

EVIDENCE FOR FEASTING IN PREDYNASTIC EGYPT

JUAN JOSÉ CASTILLOS

Uruguayan Institute of Egyptology

juancast@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT - Anthropological and ethnographic research has shown that feasting fulfilled important purposes in prehistoric societies. It allowed the sharing of food among community members, it provided an opportunity for temporary leaders to display their generosity and acquire prestige and could also lead to the appearance and consolidation of permanent inequality. Among the markers that are used by archaeologists in order to identify feasting, we can mention, besides the pictorial representations of such events as in later historical art, an abundance of resources that could provide surpluses, special kinds of food used for these events, special vessels used for serving food on such occasions like wooden gourds and bowls, the use of prestige goods into which feast foods could be converted, the presence of large hearths containing the remains of unusually abundant food consumption at a given time, the occurrence of special grounds or structures where feasts could be held and the occurrence of individuals clearly possessing more wealth and influence than other members of their community. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to detect in the archaeological record in prehistoric times but this paper endeavours to point out possible markers to identify feasting in predynastic Egypt since we know such events took place at all times in the pharaonic period and it is unlikely that, as has been found in many other prehistoric societies, it was absent in the Nile Valley in predynastic times.

Feasting and banquets have taken place in communities all through human history¹. It would be naive to think that these gatherings were meant for just the enjoyment of the mutual company, good food, beverages, music and other performances, without other connotations.

¹ C. Ember and M. Ember, *Cultural Anthropology*, New Jersey, 1973, 129-130, B. Hayden, *Feasting in prehistoric and traditional societies*, in P. Wiessner and W. Schiefenhövel (eds.), *Food and the status quest*, Providence, 1996, 127.

Today as in the past such events also cement loyalties, proclaim the status of those who offer them as well as of those who attend them, are often an excuse for the fostering of business or political agendas and go beyond the idea of having a good time².

Feasting was often performed with chiefs acting as hosts in order to celebrate a range of political, economic and social events. To these gatherings chiefs from other towns could be invited and were expected to bring gifts for their host.

Such presents were used to help fund the celebrations and involved a redistribution of what he had received from his guests³.

It should also be emphasized that feasts, and especially the competitive ones, do not seem to have taken place out of need but rather as a corollary to abundant resources. This is supported by a large body of ethnographic evidence⁴.

The study of both ancient and modern societies has shown that feasting, also involving gift giving, took place frequently in the past and in recent times among the native population in places like northwest Canada to such an immoderate and extravagant extent, since enormous quantities of wealth were destroyed, that the government had to prohibit such wasteful practices⁵.

Feasting seems to have taken place among hunter-gatherers as well as in later settled communities, with perhaps different purposes that agreed with the stage of social development in each case⁶.

In ancient Egypt during historical times feasts were depicted in wall paintings in tombs in which the simple mutual pleasures seem to have been emphasized⁷.

Classical writers gave us an exaggerated description of these feasts in Graeco-Roman times: "Between the neighbouring towns of Ombi and Tentyra there burns an ancient and long-cherished feud and undying hatred, whose wounds are not to be healed. Each people is filled with fury against the other because each hates its neighbours' Gods, deeming that none can be held as deities save its own. So

² T. Bray, *The Archaeology and Politics of Food and Feasting in Early States and Empires*, Norwell, 2003.

³ S. Kohring and S. Wynne-Jones, *Socialising complexity: Structure, interaction and power in archaeological discourse*, Oxford, 2007, 219.

⁴ B. Hayden, *Principles for creating socioeconomic inequalities*, in T. Price and G. Feinman (eds.), *Foundations of social inequality*, New York, 1995, 22.

⁵ W. Suttles, *Coping with abundance and subsistence in the northwest coast*, in Lee and DeVore (eds.), *Man the hunter*, Chicago, 1968, 64-67.

⁶ P. Miracle, *Feast or famine? Epipalaeolithic subsistence in the northern Adriatic basin*, *Documenta Archaeologica*, XXVIII, 2001, 177-197.

⁷ The best examples come from the New Kingdom tomb of Nebamun in Thebes, but many other images of wall paintings and drawings depicting such events at different times of ancient Egyptian history provide a very good idea of what went on in them.

when one of these peoples held a feast, the chiefs and leaders of their enemy thought good to seize the occasion, so that their foe might not enjoy a glad and merry day, with the delight of grand banquets, with tables set out at every temple and every crossway, and with night-long feasts, and with couches spread all day and all night, and sometimes discovered by the sun upon the seventh morn. Egypt, doubtless, is a rude country; but in indulgence, so far as I myself have noted, its barbarous rabble yields not to the ill-famed Canopus"⁸.

But, in fact, although we cannot deny the accusation of frequent overindulgence, they appear to have been fairly well organized and civilized gatherings for the enjoyment of the ancient Egyptian elite.

Now in order to deal with the problem at hand, that is, whether feasting also took place in predynastic Egypt and how we can ascertain that, I would like to go into some of the characteristics of this practice.

Feasting in ancient times can be described as celebratory, of mutual aid or commensal. The latter is the one that I was mostly concerned about due to its competitive nature as aggrandizers vied with one another to excel in these gatherings and strengthen their power and influence within their community or beyond through a generous display and use of their wealth.

Among the markers that are used by archaeologists in order to identify feasting, we can mention, besides the pictorial representations of such events as in later historical art, an abundance of resources that could provide surpluses, special kinds of food used for these events, special vessels used for serving food on such occasions like wooden gourds and bowls, the use of prestige goods into which feast foods could be converted, the presence of large hearths containing the remains of unusually abundant food consumption at a given time, the occurrence of special grounds or structures where feasts could be held and the occurrence of individuals clearly possessing more wealth and influence than other members of their community.

Until recently the buried remains of wild and domestic animals, especially in funerary contexts, was considered to be the expression of early religious practices linked to the reverence those animals received from predynastic Egyptian communities⁹.

It has been pointed out that "a cultic motivation for the independent burial of animals remains one possible interpretation. This means that alternative interpretations are equally worth investigating"¹⁰.

⁸ Juvenal, Satire XV.

⁹ E. Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*, New York, 1982.

¹⁰ D. Flores, *Funerary sacrifice of animals during the Predynastic Period*, in S. Hendrickx, R. Friedman, M. Cialowicz and M. Chlodnicki, *Egypt at its origins, Studies in Memory of Barbara Adams*, Leuven, 2004, 732.

The accumulations of cattle bones as well as those of other large domesticated animals in archaeological contexts can perhaps also be interpreted as the probable remains of feasts¹¹. In many parts of the world cattle has been considered a symbol of wealth and its accumulation or the display of same by its conspicuous consumption an exhibition of power and high status¹².

At the Sudanese site of Kerma in a Middle Kerma tomb (115) the remains of sheep and pieces of meat were buried in the proximity of this grave clearly belonging to a member of the local elite, while a large number of cattle bucrania were arranged to the south, in a half moon shape¹³.

At Kerma the number of bucrania associated to tombs range from a few to several thousand and although religious notions have been suggested as the cause for this practice, the results of funerary feasts seems to be a more reasonable interpretation.

For instance, among the Akha in southeast Asia funerary feasts held for members of the elite involved the killing of many buffaloes, valuable gifts were given to the presiding shaman and those who attended exchanged presents.

Other probable functions of such feasts could have also been the display of wealth, status, not at all unselfish generosity since alliances were ratified and strengthened and reciprocity debts were created.

As Hayden has pointed out, in these communities “wealthy people have livestock, poor people do not. The rich can use livestock sacrifices in feasts in order to create strong reciprocal social relationships with other members of the community or to contract marriages and thus gain political support and power, or ‘buy power’ “ “If one wishes to argue that prestige items such as gongs, swords, silver spoons, bronze kettles, and jewelry, or domestic animals do not necessarily indicate feasting or its associated rituals, the transegalitarian ethnographic record speaks empirically for itself. These and other similar prestige items are everywhere intimately tied to feasting contexts and behavior in the transegalitarian world”¹⁴.

The accumulated horns of the sacrificed livestock on these occasions were buried in the debris of the headman’s house and left behind when he moved to another location.

¹¹ B. Hayden and R. Maneeprasert, Feasting Among the Akha: The 1996 Report, (Unpublished report to the National Research Council of Thailand).

¹² See for example, E. Leach, Political systems of highland Burma, Boston, 1954, 71; M. Hoffman, Egypt before the pharaohs, New York 1979, 159.

¹³ L. Chaix and J. Hansen, Cattle with 'forwarding pointing horns': zoological and cultural aspects, in L. Krzyzaniak, K. Kroeper and M. Kobusiewicz (eds.), Cultural markers in the later prehistory of Northeastern Africa and recent research, Poznan, 2003, 269-281. In this last publication the authors hint to probable religious connotations for this practice based on similar finds elsewhere, but they also point out that these remains were associated to the wealth and social rank of the deceased.

¹⁴ B. Hayden and R. Maneeprasert, Feasting Among the Akha.

It is possible that large assemblages of cattle bones in funerary or settlement contexts in predynastic Egypt can be interpreted as manifestations of feasting.

In Nubia in the cemetery 142 of Naga Wadi two large pits containing the bones of oxen were found in the vicinity of Terminal Group A human graves belonging to members of the local elite¹⁵.

At Hemmameh that is also the likely context for the large numbers of oxen bones found in the settlement¹⁶, since apparently the finds of animal bones, even in funerary contexts in predynastic Egypt, seem not to have had religious connotations¹⁷.

Even though some of these examples are of later date than the Egyptian predynastic, if they correspond to feasting practices they bring closer to home a phenomenon that is well attested at different times in many parts of the world.

Recent archaeological work carried out in the predynastic settlement at Mahasna could identify the numerous remains of cattle (the most abundantly represented animal species at the site) as well as fish and other wild and domestic animals which had been sacrificed and appear to be linked to some sort of ritual or other activity that probably took place in a large structure situated in Block 3¹⁸. This could be the remains of feasts and the place where they were carried out. Although still merely a tentative suggestion, I think it is worthy of careful consideration since similar contexts have also been found elsewhere in predynastic Egypt, for instance, at the elite cemetery in Hierakonpolis¹⁹.

In a recent publication²⁰ we were reminded that in many cases the decorated and other pots found in predynastic tombs exhibit evidence of wear (erosion of surfaces, small damage to the edges, repairs made to some) and were not manufactured specifically for funerary use but came in fact from the world of the living.

It is a tantalizing thought that some of them, especially the types that are best suited to contain and serve various kinds of food and at the same time exhibit elaborate decoration, could have been used in feasting, marking the status of

¹⁵ C. Firth, *Archaeological Survey of Nubia*, IV, Cairo, 1927, 217.

¹⁶ G. Brunton and G. Caton Thompson, *The Badarian Civilisation*, London, 1928, Plates LXVIII and LXIX.

¹⁷ D. Flores, *The funerary sacrifice of animals during the Predynastic Period*, Toronto, 1999, 99.

¹⁸ D. Anderson, *Evidence for early ritual activity in the predynastic settlement at El Mahasna*, unpublished paper read at the *Origins 3 Colloquium*, London, 2009.

¹⁹ W. Van Neer, V. Linseele and R. Friedman, *Animal burials and food offerings at the elite cemetery HK6 of Hierakonpolis*, in S. Hendrickx, R. Friedman, M. Cialowicz and M. Chlodnicki, *Egypt at its origins, Studies in Memory of Barbara Adams*, Leuven, 2004, 67-130.

²⁰ B. Midant-Reynes and N. Buchez, *Adaïma, Économie et habitat*, Cairo, 2002, 571.

those who were involved in competitive feasting and took to their graves some of the elaborate pots that underlined their social position.

Since there is no reason to think that predynastic Egypt was an isolated island, differing in their manifestations of social complexity from people in many other parts of the world and being feasts a frequent and well documented phenomenon in later pharaonic times, it might prove profitable to bear in mind the above mentioned markers in future archaeological work on predynastic Egypt in order to enable us to detect more unmistakable traces of feasting in settlement and funerary contexts and how it was linked to the activities of the elite.