized as a marriage rite, and so it may indicate that this ritual act resembled the role of a woman who served her husband at meals. The presentation of food as an act of honorification occurred also in various festivals, when on a preparatory day the gods were “sanctified, honored” (*qaddušu*) by the presentation of bread and beer (see above the *kissu* festival for Ea).

42 GARZA.MEŠ, the ritual portion (of the meat), is misread by Tsukimoto 1992, 300ff. as *pa-
<an>DINGIR*^{meš}. The proposed reading and translation is certain because of variants with UZU "meat" or with the addition of GUD "oxen", UDU "sheep", and the syntax of this sentence in the ritual texts.

43 70 beakers appear also in the *kissu* ritual for Ereškigal, of which again four are given to the deity, *Emar* 385 // *ASJ* 14 49: 11.

44 Otto (in press).

45 Fleming 1992; Schwemer 2008.

7.2 Eating and Drinking after the Offering

After the presentation of the food, the ritual texts usually do not continue their narrative in the same way. There is absolutely no indication if the deity's "eating" was somehow performed. Emar rituals include rare instances when the meat was completely burnt, a ritual known from Syria and southern Anatolia.⁴⁶

Of course the foodstuffs presented had eventually to be removed to make space for the next offering. The texts, however, are never very explicit about this step, and it seems that the strange transition in the ritual texts also expresses the change of perspective. Before the presentation, the food and beverages were meant to be sacrificed to the gods and thus served a specific purpose, but after the sacralization the offerings became food and beverages again that had to be removed later. Interestingly there is no specific term, no ritual act to de-sacralize the offered foodstuffs. Consequentially this implies that there existed no such rite of transformation and that the food presented in the offerings kept the special spiritual quality it had absorbed by its destination for the deity.

The passage cited in 6.1. on the offering of the high priestess is one of the most explicit ones about the later use of the offerings. After the priestess has filled the beakers, the text continues as follows:

⁶⁷⁻⁶⁸Afterwards the 'men of the holy matters [*qidāsi*]' [and] the elders [of the city] go to the temple of the Storm god. They eat and drink. ⁶⁸⁻⁶⁹That ox and the 7 sheep that have gone in front of the high priestess are returned to the house of the 'master of the house'. ⁶⁹⁻⁷⁰While the elders of the city eat and drink, they give a good textile to her as garment. ... [Further presents follow].

⁷⁶⁻⁷⁷On the seventh day, the 'men of the holy matters' slaughter the ox that has gone in front of the high priestess [- and which has meanwhile been stationed at the 'master of the temple's' house -] at her father's house.

⁷⁷The 'men of the holy matters' divide it among themselves.

⁷⁷The kidney of the ox and his share: the king of the land takes it;

⁷⁸the *ḥasītu*-meat and his share, the head, the intestines, the fat, and the skin: the diviner takes it;

⁷⁹the lung and its share: the singers take it;

⁷⁹⁻⁸⁰the half of the intestines: the 'men of the holy matters' eat it.

⁸⁰⁻⁸¹The four tables that have been set up for the deities [sc. filled with offerings] ... : the diviner and the singer divide it among themselves.

In the Emar ritual texts, after the sacrifice was conducted the following short note appears regularly: "they eat and drink" (see lines 68 and 69 of the example above). Characteristically this phrase "they eat and drink" never contains a direct object, as if there existed a certain fear of naming the sacrificial food explicitly. Rarely it is noted that the act of eating and drinking took place in the sanctuary itself, for example: "they eat and drink in the temple of Dagan" (*Emar* 394: 37).

So a small group of persons was entitled to consume the sacred goods. Who were these persons? In the most prominent religious festivals such as in the installation of the high priestess of Emar, the king, the high priestess, and the diviner are named, thus the most

46 On foreign elements in the so-called "Anatolian rituals," see Prechel 2008 with earlier literature.

important persons in the city's religious life. In such a case the ox was divided according to fixed rules and the cuts of meat thus adopted further symbolic meanings. It is surely no coincidence that the singer received the lungs or the diviner the intestines.

Most often those eating and drinking are named the "lords, the donors of the holy matters" (*šarrū nādinū qidāši*). Consequently those who donated the food for the sacrifices were entitled to consume it after the offering. As we have seen before, this includes a re-distribution of the goods stemming from various sources. Other instances confirm this understanding. The bakers who had prepared the bread loaves for Ninkur participated in the consumption of meat and beer (*Emar* 388: 10–13, *kissu* of Ninkur) as did the singers and the potter who contributed to the rite but did not donate food (*Emar* 388: 64ff.; *Emar* 460). Furthermore, in this context the distinction by profession appears as a characteristic feature of Emar society, a perspective that emerged less clearly from the private legal texts.

On a more general level this re-distribution corresponds to the Babylonian prebendary system where likewise the holders of prebends were entitled to usufruct of the food from offerings.

The presentation of the pieces of bread and the filling of cups implies that the sacrifice ended in a common meal. In a few instances the ritual texts noted explicitly that only a small part was definitely disposed of, e. g. four cups out of seventy were offered to the deity (see above).

The cited passage from the installation of the high priestess indicates that food could also be divided and was thus brought to the private houses. The large *zuku* festival of the deities of the town is more explicit in this regard. As the main event of the rites, the deities left the city, and an offering took place at the betyles in front of the city, where the participants ate and drank as well. After the rite one returned the remaining bread, beer, and meat to the city.⁴⁷

So all the people who had contributed to an offering received their share of the meal, and those who had given only bread also received now beer and meat, donated mainly by the king. The sumptuous meal the citizens consumed came from the deity, a symbol of identification shared by the city's inhabitants.

8 The Temple, the City and Its Inhabitants

The common meal in the temple brought life to the sacred temenos, the donors received their appropriate share. As we have seen above this included more people than the few persons present, and it has become clear how closely the actions in the temple were linked to the city, instead of being a secluded place separated from the public. Compared to the more general practice, the "throne" (*kissu*) festival for the city's protective deities, Išhara and Ninurta,⁴⁸ differs fundamentally in the way how the whole population is included in the handling of food.

After the sacralization (*qaddušu*) of the temples and the divine statues, a public preparation of bread took place. Usually, as we have seen, bread was prepared at home and delivered to the temple later.

³⁻⁴One bakes⁴⁹ 17 *parīsu* of *simmadu*-flour for ritual *hukku*-bread.

⁵⁻⁶One bakes 15 *parīsu* of *zarhu*-flour for bread loaves.

47 e. g., *Emar* 373: 37 (Fleming 2000, 239–240): "The bread, beer, meat go back up into the town."

48 *Emar* 387, edited by Prechel 1996, 245–248.

49 The correct reading of the verb "to bake," Akkadian *ippû* (written *ip-pu-ú*, from *epû*) was not recognized in previous editions. Arnaud 1986, 385–386; Fleming 1992, 242; Prechel 1996, 245–248 all read *eb-bu-ú* and take it as a form of *ebbu* "pure", which is orthographically and grammatically impossible (the expected plural is *ebbūtu*).

^{6–7}In total: 32 *parīsu* of flour. They hit everything with their fists.

^{8–9}A container of bitter, a container of sweet, one container of beer, 2 sheep they offer (*Emar* 387: 3–9)

The standard offering procedure followed. Two sheep were sacrificed to Išhara and Ninurta and the ritual portion of the meat (GARZA UDU) was offered to the deities. Pieces of bread including dried bread with fruit were placed in front of the two deities. After a dividing line the text resumes the further treatment of the large amount of bread prepared before:

^{17–19}And the bread (made) from these 30 *parīsu* of flour and from the containers—the women and men of the city, each one, take it in front of them (i. e. the deities).⁵⁰

^{20–21}And one takes a female slave and they bake for themselves from the sweet (dough). They take ritual *hukku*-bread and barley beer.

^{22–23}And the lords, the donors of the holy matters, eat and drink in h[er (i. e. Išhara's) house]. (*Emar* 387: 17-23)

In this festival everybody contributed and everybody participated. One *parīsu* equals 50 liters, so the 30 *parīsu* correspond to 1500 liters of (flour for) bread. Pieces of bread could be made of ca. half a liter of flour,⁵¹ and so perhaps 3000 portions of bread were prepared and distributed to the inhabitants of Emar. The smaller the portions, the more people could be served. This was, without doubt, an event for the whole urban population, and the main festival of Emar's tutelary deities thus became truly a popular festival. While the people were feasting in the streets, the "lords, the donors of the holy matters" (*šarrū nādinū qidāši*) ate and drank in the temple, as was standard in the Emar rituals.

This exceptional occasion when the whole population participated was linked to the town's city goddess Išhara and her male companion Ninurta, whose festival was perhaps celebrated once a year.

Usually those persons who had prepared the offerings also received goods. But who were these people? At Emar, there is impressive textual evidence that families were closely related to temples. A family could actually own a temple, which could even be inherited. One such case concerns the private donation of a temple to Nergal (*TBR* 87), in another instance a temple of Ereškigal is handed over as compensation for help in times of hardship (*ASJ* 10 C). Furthermore the office of serving as the responsible *šangû*-priest of a temple was a matter of public consent.⁵² Inventories and accounts of various temples, which were directed by their respective *šangû*-priests, were stored in the archive of the

50 Fleming 2000, 79 fn. 122, assumes that each person received 30 *parīsu*; there is, however, no philological justification for such an interpretation.

51 For a general survey of the amount of flour used for bread see the study of Brunke 2011. He bases his investigation mainly on the late third millennium, where one piece of bread is most often made from one liter or a half liter of flour.

52 The letter *Emar* 268 contains the request for an installment as *šangû*-priest, which involves the decision of a committee. In *Memorial Kutscher* 6 the *šangû* priest of the Nergal temple is held responsible for taxes to the king of Mittani (see on this text Pruzsinszky 2008, 75–76). The *šangû* priest had to control the goods of a temple; this becomes clear from accounts of temples such as *BLMJ* 28, *TBR* 97, *ASJ* 14 48, *Emar* 287; cf. also the inventory of jewelery *Emar* 282. A similar situation that families care for "their" temples is known elsewhere from Mesopotamia; an instructive Old Babylonian example is discussed by Stol 2003.

diviner,⁵³ who controlled the religious life of the city of Emar. And finally, as already noted, there exist numerous lists of persons in the diviner's archive that may well have been correlated to ritual duties.

Seen against the general textual background, one recognizes the role of the persons who appeared in the rituals, first of all the "lords, the donors of holy matters" (*šarrū nādinū qidāši*). Without doubt these persons represented the families who were related to a given temple. Thus at each festival occasion a specific group of people was involved in the preparation of foodstuffs for the respective temple and they enjoyed a communal meal at their sanctuary. So the relationship to a temple served as an invisible bond of community among the citizens of Emar.

The temples fulfilled a comparable social role in Babylonia, where prebend holders performed regular services at one or various temples (see already section 5.2. above). Such an internal structure of the urban society had hitherto remained undetected for Late Bronze Age Emar, but a close reading of the ritual texts has revealed this important aspect.

9 Conclusions

The Late Bronze Age city of Emar has served as an example to investigate the interaction within an urban society at religious festivals. This paper has demonstrated that not only the commensality after the religious sacrifice served to establish social bounds but that the preceding preparation and presentation of food was at least as relevant for social integration. The cooperation of various groups at religious festivals, namely the citizens related to a temple, the temple personnel, the palace and the ruler, testifies to the social role of the city's deities as symbols of social, cultural, and local identification. The temples situated at various places within the city eventually served as focal points for collective feasts; they marked the shared space within the city. Apparently only at the urban religious festivals was the strong division of the private houses, the place of everyday meals, overcome. It has to be stressed that religious festivals were not a secluded ritual for a few initiated priests, but that in all practices related to food social interaction features prominently. The stress on the preparation, presentation, and consumption of food concurs with the central importance of the sacrifice in Mesopotamian religious practice. So it is no coincidence that the handling of foodstuffs involved the participation of citizens much more than the passive observation of ritual processions or an undetermined "holiday feeling".

The analysis has revealed aspects of a strongly diversified semantics of the various foodstuffs used in the rituals. Although their economic value certainly counted as a relevant factor, more differentiation is detectable at various steps in the process. A first selection of foodstuffs is dictated by the category of purity, thus excluding valuable, but impure foodstuffs such as garlic, onions, cress, or leek. In the supply and handling of food, labor and thus time have to be considered an important factor. And the commensality practiced in the temple eventually led to an exchange of the goods provided by various groups in the city.

Meat was clearly the most valuable food which marked the festivals. It was donated by the king or the city, thus serving as a sign of vertical solidarity. The animals were led in a procession with musicians to the temple, where they were slaughtered. Special ritual parts were presented to the deity. The meat was then divided among the highest religious officials according to fixed rules or consumed by the feast's participants.

53 *Emar* 282ff. are inventories from the diviner's archive, *Emar* 287, 289 indicate the name of the responsible person.

Bread made of barley flour was donated by the king and prepared by the temple, which meant an investment of labor by the citizens related to a temple. Various kinds of bread were prepared, which implied more time spent in the preparation. Beer came from the same sources, the king and the temple, and as an everyday beverage it is often treated in a similar way as bread. Wine, however, as a luxury beverage was donated by the king. The beverages were filled in large numbers of drinking cups placed in front of the deity, and by repetition and expansion an everyday practice of filling cups was eventually transformed into a ritual practice fitting for a religious urban festival. The foodstuffs presented to the deity were not desacralized after the sacrifice, so they may still have carried a special meaning when they were consumed by the donors in a common meal within the temple.

Whereas usually specific groups of citizens linked to a temple celebrated a festival, the main festival of the tutelary deities of the city of Emar, Išḫara and her companion Ninurta, meant a feast for the whole population: at this occasion two or three thousand people received bread, which was prepared beforehand in a collective effort. The baking of bread for all citizens was considered such a relevant element that it was carefully noted in the ritual texts that were once kept by the city's highest religious official, the diviner, and that serve as an invaluable source for us modern researchers.

10 References of Emar Texts

- ASJ* 10 = Text numbers in Tsukimoto 1988
ASJ 14 = Text numbers in Tsukimoto 1992
BLMJ = Text numbers in Goodnick Westenholz 2000
Emar = Text numbers in Arnaud 1986, Arnaud 1987
Memorial Kutscher = Text numbers in Sigrist 1993
TBR = Text numbers in Arnaud 1991

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