Chapter 5

To Dine Splendidly
Imperial Pottery, Commensal Politics, and the Inca State

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“...[the queen] was very fond of banquets and parties, and often invited the principal lords of Cuzco...giving them splendid food and abundant drink, and they could take home everything they had not eaten.”
—Martin de Murúa (1962 [1590]:33).

This paper looks at the classic polychrome vessels associated with the imperial Inca state in terms of their functional significance and considers the role of these objects in the broader context of elite identity and empire building. The focus is on several dimensions of the ceramic assemblage not normally discussed in studies of Inca pottery including their significance from a culinary standpoint and the gendered associations of this category of material culture. Based on an empire-wide analysis of the imperial assemblage, I suggest that viewing Inca pottery as culinary equipment offers a window into the ways in which food, feasting, and gender figured in the negotiation of state power and imperial expansion.

To better understand how pots functioned as political tools in the Inca state, ethnohistoric and ethnographic information on Andean foodways is presented together with archaeological data on Inca vessel forms, patterns of distribution, and contexts of finds. The imperial state assemblage is then compared to the local vessel repertoire of a northern Andean polity that was incorporated into the Inca empire shortly before its demise. These different lines of evidence are used...
to draw functional inferences about Inca vessel forms, outline the features of an imperial Inca “haute cuisine,”\(^1\) and consider the role of women in the development of the Inca state.

This paper takes as its point of departure the notion that food plays a prominent role in social activities concerned with relations of power. Cooking, cuisine, and, by extension, culinary equipment, constitute a basic medium of human social interaction. Food and feasting are increasingly recognized as having played a prominent role in the emergence of social hierarchies and the negotiation of power (Clark and Blake 1994; Dietler 1996; Gero 1992; Goody 1982; Guummerman 1997; Hayden 1990, 1996; Nielsen and Nielsen 1998; Wiessner and Shieffenhovel 1996). In the Andean context, the importance of reciprocity and hospitality as key components of Inca statecraft was first discussed by Murra (1980 [1955]). The labor services owed the state by local communities, which could range from cultivating fields to massive public works projects, were typically couched in terms of the reciprocal obligations of chiefly generosity. An important aspect of reciprocal labor obligations in the Andes was the understanding that the work party would be fully provisioned by the sponsor in terms of raw materials, tools, and food and drink (Murra 1980:97, 121–134).

In the present study, food, pots, and politics are seen as intimately linked. Rather than simply viewing Inca pottery as a signifier of the state, I approach it as an important point of articulation between consumption, identity, status, and political strategies of imperial state expansion and control. Neither a functional nor a symbolic analysis alone is adequate for understanding the significance of this distinctive artifact of imperial rule. Rather, it is suggested that the meaning and importance of imperial Inca polychrome pottery is bound up with its involvement in the political practices of the Inca state.

**POTTERY AS CULINARY EQUIPMENT**

Pottery from archaeological contexts has not typically been analyzed for its active role in the construction of social relations or as culinary equipment (though see Blitz 1993; Johannessen 1993; Pauketat and Emerson 1991; Potter 2000, for recent exceptions). Studies of archaeological ceramics have, instead, tended to focus on aspects of style (or appearance) construed as emblematic of ethnicity across space and time (Wright 1991). While a few scholars have underlined the importance of pots as tools (e.g., Braun 1983; Skibo and Schiffer 1995), prehistoric pottery has received relatively little attention from either a functional or technological standpoint in comparison to, for instance, lithics.

As Wright (1991) has suggested, the dearth of such techno-functional studies may relate to generic associations of pottery with women, cooking, and the domestic sphere of activity. The unspoken assumption is that activities controlled by