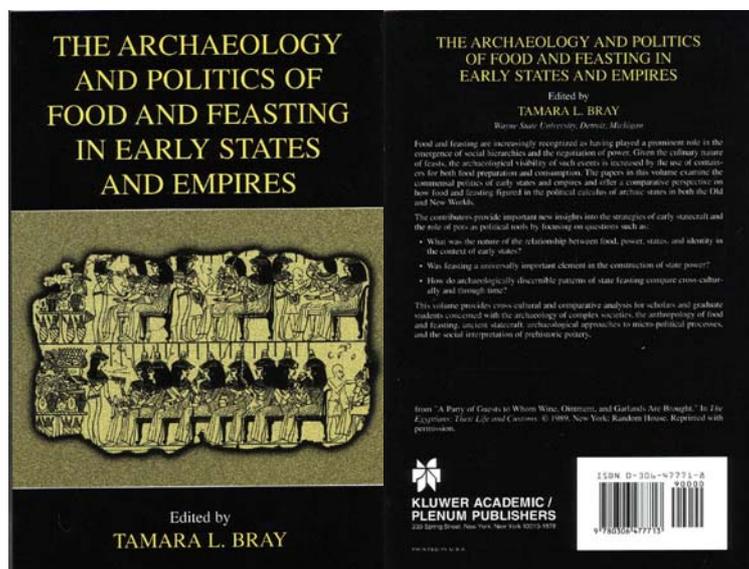


Bray, T.L. Ed. 2003. *The archaeology and politics of food and feasting in early states and empires.* – New York, Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers

Book review by A.J. Clapham



As an environmental archaeologist reading the title of this book I was looking forward to seeing papers discussing new interpretations of archaeobotanical and archaeozoological material, taking us away from the tried and tested routine of crop and animal husbandry practices. But alas, I was to be disappointed: the book is all about pots!

This book is a collection of papers divided into two sections covering the Old World and the New World. There are three papers in the Old World section covering 'Feasts, funerals, and fast food in Early Mesopotamian states' (Susan Pollock); 'Pharaohs, feasts, and foreigners: Cooking, foodways, and agency on ancient Egypt's southern frontier' (Stuart Tyson Smith) and 'Feasting the ancestors in early China' (Sarah Milledge Nelson). The New World section contains five papers covering 'To dine splendidly: Imperial pottery, commensal politics, and the Inca state' (Tamara L. Bray); 'From stew-eaters to maize-drinkers: The *Chicha* economy and the Tiwanaku expansion' (Paul S. Goldstein); 'Pots, politics and power: Huari ceramic assemblages and imperial administration' (Anita G. Cook & Mary Glowacki); 'Feasting at home: Community and house solidarity among the Maya of southeastern Mesoamerica' (Julia A. Hendon) and 'Aztec feasts, rituals, and markets: Political uses of ceramic vessels in a commercial economy' (Michael E. Smith, Jennifer B. Wharton & Jan Marie Olsen). These two sections are preceded by an introductory paper by Tamara L. Bray covering the 'Commensal politics of early states and empires' and followed by concluding remarks by Michael Dietler ('Clearing the table: Some concluding reflections on commensal politics and imperial states') and a final epilogue chapter by Joan M. Gero entitled 'Feasting and the practice of stately manners.'

In all of the main papers the authors attempt to 'reclaim' pottery studies from the usual role of providing a chronological base for archaeological excavations and to try and determine (some more successfully than others) the function of each ceramic type and relate this to its role in feasting. Although this may work for those sites in New World where there are early ethnographic records provided by the Spanish conquerors, in the Old World there is more of a reliance on the archaeological context of the finds e.g. grave goods to interpret the artefacts in terms of feasting and therefore is perhaps open to a wider interpretation. Although in some cases the finding of artistic depictions of feasting may help in interpretation. In both instances there seems to be little acknowledgement of the evidence that can be provided by other studies such as archaeobotany and archaeozoology. Very little in any of the papers mention which animal species may have been used in the feasting and no real use of the archaeobotanical date to provide information on what else could have been eaten or could have been used as wine or beer. Again the existence of early ethnographic works from Meso and South America may mean that you can get away with this but it is certainly not possible in the Old World. The lack of pot residue studies used as evidence to determine the function of vessel types was also evident and now that this method is being used more and more in certain areas, especially Egypt and northern Europe it is certainly a gap in Mesoamerican and South American studies that needs to be addressed.

Overall, I think that this collection of papers is a brave attempt to 'rescue' ceramics from its usual role but whether or not it works is I think, up to the individual reader. But for one who specialises in archaeobotany, the

lack of utilisation of the evidence provided by both archaeobotanical and archaeozoological studies as well as chemical analysis of pot residues is a missed opportunity and hopefully this will be rectified in the future.

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Dr. A.J. Clapham
Department of Archaeology
Durham University
Durham, DH1 3LE
UK