The kitchen of the gods

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The temple played an integral part in the beginning of civilisation in Mesopotamia around five millennia ago. It introduced monumental architecture, a new level of job specialisation and technical innovations such as writing. In command of a bureaucratic institution, temple officials were key political and economic agents in the formation of the state.

Under one influential thesis, the "hydraulic" model, religious despotism was necessary to organise large-scale irrigation works, which were found, suggestively, not only "between the rivers" of the Tigris and Euphrates, but also in subsequent river valley civilisations along the Nile, Indus and Huang He (Yellow River).

Under the glare of research, however, the importance of the temple has tended to recede. Its role had perhaps been over-stated as a result of earlier archaeological treasure hunts, interpretation of the Ancient Near East in the light of biblical Israel ("Ur of the Chaldees"), literary emphasis on mythological texts, and orientalising stress on enslaved populations. Economic activity, particularly, was much more widespread than the temple. Intensification of agriculture, including through irrigation, appeared earlier than the state. The assembly, great families and the palace provided alternative power structures.

Typical of bold historical generalisations, the longer the origin of the state has been debated, the more objections and further considerations have blurred the temple's role. The temple can be examined as material remains, exemplification of organisation theory and the written word; that is, it attracts physical sciences, social sciences and humanities. This is, by definition, where prehistory and history intersect. The temple was the house of both the gods and political creatures.

For progress to be made, the account requires not only more evidence and analysis but also ideas which might bring the elements back together. How should we explain the emergence of a distinct politico-religious institution? What more convincingly than the government of water might have been the temple's role? How can we combine state and religion conceptually without some model of authoritarian power, which either reduces religion to an "opiate" or politics to an "ideology"? A synthesis must take into account the interplay of innumerable elements, not the least local ecology, social organisation and interpretations at the time.

I want to restore life to the concept of the temple-state at the beginning of civilisation by adopting a perhaps unexpected viewpoint, the gastronomic. In particular, I depict the temple as a kitchen elevated above the domestic and tribal to the state level. The temple kitchen now served a greatly extended household, reaching across the city, its productive lands and along trade routes. The central attraction of

the gastronomic approach is the subtle integration of physical, social and cultural elements. The notion of the kitchen is sufficiently replete to make sense of both religious and political impulses alongside the struggle for physical survival.

The formation of the state

The first Mesopotamian temple-states such as Eridu, Ur and Uruk emerged among the semi-nomadic villages of southern Mesopotamia in later Babylonia. Around 4000 BCE, the Ubaid period gave way to the first cities lining the southern marshes. Concentrations of population could rely on a rich and varied habitat of irrigated farming, herding, fishing and hunting. This was simultaneously a process of urbanisation and the transformation of primary production, in which the countryside became relatively depopulated, the fields probably worked by teams from the city.

The earliest Mesopotamian temples may have been in origin storehouses in which nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes kept their sacred objects and provisions (Jacobsen, 1987:447) or important shrines, evolving from pilgrimage sites and their inferred markets (Yoffee, 1995:284). During the last part of the fourth millennium BCE, the temples became unprecedented monumental complexes. At Uruk, the Eanna precinct alone covered almost 7 hectares; the construction of the huge mud-brick terrace would have required the labour of perhaps 1500 people working ten hours per day for five years (Robertson, 1995:449). By the third dynasty of Ur, stairs led up the side of high mounds or ziggurats to the god's living quarters. Larger temples and accompanying storerooms, kitchens and workshops were protected by a wall (Jacobsen, 1987:463).

Politically, early inscriptions mention an *unkin* or general assembly, sometimes described as "primitive democracy" and perhaps a residual of nomadic organisation. Assemblies are identified throughout the third millennium and into the second, although, admittedly, assembly houses have not been excavated (Yoffee, 1995:302). The assembly served as law-maker and court and appointed officers, notably the religio-economic manager, the *en*. Thorkild Jacobsen describes the *en* as a city manager, "basically a person who produced abundance". He or she was spouse of the city deity in the annual fertility drama of the Sacred Marriage. "One might speak of a 'priest-king' or 'priest-queen'" (1987:449).

The palace developed alongside the temple. In times of crisis, the assembly might have appointed a *lugal*, which has often been translated as "great man", but which Jacobsen tells us should be "great householder". The *lugal* was originally the son of a major landowner, and was chosen for military prowess and the servants he could command as the core of the army. With competition for agricultural land and trade routes especially along the rivers, and the escalating need for a war leader, the *lugal* became a permanent appointment and increased in power vis-a-vis the *en*. When the two positions merged, the old term of *en* continued in Uruk but almost

everywhere else *lugal* was preferred. A new title appeared in the Early Dynastic period, *ensi*. This was "productive manager of the arable lands". It designated the official in charge of ploughing and thus the city's draught animals, which could also be drafted for war. The *ensi* tended to become the political head of the community (1987:449).

Conflict between city-states was subdued around 2300 BCE by Sargon of Akkade, who conquered the entire region and reorganised it into a genuine territorial state or empire (Yoffee, 1995:290). Within two centuries, during the 48-year reign of Shulgi, the political administration in Mesopotamia was again transformed. Shulgi created a standing army, reorganised temple households, established a new system of weights and measures, created a bureaucracy in charge of a regular taxation system. The vast number of texts record especially details of the animals (mainly cattle, sheep and goats) which were brought in, penned and sent mainly to temples in nearby Nippur and other cities. However, the enormous bureaucratic hierarchy of Ur III appears to have been so cumbersome that this second empire also soon foundered (Yoffee, 1995:295-6).

Theories of the temple-state

Military explanations of the early state fit its definition by Max Weber as the "human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory" (1948:78). Important among warrior theories is Robert L. Carneiro's (1970) that states arose in "*areas of circumscribed agricultural land*. Each of them is set off by mountains, seas, or deserts, and these environmental features sharply delimit the area that simple farming people could occupy." With increasing population, the need to seize scarce land became a major incentive for war. A defeated village could only stay put by accepting political subordination. With continuing warfare, the entire valley was unified under the strongest chiefdom. Unfortunately for Carneiro's theory (reliant initially on evidence from Peru and the Amazon basin), the formative years in Mesopotamia were characterised by a virtual absence of militarism. While the palace eventually assumed political dominance, to understand the origins of the state, we must still look to the temple.

The rise of the temple-state can still be considered in relation to V. Gordon Childe's list of the main elements of civilisation is:

> the aggregation of large populations in cities; the differentiation within these of primary producers (fishers, farmers, etc), full-time specialist artisans, merchants, officials, priests, and rulers; an effective concentration of economic and political power; the use of conventional symbols for recording and transmitting information (writing), and equally conventional standard weights and of measures of time and space leading to some mathematical and calendrical science (1951:161).

Borrowing Marxist themes, Childe accords importance to "production" and, more particularly, to the creation of a "surplus" to support specialists and large teams of labour. The notion of economic exchange is then usefully brought in Karl Polanyi's categorisation of three main modes of distributing goods: reciprocity, redistribution and the market (1944 & 1957). Reciprocity is the gift exchange characteristic of domestic economies, and redistribution, which can be added here, is the central collection of goods through tax and tribute for later disbursement. The picture of temple-state redistribution is supported by the unearthing of ubiquitous bevelled-rim bowls in the Late Uruk period. The main suggestions are that they were containers either for offerings from local households to the temple or, conversely, for grain rations distributed by the temple (Beale, 1978).

While relatively independent politically, each city-state shared a discernibly Mesopotamian culture. This is not just artistic style, but quasi-universal religious values which had the capacity to integrate a wide territory. It is agreed that writing, which contributed to a sense of an extensive and lasting civilisation, was an outcome of the new arrangements of labour and management within late Uruk city-states and used primarily for keeping track of commodities. The evidence of Mesopotamians even beyond Mesopotamia is usually explained in terms of city-states establishing colonies to control important trade routes over which metals and other commodities flowed to the resource-poor alluvium.

The "hydraulic state" hypothesis, which is often identified but by no means original to Karl Wittfogel (1957), draws primarily on the observation that the ancient civilisations typically developed along river valleys and practised irrigated agriculture. Such irrigation might be highly productive, sufficient to generate the surplus, but raising labour-gangs and allocating water demanded an entirely new kind of organisation. Wittfogel's *Oriental Despotism: A comparative study of total power* encouraged a picture of the temple-state as a totalitarian regime.

A more sophisticated social and economic model has been required, which will let central authority perform a variety of tasks, including the redistribution of foodstuffs between not just specialists but perhaps different "ecological niches". However, it is not always easy to resolve the tension between theory so general that it is near meaningless ("systems theory") and a believable key factor.

As an example, Gregory A. Johnson is an advocate of organisation theory, suggesting that "the immediate processes leading to state formation must have been complex and multiple, and collectively increasing the workload of regulatory institutions to the point where increased vertical complexity of organization was required." At the same time, as a core function, he speaks of centre administrators subsidising large-scale craft production and thereby undercutting rural producers (1987:107). Population growth has often been postulated as the ultimate driving force. In a reverse argument from Malthus, population growth demanded more efficient production, pushing societies to reorganise in more complex and effective ways. Again, this is obviously an important but very general factor. A convincing

synthesis has proved elusive.

The elaboration of theories of state formation is never-ending. Nonetheless, there is little doubt that, overall, the temple was a powerful social, cultural, political and economic institution, implicated in aspects of civilisation and describable as the earliest state. To help this understanding, let us pay a little more attention to the gods.

Cooking for the god

While the gods belonged to an overall Mesopotamian pantheon, individual towns had their own deities in charge of continued sustenance. Jacobsen has described how the gods' responsibilities for local economies often showed up in their names. In the southern marshlands, Eridu was the city of Enki, whose other names were Daradim ("wild goat fashioner") and Enuru ("lord reed-bundle", the construction material of huts). Closer to the river itself was the irrigated orchard country and Ninazu of Enegir, seemingly a god of waters, his wife Ninazimua ("mistress of the well-grown branch") and his son Ningishzida ("master of the good tree") of Gishbanda. At Uruk, which was in antiquity as today a centre of date culture, the god was Amaushumgalana, the power for animal growth and new life of the date palm, and his consort Inanna, previously Ninana ("mistress of the date clusters"), the personification of the date storehouse. Up the river, Nippur had the Ekur temple of Enlil, whose moist spring winds made the soil workable; he was also the god of the hoe. His son Ninurta ("master plough") was god of the younger implement, and ploughman of his father's estate (1987:450-1).

A Mesopotamian god was an image, statue, ikon. It lived in the sanctuary of the ziggurat with its family and was looked after, being fed, washed and maintained. While usually kept from public view, the image could be seen when carried in procession through the temple compound or certain streets (Oppenheim, 1977:186-7). In A. Leo Oppenheim's reconstruction of feeding the god, linen curtains were drawn, a table was placed before the image, then water for washing was offered in a bowl. A number of liquid and semi-liquid dishes were arrayed on the table, along with beverages. Next, specific cuts of meat were served. Finally, fruit came in what one text describes as a beautiful arrangement. Musicians performed, the space was fumigated and the table cleared and more water offered for cleansing the image's fingers. After the dishes had been presented to the image, they were sent to the king, and records remain of the Assyrian kings' pride at having received "leftovers" (188-9).

The feeding of the god "presents itself as the very *raison d'être* of the entire institution", Oppenheim notes. However, great quantities of food were collected and redistributed to workers and the needy. Income came primarily from agricultural holdings, either directly or through rent and taxes; secondarily, from what its own workshops produced; and, lastly, from the offerings of worshippers of the god

(1977:95-96). At its peak, the temple employed many hundreds of people, sharply differentiated according to occupation, and many working in food production, transport, storage and administration. One long list includes ploughmen, plough-leaders and ox-drivers, herders for various animals and their supervisors, gardeners and their assistants, a striking number of fishermen, several classes of storehouse administrators and subordinates, scribes each keeping up the paperwork on particular commodities, "master" and "ordinary" craftsmen working with various materials, messengers, teamsters, boatmen, merchants and traders. The processing of primary products was done by bakers and cooks, butchers, brewers and leatherworkers. The preparation of flour, along with spinning and weaving, were the tasks of female slaves (Falkenstein, 1974:8).

With cooking for the gods and their staffs, the temple was loaded with culinary significance. Its nature is laid bare once we have sharpened our notions of the functions of a kitchen.

Gastronomy

Gastronomy sets out to explain the meal, which, at its heart, is the locus of food sharing. This implies a social dimension in that people must come together in various formations to participate. And sharing does not just happen. It needs cooks. In fact, cooking can be defined as the activity of distributing nourishment (Symons 1998a). The kitchen can be viewed as the headquarters of this food distribution, which, importantly, involves storage. A number of basic corollaries accompany this picture of cooking. To share food means that it has to be acquired, so that food gathering or production can be re-positioned as cooking's necessary support. Furthermore, the acquisition and distribution of food follow definite shapes, providing for an organisational or cultural dimension. In other words, the gastronomic approach locates the meal at the focus of the physical (foods and stomachs meeting in a metabolic universe), the social (cooks, relations of production, eaters, commensal relations) and the cultural (reproduction of gastronomic action).

We are used to thinking of cooking as a domestic activity. But once we take it seriously we see that the same processes occur much more extensively. The three key moments of cooking - food acquisition, distribution and organisation - are not restricted to domestic meals but are also found in public meals of increasing ambit. Meals magnify in scope and complexity through food sharing itself. For the sharing of food enables the sharing of responsibilities. That is, when people swap food they make possible the swapping of jobs. In the basic, gender division, women remain at the hearth, in charge of the distribution, while men go into the field, undertaking the acquisition. With the evolution of societies, the exchange of food and distribution of responsibilities become increasingly complex. The sharing extends across tribes, chiefdoms, states (as in this case), empires and, finally, globalised society.

As an illustration of how the hearth magnifies in the public domain, James

Frazer draws attention in *The Golden Bough* to the sacred flame at the centre of many societies. He recognises the basic desirability of "some one place in the village where every housewife could be sure of obtaining fire without having to kindle it by friction" (1911:260). Nomads would then, he suggests, invest the "simple old custom with a halo of mystery and romance", attributing efficacy to the fire in repelling evil and maintenance of the flame with the "majesty or even the life of the king" (266). Here, Frazer finds the basis of public cults like that of Vesta who grew from a domestic god until six vestal virgins watched over ancient Rome's flame. Similarly, as well as the hearth god, Hestia, Greek cities had a *prytaneion*, a temple in which the sacred city fire would stay burning and from which citizens would take fire when leaving to found new colonies.

The phenomenon of sacrifice is also susceptible to interpretation as a public meal. Conventional understandings draw attention to the superficially wasteful character of sacrifice: a beast is burnt to a cinder to appease the gods. This interpretation might have suited colonial explorers, collectors of folkloric myth and sceptics seeking to reduce religion to superstition. But sacrifice does not have to be made foreign at all. Typically, only a tiny part of the beast was "lost" to the gods. Importantly, the rest was distributed according to formal procedures. Other rituals and interpretations accrued, but the underlying reality of sacrifice was the public divvying up of a beast. No domestic unit could consume an entire ox, so that the valuable animal was distributed festively.

Following a similar gastronomic pattern, the temple-state was the kitchen extended, professionalised, made male and aggrandised. Its new level of food distribution beyond kin to state functionaries was matched by a corresponding level of role specialisation. The head of the kinship-based household or tribal chief was replaced by a more abstract authority or god, just as the monarch returned with the trappings of religious power. Well integrated into the natural, social and cultural environments, the paramount kitchen could command respect.

The kitchen

The Mesopotamian temple is often described as the extended "household" of a god and his or her immediate supporters. Childe speaks of a "divine *household*, an enormously enlarged version". In this new household,

> the several tasks which were performed collectively by the members of a neolithic household have been differentiated and divided between specialists ... The specialists thus withdrawn from direct food production are nourished by the surplus produced by the god's tenants and concentrated in his granaries ... The system of divine households ensured the rational exploitation of the land, the maintenance of essential canals, and the production of a surplus on a scale large enough to support a substantially increased population (1964:103-4)

"Household" is indicated by both the Sumerian and Akkadian terms for "temple", respectively É and *bitu*. In explaining this, John F. Robertson asks us to think of the temple as combining "aspects of an autonomous, self-sustaining household with elements of a corporation that also engaged in activities outside the immediate household" (1995:444).

Jean-Claude Margueron emphasises that the Mesopotamian temple "is in fact a house - that is, a shelter". His point is that it not a place for a congregation to gather, but the god's dwelling (1997, 5:165). But what is a house? Fundamentally, it is a kitchen, which differentiates into specialised rooms. Schematically, the first house was essentially a single room which looked very much like a kitchen, with people finding a warm place to sleep around the fire. Its first split was into the equivalents of the medieval "hall" and "chamber". Then, we might find separate dining-room, study, and so on. This is like the way in which the temple-state would differentiate into temple, palace and subsidiary institutions. Furthermore, what is a kitchen? In its origin and continuing essence, the kitchen has comprised food storage-distribution facilities. According to the archaeological record, the earliest buildings are based around semi-subterranean pits, rock-hewn hollows, plastered niches, baskets, bins, basins, troughs, store rooms, silos, granaries. In these, cooks kept seeds, beans, roots, tubers, nuts, dried fruits and so on. From the start, the house was not a shelter so much for people as for foods.

Economic history has turned the temple into a food circulating system, supervising herds, grain production, orchards, trade and storage. As Michael Mann proposes: "Perhaps the gods were fundamentally guardians of the stores ... their temples were merely decorated stores; the inscribers less priests than clerks. But these were important stores, being at the centre of the production-redistribution cycle" (1986:89). The early temple was a kitchen for the extended redistribution especially of stored commodities.

The notion of the temple as kitchen is not new. Perhaps more in exasperation than jubilation, the excavator Leonard Woolley thought the buildings beside the Sumerian ziggurat in Ur, which he excavated between 1922 and 1934, were more like kitchens than temples. One part of the complex was the temple of the city's patron deity, Nanna, the eldest son of the chief god Enlil. It contained a raised brick-and-bitumen tank reminiscent of a scullery sink that was probably used for the preparation of food or the washing of utensils. Off the court were two square chambers, each entirely taken up by a great fireplace, square in one and circular in the other, and showing signs of constant use. There were also three large presumed storerooms. As the archaeologist confesses: "There is nothing here that suggests a temple; the obvious term to apply to such a building is 'kitchen'."

Woolley explains that sacrifices were offered to the god, and:

> the flesh of the votive animal had to be cooked, whether it was roast with fire or seethed in the pot, and the cakes and the show-bread had to be baked, so that a kitchen was an important part of the temple ... In the present instance we

have a kitchen and no temple (1954:104).

A nearby building - the temple dedicated to Nin-gal, the wife of Nanna, as well as to some minor deities - was similar. "Here then we have a second 'kitchen'," Woolley admits (105).

Among later structures at Ur was the temple of Enannatum, High Priestess of Nanna, occupying 80 by 80 metres. The maze of rooms includes service chambers, (food) magazines and a set of rooms comprising the kitchen. In an open court was a well, and by it a bitumen-proofed tank. Against one wall are two fireplaces for boiling water, and against another the brick "cutting-up table", the marks of the butcher's knife still clearly visible. In a side room is a beehive-shaped bread oven, and in another room the cooking-range, which has two furnaces and circular flues and two rings of small holes into which the cauldrons were set. Using local actors, Woolley photographed the kitchen in use. He declares that "after thirty-eight centuries one could yet light the fires and reconstruct with all its activities ... just such a kitchen as there was at Shiloh when the Ark of the Covenant was there and the sons of Eli quarrelled with the Israelites over their share of the sacrificial meat" (170-1).

In its dictionary meaning, a temple is a "building devoted to the worship, or regarded as the dwelling-place, of a god or gods or other objects of religious reverence". Such a definition, relating to the gods at the expense of people and their world, tends to marginalise, even disconnect the temple. But the ancient Mesopotamian temple was not just a monument to inspire citizens; it was a political, economic and artistic centre, providing not just food but also festivals, calendars and all the other paraphernalia necessary for the organisation of a more ambitious level of physical sustenance. Just as Woolley found, the temple was essentially the kitchen of the gods, administering food through the society and imprinting the cooks' duties on a public domain. This does not devalue the religious impulse as mere symbolism, ritual and cultural code, but rather brings it back in as giving meaning to roles and activities in terms of the cosmic forces, not the least of wind, rain, sun and natural regeneration.

Advantages of viewing the temple as a kitchen

The concept of the temple-state as a kitchen offers numerous advantages. Among them, we know kitchens to be relatively overlapping and permeable. We never think of some total state kitchen, running all others. That is, we can accept that the temple was a commanding early kitchen, which greatly extended the organisation of everyday existence, and yet worked alongside both domestic households and also the other extended kitchens of estate owners and, eventually, the palace. The various institutions, conceived as kitchens, could be interdependent so that higher-order kitchens could rely on smaller (just as global capitalism still relies on the "reproduction" tasks of domestic households).

The idea of the kitchen foregrounds food distribution, to which so much

evidence and so many theories have pointed. Too often, however, food sharing has been made to seem as if it occurs by magic. People have sat down (or stood at the altar rail) to break bread as if the bread comes from an invisible baker. To participants, the temple might have seemed to have provided rations solely through divine beneficence. Likewise, the free market (which some historians try to discern as early as this) has often been conjured up as an institution in the sky, detached from human effort. But we know the kitchen as a very material distribution centre, employing very bodily cooks. Furthermore, we also definitely know kitchens to be storage sites - the place of bins, pots, jars, pantries and cellars - and the temple was a kitchen atop great grain stockpiles and animal food "stored" as herds. In a related point, the kitchen as the locus of food storage and distribution retains a central position for labour while shifting the balance a little away from food production, which is now agreed to have been only part of the process.

The kitchen is a single idea and yet conceptually all-embracing. This is not just the location of food which is physically processed, stored, and divided up; it is a site of social interaction and a cauldron of culture. The kitchen brings together all levels of reality, from the physical upwards. Running an extended kitchen, the officials were not just in charge of the burners but the food acquisition and the cultural maintenance; they marshalled social gatherings (meals) and the division of labour (cooking); they provided representational systems (recipes). Conventional views of religion and politics tend to essentialise the one (as ideal and ritual factors) or the other (as the pursuit of power). The temple as kitchen is complex enough as an idea to include representational schemes, governmental functions and perhaps even the exploitation of violence.

The universality of kitchens permits a single history. The approach ties the temple into a moving picture of broader, kitchen-like organisations. Rather than quarantining the temple as a purely religious institution, with its own, entirely independent history, it can be compared and contrasted with a variety of other political, military and economic institutions. This also suggests an evolutionary history. We can view the temple as developing out of a domestic household with hearth gods and the chief's sacred storehouse, fire and feasts. Over time, the temple-state split into a differentiated set of institutions. We can thus make sense of original unity of religious and political institutions, without resorting to a nebulous discussion of power, in which religion is reduced to an ideological weapon and the state a violent enforcer. In like manner, the concept of social institutions as kitchens (or part-kitchens) and their staffs ties them once again to fundamental issues of human survival.

A kitchen is an evocative description of an institution involving the storage and distribution of foodstuffs, the accompanying division of labour and overall culture. Beyond that, by throwing the spotlight on feeding strategies and activities, this approach brings the temple, the palace and the emerging state apparatus into a shared history. The temple-state can be located in the history of the kitchen, its elaborations and offshoots. The temple can also be located in the kitchen of history.

Borrowing the slogan, "*Der Mensch ist was der isst*", nineteenth century materialist philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach believed he had cracked the link between mind and body - it was nutrition. Reacting against the reductionism of this approach, Marx pointed to the need for some active, intermediate principle, which he viewed as "production", valorising industrial work. The gastronomic outlook can do better in linking cultural and material factors through the vital, multi-faceted activity of cooking. As Feuerbach intended, the mundane idea of the kitchen might seem to separate people from their gods, but it really reunites them. Separately from this account of the temple-state, I have attempted a re-evaluation of Christianity through a focus on meals, which a variety of New Testament scholars have also recently put at the centre (Symons, 1990: 1998b). Undoubtedly, the gastronomic interpretation of religion can be pursued much further.

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