Chapter 3

Pharaohs, Feasts, and Foreigners
Cooking, Foodways, and Agency on Ancient Egypt’s Southern Frontier

Stuart Tyson Smith

Previous investigations of Egyptian imperialism have focused principally on the policies of pharaoh and his close advisors to the exclusion of other data. But archaeological evidence indicates that Egyptian frontier communities did more than simply implement central policy. In this paper, I present an analysis of cooking and serving assemblages from the Nubian fortress of Askut that illustrates the role of individual agency in the day to day cross-border interactions that characterized frontier life. The study demonstrates that Egyptians and Nubians collaborated and may have intermarried in spite of a politically charged ideology of separate identities and otherness.

In historical studies of ancient empires, there is a tendency to view imperial frontiers as absolute and impermeable boundaries that separated insiders from ethnically distinct outsiders. This impression is typically reinforced by the decrees and proclamations of the rulers. Such is the case with ancient Egypt. Modern archaeology, however, reconstructs the reach and influence of
ancient empires based on patterns of material culture as well as other elements such as architecture, art, and written records. To better understand how identities were manifest and deployed at imperial borders, I examine the ceramic materials found on Egypt’s southern frontier with Nubia for insights into foodways, juxtaposing this data with the historical information offered on Egyptian and Nubian identities and relations. Foodways, defined as “modes of feeling, thinking, and behaving about food that are common to a cultural group” (Simoons 1967:3), may be accessed archaeologically through the functional analysis of cooking, serving and storage vessels. Such an approach provides insights into ethnic identity, hierarchy, and social relations within and between groups (Wood 1995).

Some anthropologists suggest that rather than expressing identity, food choices primarily reflect nutritional and biological needs (Harris 1985). Most, however, argue that while nutrition is important, the kind of food eaten, its manner of preparation, and the modes of consumption have a social significance that transcends biological necessity and relates more to the construction of identity and status (Goody 1982). While various forms of feasting are used to create and reinforce social distinctions (Dietler 1990), foodways also serve to bind individuals in larger social groups through shared understandings of cultural conventions (Wood 1995).

The views of imperial identity and cultural boundaries given in Egyptian monumental texts and art construct a strict distinction between inner civilization and outer barbarism. This is the view from the center, but what was the reality of day to day interactions of Nubians and Egyptians on Egypt’s southern frontier? Previous investigations interpret Egyptian imperialism through the lens of the policies concocted by pharaoh and his close advisors, based on texts and artwork created by and for the Pharaonic state (e.g., Kemp 1978, 1997). Did Egyptian frontier communities do more, however, than simply implement central policy? As Driessen (1992) observes, individual agency can weigh more heavily than the pronouncements of administrators and ideologues in the day to day interactions that characterize frontier life. What role did individuals play in determining imperial interactions and outcomes between ancient Egypt and Nubia?

In what follows, I provide first a broad historical outline of the changing fortunes of Egypt’s empire and interactions with Nubia from c. 2040–656 B.C. (Table 3.1). I then examine the dynamics of the frontier communities on the Egyptian-Nubian border through a carefully contextualized analysis of ceramics from the Egyptian colonial fortress of Askut located at the second cataract of the Nile. Finally, I consider the local interactions that helped shape larger scale geopolitics and attempt to reconcile the apparent contradictions between actual practice reflected in the archaeological evidence and imperial policy and ideology as given in royal inscriptions.