

# The Ritual Use of Mortuary Pottery in Ancient Nubia. Some interpretational thoughts on the rituals and symbolism behind the mortuary ceramics of the Ancient Nubian C-Group

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This article<sup>1</sup> is dedicated to the memory of our dear colleague Francis Geus whose contributions to Nubian Archaeology were significant. With his excavations of archaeological sites at Saï Island, at el-Multaga, and el Kadada (Geus & Lecoite 2003; Geus 1995; 1996), and the publications of the material from these sites, Francis Geus brought our knowledge of the ancient history of Sudan many steps forward. In two articles ('Burial Customs in The Upper Nile: An Overview' and 'Funerary Culture'), both published by the British Museum, Geus provided us with a wide chronological overview of the funerary customs in Ancient Nubia and Sudan and offered some interpretative thoughts on the funerary practices of this region (Geus 1991: 2004). In a paper dealing with the distinctions between remains of the rituals and the actual furnishing of the grave during the time of the A-Group Hans-Åke Nordström followed up on Geus' ideas (Nordström 2006).

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1. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Hierakonpolis Expedition and Dr. Renée Friedman who has kindly provided me with pictures and field notes from Cemetery HK27, Hierakonpolis as well as her essential comments on this paper. Furthermore, I am very grateful to Professor Hans-Åke Nordström for his criticism and remarks on this paper and for providing me with the detailed information of A-Group Cemetery SAS- 6-G-18. I am deeply grateful to Lecturer Bo Dahl Hermansen, to Lecturer Tine Bagh, to Associated Professor Stephen Lumsden, to Dr. Theol. Joshua Sabih, and to Professor Peder Mortensen whose thorough comments and criticism on my theoretical work were fundamental for this paper. I would like to address my thanks to my friends and fellows at the Carsten Niebuhr Department, Ph.D. Rune Nyord, Monica T. Lauridsen, and MA. Mette Gregersen for their comments on the issue dealt with in this article. I am very thankful to Professor Marla Berns who has kindly provided me with her original photo of Ancestral wiiso-vessels from north-eastern Nigeria. Finally, I would like to thank 3D animator Tom Westermann for his visual editing of the illustration used in this paper.

This article is a humble attempt to shed a gleam of light on some ritual aspects of the funerary material belonging to the people known as the C-Group, who inhabited the Lower Nubia from the mid 3<sup>rd</sup> to the mid 2<sup>nd</sup> Millennium BC. The primary focus of this article is the ritual use of pottery by the ancient C-Group people. However, I shall stress that mortuary ceramics should be interpreted in contexts with the other grave objects of the same provenance. Therefore this paper will be followed up by additional articles about other aspects of C-Group funeral and mortuary practices.

The core area of the C-Group is situated on both banks along the Lower Nubian Nile extending from Buhen in the South and as far as Hierakonpolis in the North. The evidence of the C-Group culture consists mainly of cemeteries but a few settlement sites have also been revealed, which makes the archaeological material from this horizon a perfect case for studying ancient Nubian funerary and mortuary practices.

The ceramic items placed in context with the C-Group burials have most often been interpreted as being grave offerings only (Junker 1926: 20-21; Bietak 1966: 24). However, the ethnographic records indicate that items placed in context with graves most often possess multiple symbolic functions.

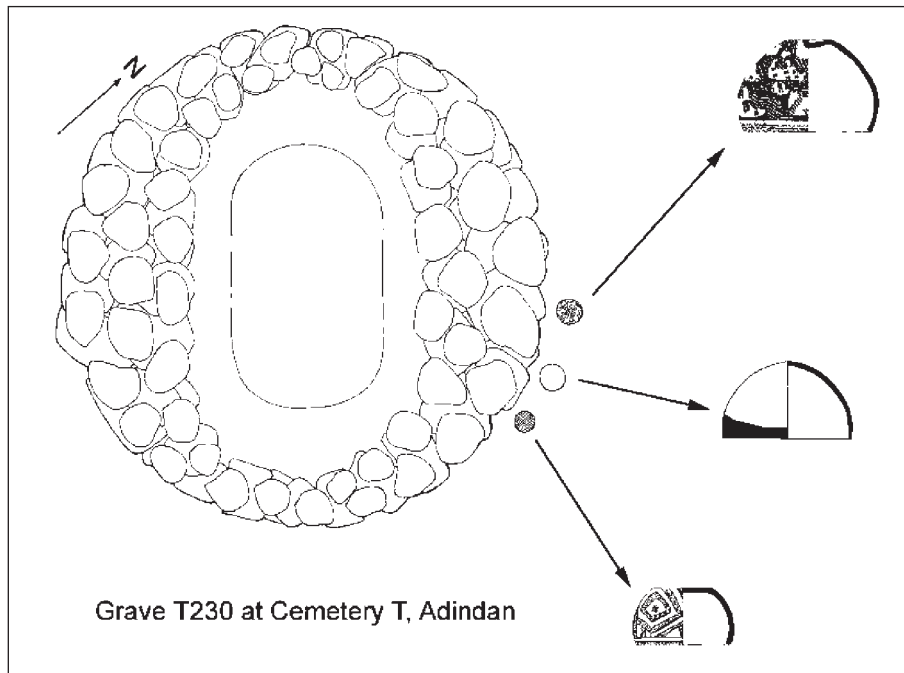
In order to investigate the underlying mechanisms mediated by the mortuary material of the C-Group specific burials at two cemeteries of this horizon will be examined, as each represent facets which occur frequently or are characteristic for this culture. The first examples are the graves T38 and T230 from Cemetery T at Adindan in the northern part of Lower Nubia. The second case is from Upper Egypt: Tombs 5, 7, 17, and 23 at Cemetery HK27C, Hierakonpolis. All of these graves can be dated to the later phases of the C-Group. Each case will here be described in the order mentioned above and subsequently I shall attempt to interpret the grave material within a wider range of social and ritual settings.

### **Grave T38 and T230 at Cemetery T, Adindan**

During the great archaeological salvage projects in Nubia under UNESCO, the Oriental Institute of Chicago undertook several excavations at Qustul, Ballana, and Adindan, which are located just North of Abu Simbel. This area was investigated thirty years earlier, from 1931 to 1933, by the British scholars W. B. Emery and L. P. Kirwan, whose most famous discoveries were the great royal burial mounds of the so called X-Group kings at Qustul and Ballana (Emery 1965: 231-250; pl. IV-XX).

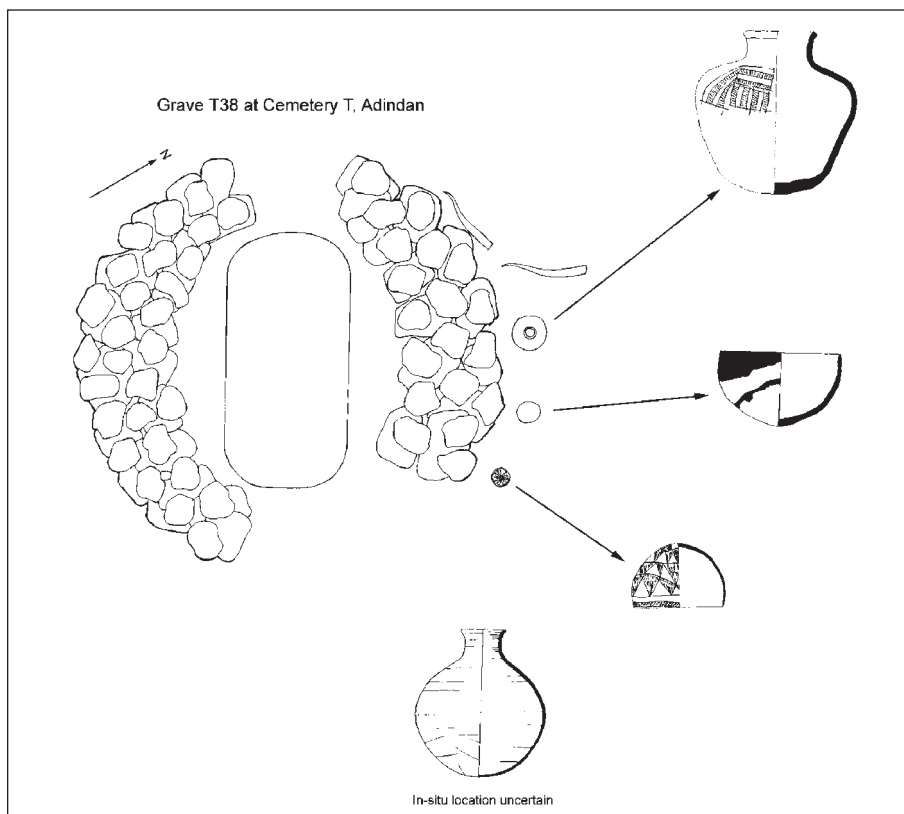
During the field seasons of 1962 and 1963 the Chicago Expedition under the direction of Dr. Keith C. Seele re-identified and excavated the C-Group cemeteries K, T, and U. With its 265 grave units Cemetery T was significantly larger than the two other C-Group necropolises situated within the concession area of the Chicago Expedition. The essential results of the Chicago Expedition's excavations were preliminarily published by Seele (Bigs 1973: 1-3; Seele 1974: 25-27), however, after Seele died in 1971 the outcome of his work was finally published by Bruce Beyer Williams in 1983 (xvii-xxi, foreword).

• **Grave T230** consisted of a stone built tumulus positioned above a semi-angular burial pit orientated SE-NW (**fig. 1**). This tomb belonged to an adult female. In the debris of the pit, snail shells were observed. Three bowls had been deposited on the north-eastern side of the superstructure. Two of these bowls were incised, one with diamond designs, whereas the other one was fully covered with incised cattle motifs, making it quite special. The third bowl was of red polished – black top ware. All these bowls had been turned up-side down (Williams 1983: 185-186, fig. 28, pls. 17B; 20; 47; 5C; 21C).



**Fig. 1**  
Pottery placed inverted in context with Grave T230 at Cemetery T, Adindan (from Williams 1983: fig. 28; visual reediting of the bowls by Steffensen 2007. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago).

• **Grave T38** at Cemetery T, Adindan consisted of a tumulus built of stones and situated above a rectangularly shaped burial pit that was oriented SE-NW (**fig. 2**). No diagnostic human bone material was retrieved in this pit; actually only few fragmentary sherds from a bowl and a cup were found. However, on the north-eastern side of the tumulus several grave goods had been deposited:



**Fig. 2**  
Pottery placed inverted in context with Grave T38 at Cemetery T, Adindan (from Williams 1983: fig. 12; visual reediting of the bowls by Steffensen 2007. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago).

a clay disc; an incised Nubian bowl placed in an inverted position, a red polished – black topped bowl; and an incised C-Group jar. Finally, an Egyptian jar was found near the tumulus; however, this jar may belong to Grave T45. Apart from the incised Nubian bowl, the ceramics were all placed up-right in a ‘normal fashion’.

In addition to the pottery two bovine horns were found in context with the tumulus (Williams 1983: 131-132, fig. 12, pls. 8B; 27C; 53C; 56A; 66A; 73A).

### **Tomb 5, Tomb 7, Tomb 17, and Tomb 23 at Cemetery HK27C, Hierakonpolis**

The C-Group Cemetery HK 27C was identified in 2001 at Hierakonpolis, a site on the west bank of the Nile ca. 113 km. north of Aswan, in Upper Egypt. The excavation of this necropolis has been carried out by the Hierakonpolis Expedition under the direction of Dr. Renée Friedman. In the season in 2003 approximately one quarter of this site was investigated (Friedman 2001: 29-45; 2004a: 24-26; 2004b: 47-52; Giuliani 2004: 52-55; Irish 2004: 56-59). In 2007 excavations resumed, and the majority of the cemetery was excavated, revealing a total of 60 C-Group graves (Friedman in *Sudan & Nubia* 11, 2007, forthcoming).

Not only is Cemetery HK27C the most recently discovered C-Group site, it furthermore holds the most northern location, far north of the Egyptian-Nubian frontier at the First Nile Cataract. Excavations in 2001 and 2003 revealed at least four cases, which strongly suggest ritual use of the pottery that was found near tombs. Vessels that had been deliberately turned up-side down were found near Tomb 17, 5, and 7. Moreover, bowls which had been intentionally broken were found in connection with Tomb 23 and near Tomb 17. During the field season in 2007 at least in two bowls found placed up-side down, and no less than five cases were bowls recorded, which had been deliberately broken.<sup>2</sup> However, I shall here concentrate on the tombs 5, 7, 17, and 23, only, and give a brief description of each of them.

• **Tomb 17** was outlined by a mud-brick circle which defined the remains of the superstructure. Beneath the tumulus an angular burial shaft was located, orientated NE-SW (**fig. 3**). The skeletal remains of one individual, 20-35 years of age, were discovered at the base of the shaft in Tomb 17; the inhumation of a juvenile between 5 and 10 years of age was found in the upper levels (Friedman 2004: 51; Irish 2004: 57). Although the body was disturbed it appears to have been wrapped and/or clothed in leather, and moreover, it was surrounded by reed matting and mud. Blue faience beads from bracelets and from the decoration of the clothing were found together with carnelian beads, flakes, and carnelian chips. Also fragments of shells and some twig were found in context with this tomb. On the floor of the shaft were impressions of reed mats.

The superstructure that covered the burial shaft consisted of a well-built ring of mud-bricks four courses high. A large Egyptian amphora was discovered on the north side of this tomb. Three offering places (X, A, and B), each beside

2. At least in seven cases of pottery which has been ritually treated can now be cited from the current excavations in 2007. A bowl of Nile C ware was found in context with Tomb 24, and an incised Nubian bowl was found in connection with Tomb 40. Both of these bowls were placed up-side down. Remains of a Black Topped bowl which clearly had been ritually ‘killed’ were recovered in context with each of the tombs: 40, 44, 45, and 50. Additionally, a Black Topped bowl which has been killed in the base was retrieved in Test Square G, locus G15. The results of the field season 2007 will be dealt with in forthcoming publications.

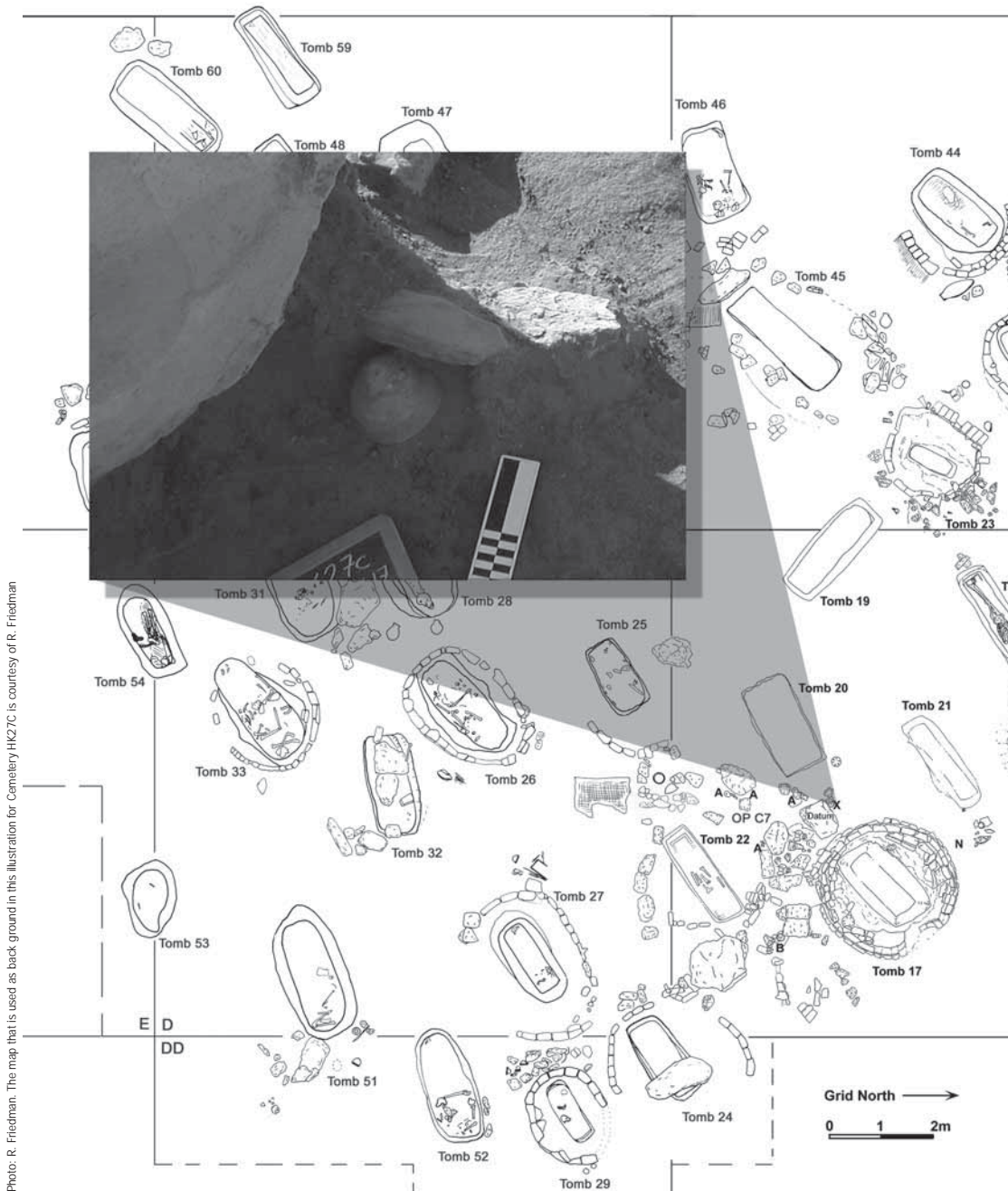


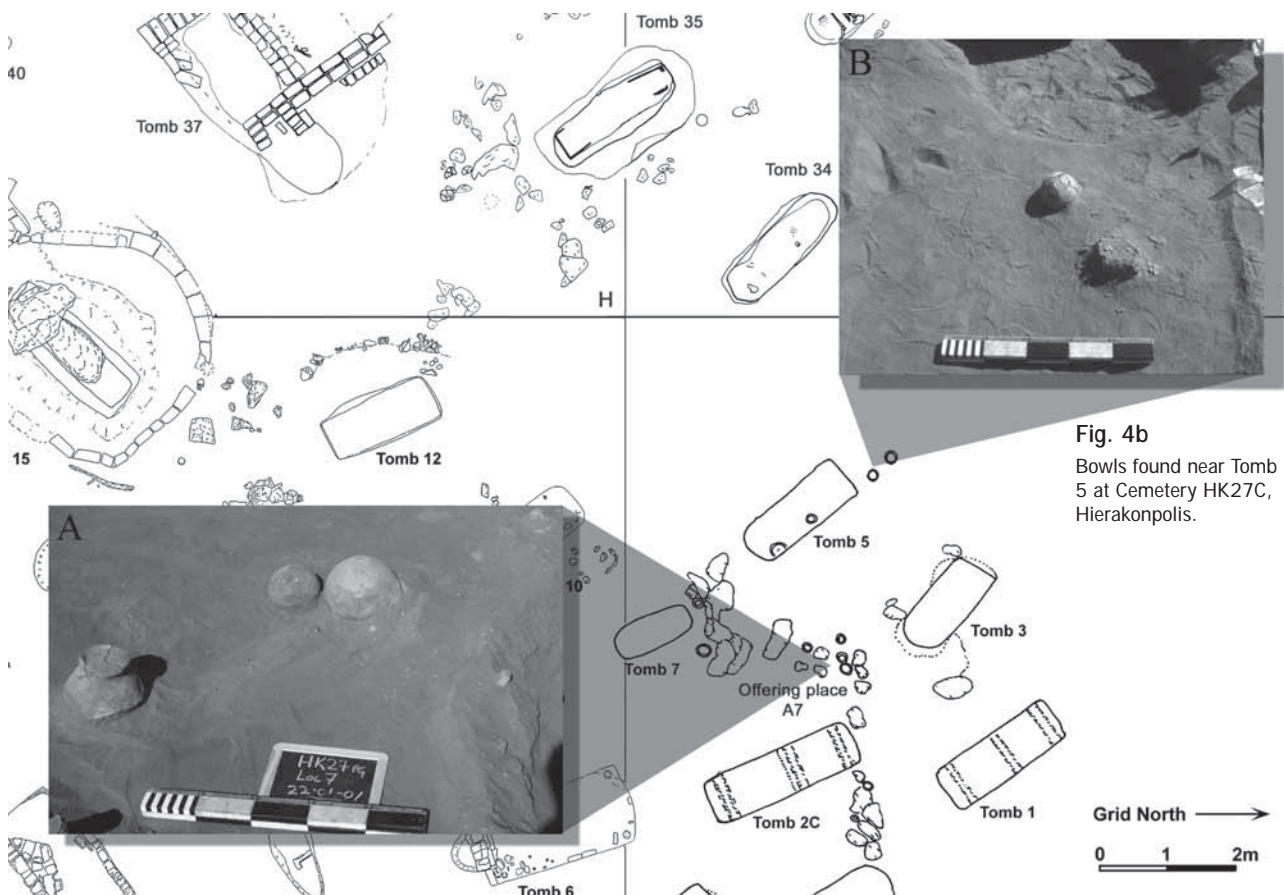
Photo: R. Friedman. The map that is used as back ground in this illustration for Cemetery HK27C is courtesy of R. Friedman

Fig. 3  
Bowl found beneath a boulder at the Offering Place X just E of Tomb 20 and SW of Tomb 17 at Cemetery HK27C, Hierakonpolis.

or next to large boulders, were located SW, S, and SE of the superstructure of Tomb 17 respectively. An offering place built of fieldstones was located between two of these boulders. Bright yellow sandstones were found in this area. A number of surface deposits of both Egyptian and Nubian pottery vessels were found around the tumulus. Much of this pottery was either grouped beneath the boulders or simply placed against the wall of the tumulus (Friedman 2004: 51). At the offering place X a bowl of Egyptian fabrication had been deposited in an upended position beneath a large boulder, and at offering place A a Nubian black topped bowl was discovered. A hole had been blown in the bottom of this bowl which may suggests that this bowl was ritually 'killed' (Friedman 2004: 53).

• **Tomb 7** was defined by a small and fairly oval shaped burial shaft. The shaft was orientated in a NW-SE direction, and stone slabs that were situated on the north side of the burial shaft may be what remain from the tumulus of this grave. This burial was completely disturbed. Poorly preserved bones from three individuals were found in the burial pit; the bones of two juveniles who were both between 15 to 17 years of age when they died, and the bone of an infant 3 to 5 years of age. However, some of these bones may belong to the burial further south. Traces of matting and leather were recovered from this pit. Two Egyptian bowls were retrieved at the offering place located east of Tomb 7 (Offering Place A7). Both bowls were wheel made; one was a typical hemispherical bowl, while the other was painted red with a black rim - an imitation of a Nubian black topped bowl. Both of these bowls were found, both turned up-side down (**fig. 4a**). It is not clear if this offering place was attributed to Tomb 7 only. It may very well have been a communal offering place, which besides Tomb 7 served the other tombs in the surrounding area, like the tombs 2C, 3, and 5.

**Fig. 4a**  
Bowls placed in upended position were found at the Offering Place A7 near Tomb 7 at Cemetery HK27C, Hierakonpolis.



**Fig. 4b**  
Bowls found near Tomb 5 at Cemetery HK27C, Hierakonpolis.

Photos: R. Friedman. The map that is used as back ground in this illustration for Cemetery HK27C is courtesy of R. Friedman

• **Tomb 5** was simply defined by its burial shaft, however, scattered stones in area may have marked this grave, but the area was extensively disturbed and eroded. The shaft was orientated in a NW-SE direction. Its NW-end was angular while its SE-end was rounded. A few fragments of the ribs and vertebrae of an adult individual were found in this pit together with some hair and skin fragments. In association with this tomb sherds of a small 'milk-jar'

were found adorned with an incised motif of a cow (Friedman 2001: 32, fig. 4, pl. 3)<sup>3</sup>. A complete wheel made carinated bowl was recovered on the south end of the pit. Sherds from Nubian black topped ware were found scattered on the surface of this tomb and in its surrounding area. Just North of Tomb 5 a cup with red slip and a Nile B bowl were deposited. Both of these vessels were placed upside-down (fig. 4b).

• **Tomb 23** was marked by a mud-brick circle which constituted the remains of the superstructure. Beneath this structure an angular burial pit was located, orientated NE-SW. Tomb 23 belonged to a child. A small funerary chapel was annexed to the northern side of the tumulus.

On the east side of this tomb a Black Topped bowl was found. This bowl, which may have been turned upside-down, had been 'killed' intentionally since a hole was clearly made in the bottom (fig. 5). Furthermore, this bowl was surrounded by burned material and was partly burnt itself, which may point to some kind of ritual. The eastern edge of the mud-brick circle showed three gaps, which may potentially have been placements for offering-vessels. Additionally, it should be noted that remnants of charcoal and ashes were discovered in this area.<sup>4</sup>

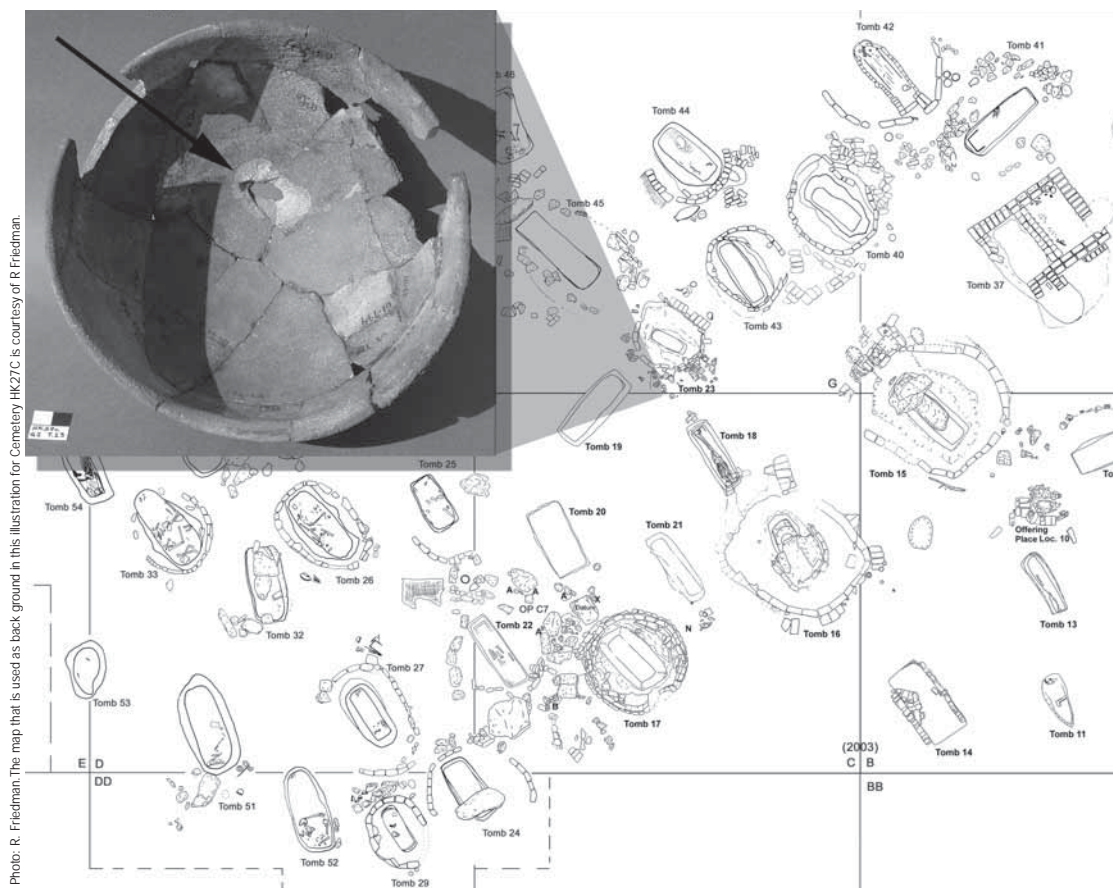


Fig. 5

A 'Killed' bowl was found on the east side of Tomb 23 at Cemetery HK27C, Hierakonpolis.

Photo: R. Friedman. The map that is used as back ground in this illustration for Cemetery HK27C is courtesy of R. Friedman.

3. Friedman (2007) has pointed out that in 1907 another sherd which clearly belongs to this 'milk-jar' was retrieved by Henri de Morgan at the site that was then believed to be a pre-dynastic settlement; however, which is now recognised as the C-Group Cemetery HK27C (for further notes see Needler 1984: 388-389, pl. 88, fig. 46).

4. Personal comm. Friedman 2006. Information from the field notes recorded during the field season November 2003.

### **Some thoughts on the rituals and symbolism behind the funeral objects**

Among the rituals that mark the life-stages of a person, the funerary and the post-funerary rites should be seen as the final and most striking transformations that mark the segregation of the deceased from the community of the living. Nonetheless, by passing through this transformation the person still plays a significant role in the community, and the relationship is still upheld; however, now manifested as funeral rituals and/or as an ancestor cult. Thus, the deceased is reincorporated back into the community but now in the shape of a forefather, a ghost, or a spirit (Van Gennep 1960 [1909]: 213-221; Fowler 2004: 80-81). Similar to gift exchange among living people, which strengthens the social and political bonds, the gift exchange that is performed at the funeral between the surviving relatives and the dead person consolidates the connection between generations and furthermore upholds, and at the same time renegotiates, the relationship between the living and the ancestral realm. Additionally, Chris Fowler advocates that through the rites of passage, which outline transitions between different life stages, the person involved is applied with 'a new set of personhood'. Like these different life-changes death is yet another change into a new set of personhood (Fowler 2004: 80-81). Fowler explains this transformation as follows:

*'Rites of passage are sacred arenas in which the person passes from one set of relations to another. These delimit dramatic changes in personal identity due to a shift in the relations with other persons'* (Fowler 2004: 79-80).

### **The use and symbolism of mortuary pottery in a C-Group context**

The pottery found in C-Group cemeteries was mostly placed on the ground surface near the tumulus, leaning up against its exterior wall. However, occasionally pottery was deposited at offering places, and during the later phases of the C-Group ceramics were often deposited in the burial shaft or in the funeral chapel (Emery & Kirwan 1935: 482; Bietak 1968: taf. 1-18; Nordstöm *apud* Säve-Söderbergh 1989a: 154-156).

As stated earlier, mortuary material of the C-Group is very likely to have held multiple symbolic elements. Since pottery is the most common type of artefact found in archaeological contexts in general and in the mortuary material of the C-Group specifically, I here wish to draw attention to how we could interpret the symbolic use of pottery in a ritual context. First, allow me to give a brief summary of the pottery found in direct context or near to the graves with which we are dealing in this article.

Among ceramic vessels found in connection with Grave T38 at Adindan the incised Nubian bowl ceramic item had been placed in an upside-down position, whereas the other vessels were all placed upright.

Three inverted bowls of Nubian fabrication were discovered in connection with Grave T230 at Cemetery T, Adindan. These bowls had all been deposited on the north eastern side of the tumulus. Two of these bowls were decorated with incised diamond designs and cattle motifs, respectively.

The pottery corpus from the C-Group Cemetery HK27C has preliminarily been analysed and published by Dr. Serena Giuliani (Giuliani 2004: 52). Most of the pottery that was discovered near Tomb 17 was clustered beneath the boulders of the offering places A, B, and X. At offering places A and B surrounding Tomb 17 small to medium Egyptians jars of Marl A3 had



been deposited (Giuliani 2004: 54). In the same area of the cemetery Middle Kingdom jars with trefoil rim were found. Furthermore, a medium sized, carinated bowl of Nile B ware was placed at offering place X (Giuliani 2004: fig. 6.d; h; Personal comm. Friedman in May 2006). Both, at offering place A near Tomb 17 and in connection with the tumulus of Tomb 23, there are strong indications of the fact that Nubian bowls of red slipped-black topped ware had been ritually 'killed':

It is not quite clear whether the offering places A, B, and X were in fact part of Tomb 17 or whether these offering places served the neighbouring tombs 20 and 22. A third suggestion could be that these three offering places were in fact shared between these three tombs. We are confronted with the same interpretational problem when dealing with the Offering Place A7, which in addition to Tomb 7 might have been serving the tombs 2C, 3, and 5 as well.

Additionally, it should be noted that the practice of placing bowls in an upside-down position has been observed in ancient Nubia in periods earlier, and contemporary than that of the C-Group. For instance, inverted vessels are known from the A-Group.

In 1962 Hans-Åke Nordström excavated Cemetery SAS- 6-G-18, located on the West bank in the Wadi Halfa reach, between Gezira Dabarosa and Buhen. In the unlooted A-Group section of this large site 31 pots were found deposited in an inverted position, 21 cups and bowls and 10 large dishes. Some specimens of the former category were inverted on top of storage jars of various kinds. The remainders were found in-situ below and around the body of the deceased (Nordström 2006: 5). In some grave shafts, Nos. 50 and 56 for example, there were several of vessels.

At the royal necropolis at Kerma some of the tumulus structures were well equipped with inverted vessels. On the eastern side of a tumulus dated to *Kerma Ancien* no less than 18 bowls were found placed upside-down (Bonnet 1986: pl. 14; 2004: 82, pl. 64).

### **Pottery: An objectification of the human body and a mediator of social identity**

The relationship which connected the kin with the deceased is mediated by the items deposited by the mourners. In that sense grave-finds, when occurring in an archaeological context, should be viewed as a 'frozen picture' displaying and demarcating the funeral ceremony. In the C-Group burial context the pottery is among the most frequently occurring types of artefacts.

Louis Keimer noted that the C-Group people used identical motifs on pottery decoration and on anthropomorphic figurines of clay (Keimer 1948: 16, 37, 39, fig. 33-36). These figurines are characteristic in the later phases of C-Group and they have been found at both cemeteries and at habitation sites (Bietak 1968: 112; Emery & Kirwan 1935: fig. 83,5; Steindorff 1935: taf. 71-72; 94; Säve-Söderbergh 1989b: pl. 66; Williams 1983: pl. 103). Most of these figurines were female figurines adorned with steatopygia, though a few male figurines have been retrieved at Cemetery T, Adindan and at Cemetery N, Aniba (Williams 1983: pl. 103; Steindorff 1935: taf. 72, 21). Most often these figurines were decorated with rows of punctuations either displaying patterns of standing diamonds or quadrilateral designs, which were placed on either their front torso, on their pelvis, or on their legs. This may indicate that the body decorations on these figurines either imitated scarification or tattoo marks. This decorative program is similar to the incised diamond designs which were



Fig. 6

Examples of identical decoration program used on vessels, on figurines, and on the human body. From left to right: A C-Group bowl from Cemetery 262 at Abka, Shirgondi (from Säve-Söderbergh 1989B: pl. 27.5); a C-Group jar from Cemetery 179 at Serra East (from Säve-Söderbergh 1989B: pl. 29.3); a figurine from grave T51 at Cemetery T, Adindan (from Williams 1983: pl. 103a-b. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago), and tattoos on a female body Tomb 9 at Cemetery HK27C at Hierakonpolis (from Friedman 2004: 24 in courtesy R. Friedman). All four pictures has been combined and the 'close up circles' have been added by Steffensen 2007.

used for decorating bowls as well as jars.<sup>5</sup> During the Archaeological Survey of Nubia Cecil M. Firth recorded some well preserved human remains proving that body decoration was actually practiced among C-Group people. At Cemetery 110, at Kubban Firth discovered the remains of an adult woman whose abdomen bore tattoos<sup>6</sup>, and moreover Firth revealed a number of bodies with well preserved skin displayed tattoo marks.<sup>7</sup>

At the Cemetery HK27 at Hierakonpolis, Friedman discovered an adult female bearing tattoo marks. The tattoos of this woman were very elaborate and included a lattice of dots arranged in quadrilaterals running along her abdomen and up over her hip, a zigzag line on the front of the torso, and a diamond pattern of short dashed lines on her left hand (Friedman 2004: 47-50, fig.2). Henriette Hafaas argues that the C-Group women, whom she suggests the C-group potters constituted, invented and incised the decoration program on both the pottery and on their bodies (Hafaas 2006: 103). However, it is my intention to bring this argument even further: regardless of the vessel shape, the C-Group people viewed some pottery, when used within the context of the mortuary cult, as a material metaphor for the human body (fig. 6).

The ethnographic studies of recent mortuary rituals practiced in Africa and Asia may provide us with usable tools by means of which ritual and cult practices can be interpreted on the basis of funerary material displayed in the archaeological contexts.

The metaphorical link between the pot/container and the human body is used among various population groups all over the African continent. Besides its practical purpose as a container, both on daily basis and during special occasions, 'the pot' can be associated with the body and spirit of living people as well as the embodiment of forefathers. I shall here present some ethnographic examples where pots and other objects used in funeral ceremonies or ancestor cults was being closely associated with the human body.

Among the Mafa and the Bulahay people who live in the Mandara highlands in the northern Cameroon, pots are not only defined by their practical purposes, they are also strongly associated with the human body and the human spirits or other spirits of either morphological or divine nature (David, Sterner & Gavua 1988: 365-389). Mafa and Bulahay people describe the pots as having a mouth, necks, bodies, navels, lower parts (*i.e.* bases), arms (*i.e.* handles), and occasionally a stylized penis appears on male ancestor pots; female ones have breasts and a vulva (David, Sterner & Gavua 1988: 371). Furthermore this association of the pot with the human body can in some cases also be applied to body ornamentation. The Mafa and the Bulahay men are adorned with certain motifs of millet grain, which are displayed as scarification on their bodies. Such body decorations serve to protect their 'owner' against evil spirits. Likewise, men's meat pots and soul pots are adorned with appliqué pellets which

5. See Bietak 1968: 110 (type: II/b/13); 111 (type: II/b/18); Steindorff 1935: taf. 48; Junker 1926: taf. XIX.263-268; XV.159, 160, 164, 167; Firth 1912b: pl. 40a.3; Firth 1915: pl. 29c.7; 39.3-5; 33c.4, 10-11; 40; Emery & Kirwan 1935: fig. 190.2; 272.1; Langdorff *apud* Steindorff 1935: taf. 91s. 116-118; MacIver & Woolley 1909: pl. 12.4188-4190; 11a. 4143, 4145, 4155, 4157; Säve-Söderbergh 1989b: pl. 7.262/5:1; 7.179/77:01; 14.179/4:03; 27.5; 29.3; Williams 1983: pl. 18.E; 58.F. As rows of puncturations arranged in quadrilateral patterns see Williams 1983: pl. 63.A; 70.c

6. Firth 1927: 50-51, 54. Firth noted that the skin of this woman's abdomen was decorated with tattoo marks identical that were comparable to the designs used for the clay figurines of the C-Group (see Firth 1927: 54).

7. For further references see Keimer 1948: 16, footnote 1.

symbolize the millet grain which by the Mafa and the Bulahay is viewed as having a prophylactical function helping to protect the contents of these pots.<sup>8</sup>

The Yungur people of the north-eastern Nigeria make special anthropomorphic ceramic vessels called '*Wiiso*' which serve as portraits of their forefathers and as containers for ancestral spirits of once-living male Yungur leaders (Berns 1990: 50-60). Every vessel is adorned with a head, a face (including mouth, nose and eyes), a neck, arms etc. Each Yungur hamlet has one or more ancestral shrine enclosures in which these *Wiiso*-vessels are kept. These shrines demarcate the ground on which the relationship between Yungur people and their ancestors is formed. Essential for the annual pre-planting *Mama*-festival is the brewing of beer, which is shared by the ancestors and the Yungur. On behalf of their communities, the Yungur headmen make, during the *Mama* festival, special appeals to the creator god, Leura, and the ancestral realm for sufficient rainfall and good harvest (Berns 1990: 51-52, 56; **fig. 7**).



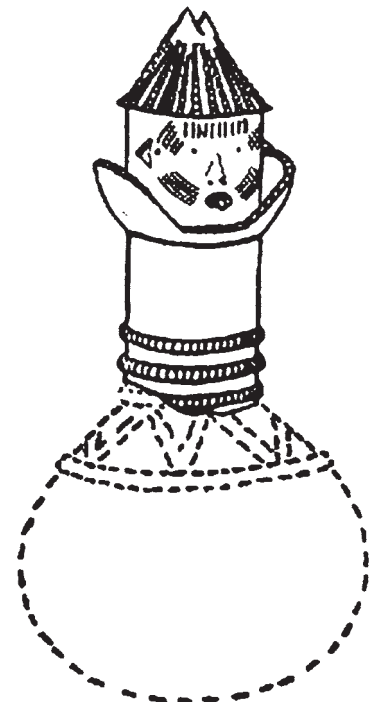
Photo: M. Berns.

**Fig. 7**

Two *Wiiso*-vessels from an ancestral shrine in north-eastern Nigeria. These vessels contain the spirits of the deceased chiefs of the Dola lineage (From Berns 1990: fig. 6. Courtesy of Maria Berns).

**Fig. 8**

Pot from the Zure Hill in the Dakakari Area, Nigeria. (From FitzGerald 1944: fig. 11A).



The *Wiiso*-vessels operate as mediators between the Yungur and their ancestors. Thus, the *Wiiso*-vessel legitimizes the power of Yungur headmen and symbolically structures the relationship between lineages and between the living Yungur and their ancestors. These vessels are actively functioning as custodians of the social and cosmological order of the Yungur communities (Berns 1990: 60).

In the Dakakari Area in Nigeria the Lilawa and Lelna people deposit pots at their burial grounds either as funerary gifts or as cult gifts. Some of these 'grave-pots' represent either human or animal bodies with body elements attached, such as limbs, faces (with nose and mouth), and phallus etc (FitzGerald 1944: 43, 49-51, fig. 11-12; **fig. 8**).

<sup>8</sup> David, Sterner & Gavua 1988: 373-375 The 'millet grain' motif used in the pottery decoration of Mafa and Bulahay people represent the hair of the Zhikile God, which is considered to be the fruitful millet harvest and visa versa (David, Sterner & Gavua 1988: 374).



Fig. 9

Zanlenga, the fiber net that holds a woman's calabash bowls, is an important symbol of marriage and the female domain; it figures significantly in her burial rituals (From Smith 1989: fig. 11).

For the Gurensi people who belong to the Frafra Culture of north-eastern Ghana the potter is viewed as having a special relationship with the Earth from which the potter's clay derives. For the Gurensi, the notion of 'container' constitutes multiple facets, since it not only involves ceramic vessels, but it can also be used for domestic rooms, granaries, shrines, and grave shafts. All these forms are constructed of clay or Earth. '*The Earth is considered as a beneficent deity, a mystical force distinct from its manifestation as soil*' (Smith 1989: 60). For the Gurensi people all these products of Earth constitute a single conceptual scheme which mediates the belief that the Earth itself is also a container holding the life-sustaining forces which operate both in 'the land of the ancestors' and in 'the land of the living'. Along with the Gurensi's ancestors, the Earth is a critical regulating force which keeps the social and religious system in balance (Smith 1989: 60-65). The decorations applied on the Gurensi pottery are indeed associated with the personhood of the pot-owner. Like the net design, called *Zanlenga*, which imitates the fibre net that holds a woman's bowls. This '*Zanlenga net-design*' is painted on the calabash bowls of women only and symbolizes marriage and the female domain (Smith 1989: 64; **fig. 9**). Other decorative motifs are used for pottery, such as *tana*, which imitates the stripes of cloth that are sewn together in the making of the men's smocks<sup>9</sup>. Among the Gurensi, the potter is seen as being able to influence nature spirits who are metaphorically connected to the Earth and ancestors (Smith 1989: 65).

The reason that I have chosen to include ethnographic references in this paper is not because I wish to draw a direct parallel between the ancient Nubian C-Group population and modern population groups in Africa. However, by comparing the archaeological material with the knowledge that we can gain from the ethnographic record we may be able to read some of the underlying mechanisms/symbolism hidden in the archaeological material. In the case of the C-Group's 'mortuary pottery' there is nothing which indicates that certain ceramic types were associated with a specific gender nor is there anything pointing to special genres of pottery being connected to certain age-groups. However, when we consider the strong similarities in the decorative designs of standing diamonds or quadrilateral designs that were used for decorating pottery, figurines, and as actual human body ornamentation, it may suggest that the C-Group people viewed some of the pots, when used in a mortuary context, as an objectification of the human body, perhaps not associated with a specific gender but rather with the human body as a general notion. Naturally, one can not conclude that pots in general when created by the potter were meant as a direct metaphor for the human body, since incised C-Group pottery was adorned with other motifs than those of diamonds and quadrilateral designs, such as motifs of triangles, checkers designs in horizontal and curving lines, and in a few cases C-Group vessels were even decorated with motifs of cattle. None of these motifs are attested as decorations on figurines or as tattoos for the human body. Moreover, at some C-Group cemeteries, like HK27C, Egyptian pottery was to a large extent used as grave gifts or cult offerings – pottery which originally served other functions and originally was attributed with another symbolism. Nevertheless, we still have to cope with the fact that

9. Among the Gerensi people the *tana* generally refers to the state of well-being and success, but furthermore these garments symbolize skin of important men; it contains them and defines them. The *tana* decoration is on the upper body of the vessel, like the smock is worn on the upper part of the body (Smith 1989: 64).

several pots from C-Group burial sites, regardless of their shape, decoration, and origin, were intentionally placed in distinct ways. The strong similarities in the decorative designs of diamonds or quadrilateral designs that are used for pottery, for figurines, and for actual human body ornamentation may exemplify the metaphorical link between vessel, figurine, and human body. Pottery, when used as grave gifts or cult gift for the ancestors, was reincorporated into a 'new' context. There, besides their practical functions the vessels had other metaphorical associations.

Just as the body was viewed as a physical object bounded by its skin so was the vessel-container that was bounded by its clay-surface and in that sense both the body and the vessel were defined by their bounding surface that holds substance. This metaphorical link between on one side the human body and on the other side the container, which both are physically bordering the 'internal' and the 'external', has been expressed very lucidly by Lakoff and Johnson:

*'We are physical beings, bounded and set off from the rest of the world by the surface of our skins, and we experience the rest of the world as outside us. Each of us is a container, with a bounding surface and an in-out orientation. We project our own in-out orientation onto other physical objects that are bounded by surfaces. Thus we also view them as containers with an inside and outside'* (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 29).

Objects should be viewed as the media through which mindsets are 'actively communicated'. Objects embody and reproduce these cultural habits and social features by creating a worldview in which we know ourselves and the world we live in (Tilley 1989: 188; 2006: 60-73; Hodder 1982b: 10.). Therefore I suggest that mortuary pottery served not just as containers and as grave gifts, but moreover, it was considered as components of groups' and persons' identity and thereby pottery like other objects were actively mediating the social and cosmological structure of the society in which they were created and used. It is within this hypothetical scheme that we shall interpret the practice and the use of pottery found in C-Group grave context.

### **'Killing the pot or turning it upside-down': Objectification of the human body – some cases from the archaeological and the anthropological records**

The practice of intentionally breaking or 'killing' items, or in other ways of 'making items unusable' has been an essential part of mortuary rituals and ancestor cults in many different time-periods and in various cultures around the World. The motivation behind such ritual practice can indeed be multiple. Nevertheless, as we shall see most often the destruction of items at the burial ground is to be associated with the 'decay' and transformation of the deceased. However, here we shall first see how this practice occurs in an archaeological context of the mortuary material of the C-Group.

Certain types of pottery were placed in and around the grave in a different way from others, for example, one bowl might have been 'killed' while other pots were left intact. As previously mentioned the treatment of black topped bowls which were found at each of the Tombs 17 and 23 (**fig. 5**) at Cemetery HK27C, Hierakonpolis, suggests that they had both been ritually 'killed'. In both cases the hole in the bottom of these bowls was intentionally made from the interior. An identical practice was recorded at the C-Group Cemetery 176 at Deberia East where the Scandinavian Joint Expedition discovered a number of pilgrim

bottles of Egyptian fabrication, nearly all of which had been 'killed' in the base (Säve-Söderbergh 1989a: 203). Additionally, at Serra East Cemetery B, the Oriental Institute Sudan Expedition recorded that most of the Nubian incised bowls dated to the late C-Group had been deliberately smashed, while the black topped bowls which were placed nearby were left intact (Williams, Hughes & Knudstad 1993: 31; 38).

The practice of breaking items related to the deceased is well known from the ethnographic and archaeological records.

In his studies of the practice of material symbolism among tribes in the Kordofan province of the Central-West Sudan, Hodder observed that the Moro and Mesakin tribes as a part of a funeral ritual broke the personal items of the deceased and afterwards placed these broken fragments on the top of the burial mound. At a grave of a person belonging to the Mesakin tribe, Hodder noted that a pot that had been placed on the top of a small mound was broken through by walking sticks (Hodder: 1982a; 164; 167; 169).

A ritual of breaking pots is also practiced among the Lodagaa people in Ghana. Here it is mainly associated with the funerals of women since it serves as an act of paying tribute to their domestic achievements (Goody 1962: 82).

Among the Gurensi people in Ghana, the woman's eating bowl 'laar' is smashed at her funeral in order to signify that she has departed from her kinsfolk. Also, the vessels which the deceased woman had used in her daily domestic activities during life are stored within her room and at the time of her funeral these vessels are broken (Smith 1989: 61). After this ritual has been performed, some of the remaining sherds are ground down to produce the grog used as temper for the making of new pots, while other sherds are placed at the ancestral shrines since they are associated with the earth (**fig. 10**). As the pots of the deceased woman are seen as a part of this woman's personhood, the remaining fragments preserve a link between the dead woman and her surviving relatives on the one hand, and on the other hand connect her to the earth. Like the body and spirit of the dead woman her pots have become part of the cosmological circle which involves birth, life, death, decaying, and resurrection. One may add that for the Gurensi people the actual term for breaking a pot is identical with the term for 'change' (Smith 1989: 61, 64).

Among the Melanesians at northern New Ireland, Papua New Guinea, the climax of the funerary ceremony is the production of a so-called Malanggan sculpture. Such a sculpture is carved out of soft wood and its height can be up to two or three metres. The Malanggan sculpture substitutes the body of the deceased (Strathern 2001: 2.). This sculpture is carved in the round, and is decorated very elaborately with engravings and painted motifs comprising different kinds of birds, insects, fish, and shells as well as mythical images (**fig. 11**). These images hold social memories and are mediating different elements and entities, which constitute the personhood of the deceased and furthermore they constitute the identity and the memories of the whole community – or in other words: *'the mask [sculpture ed.] is not the dead person's spirit; it is a skin or body for that person's spirit. The spirit is about to become an ancestor, and the body is carved into a form recognizable as ancestral to the person's clan'* (Strathern 2001:3). At the grave the images on this sculpture are destroyed by money being thrown on it. The native Melanesians call this ritual to 'strip the skin'. Afterwards, the demolished sculpture is left in the forest to decompose (Küchler 1987: 238-255; Rowland 1993: 148-151). Just as in other cultures where the 'pot' is the objectification of bodily processes, the sculpture in the Malanggan

Fig. 10

Pot sherds on the Ancestral shrine of the Gurensi in Ghana (From Smith 1989: fig. 4).



Fig. 11

Malanggan Sculpture from Papua New Guinea (From Küchler 1988: fig. 2).

ritual mediates similarly these different aspects of bodily process. The word for sculpting (*tetak*) means literally 'the making of skin', and thereby the 'killing' and the subsequent decaying of the sculpture is analogous to the body process: life, death, and decomposition (Küchler 1988: 630-632).

As suggested above, there might be indications that when the C-Group people used some pottery in funeral or cult ceremonies, it functioned as a material metaphor for the human body. The ethnological records point to the possibility of objects and animals being analogue to aspects of persons or to aspects of groups and communities. I suggest that it is within this scheme we should interpret ancient Nubian funeral material. As illustrated previously, the funeral pottery of the C-Group were deposited in accordance with their shape. Bowls were either placed upright or in an inverted position, whereas other form-types such as jars and pots were either placed upright or on their sides. This pattern of depositing vessels at the burial ground was not incidental; however, instead it seems to have been strictly followed regardless of the original place of production and date of the vessel. In that sense imported Egyptian vessels became encapsulated in a Nubian C-Group funerary or cultic context and their shapes, besides the function as containers, were considered as metaphor for the body of the deceased.

Considering that some pottery used in connection with rituals may have been understood as objectification of the human body, the ritual treatment of the pottery, either during the funeral ceremony or during the ritual of an ancestor cult, could be seen as bodily processes as well as mediators of different entities of personhood. Furthermore, we might be dealing with the fact that some vessels were made 'unusable' either by 'killing' them or by placing them in upside down positions. Bowls, like other types of pottery, are containers holding a substance, but by making a hole in the bottom of the bowl or by turning it upside-down the bowl was literally emptied of its substance. This may suggest that these bowls were regarded as a symbol of the dead and decaying body. Metaphorically the bowl was 'emptied of life' and made 'unusable' and 'dead'. By performing a ritual in which the bowl was made 'unusable', like the deceased, the bowl was disenfranchised from the community of the living.

Though other vessels, which were also found in the context of tombs, were placed either in an upright position or on their side.<sup>10</sup> As for these vessels the most obvious assumption is that they were simply funeral gifts. However, another reasonable suggestion could be that the standing vessels were placed near tumuli or at offering places at the burial ground, by the surviving kin during post-funeral ceremonies, not as grave offerings but as cult gifts attributed to the ancestors. Regardless of which interpretation we choose for these vessels - whether they served as grave offerings or whether they served as cult offerings for the ancestors, they were most likely to be considered as a gift-exchange between the kin and the deceased, but at the same time these offerings were also a manifestation of gift-exchanges between the community of living and the ancestors. Thus, these vessels were functioning as mediators by which the social structure of the community was renegotiated between these two groups.

At Cemetery HK27C at Hierakonpolis, vessels were discovered in connection with three offering places (A, B, and X) located near Tomb 17 and the offering place A7 situated near Tomb 7. It is not clear whether these offering places

10. Such as the incised C-Group jar (type II/a/23) from T38 at Cemetery T, Andindan (Williams 1983: 131-132, fig. 12, pls. 8B; 27C; 53C; 56A; 66A; 73A).

served a specific tomb or if their purpose was to serve all the tombs clustered in a specific area of the cemetery. Perhaps such offering places served as a cult place for the community to bring gifts and to give prayers to their ancestors. Such cult ritual may have been performed seasonally as a part of a feast dedicated to the ancestors. However, whether offerings of ceramic vessels or other objects had been placed in context with a tomb attributed to a single person or whether these objects were deposited in connection with communal offering places as gifts for all the ancestors, the offering ritual, when performed at the burial ground, was possibly still a way to communicate with the whole ancestral realm. Thus, the burials and the funeral ceremonies of single persons were events setting 'the scene' for the communication between two groups, namely the world of the living and the world of the forefathers.

The concept of 'individuality' as we understand it in a modern western sense cannot be applied to ancient cultures. This does not mean that the ancient Nubians were not individuals. However, the identity/ies of each single person may have been closely associated with the community as a whole.

The term 'dividual' was introduced by McKim Marriott in his studies of the social structure of the Hindu-society in India (Marriott 1976: 111). Marilyn Strathern later employed the notion of 'dividuality' in her ethnographic research of the Melanesian people (Strathern 1988: 13-14). Here Strathern argues that a person's identity is formed through the social relations with other persons. By creating and/or consolidating social relations, for instance manifested as a gift-exchange between people (an exchange of physical objects), components of identities are exchanged. Thus, the persons involved in such transaction are imbued with components of identity from the other members of the community (Strathern 1988: 13-14). In this light physical things are seen as objectifications of identity/ies, and in that sense each 'dividual person' holds constituents of the entire community.<sup>11</sup> Fowler has successfully adopted the concept of 'dividuality' in order to understand the mechanisms mediated in the exchange of objects when viewed in an archaeological context.<sup>12</sup>

Ancient C-Group communities may to some extent have been similar to the segmentary systems which are known among the present Nilotes in the Southern Sudanese basin, where tribal systems consist of a net of kinships connected by common agnatic ties between descendents of the same ancestor.<sup>13</sup> The structure of such a system may have been what Lévi-Strauss has recognised as 'House Societies' which he defined as:

*'a corporate body holding an estate made up of both material and immaterial wealth, which perpetuates itself through the transmission of its name, its goods and its titles down a real or imaginary line, considered legitimate as long as this continuity can express itself in the language of kinship or of affinity and, most often of both'* (Lévi-Strauss 1982: 174).<sup>14</sup>

11. For further discussion see Fowler 2004: 23-42.

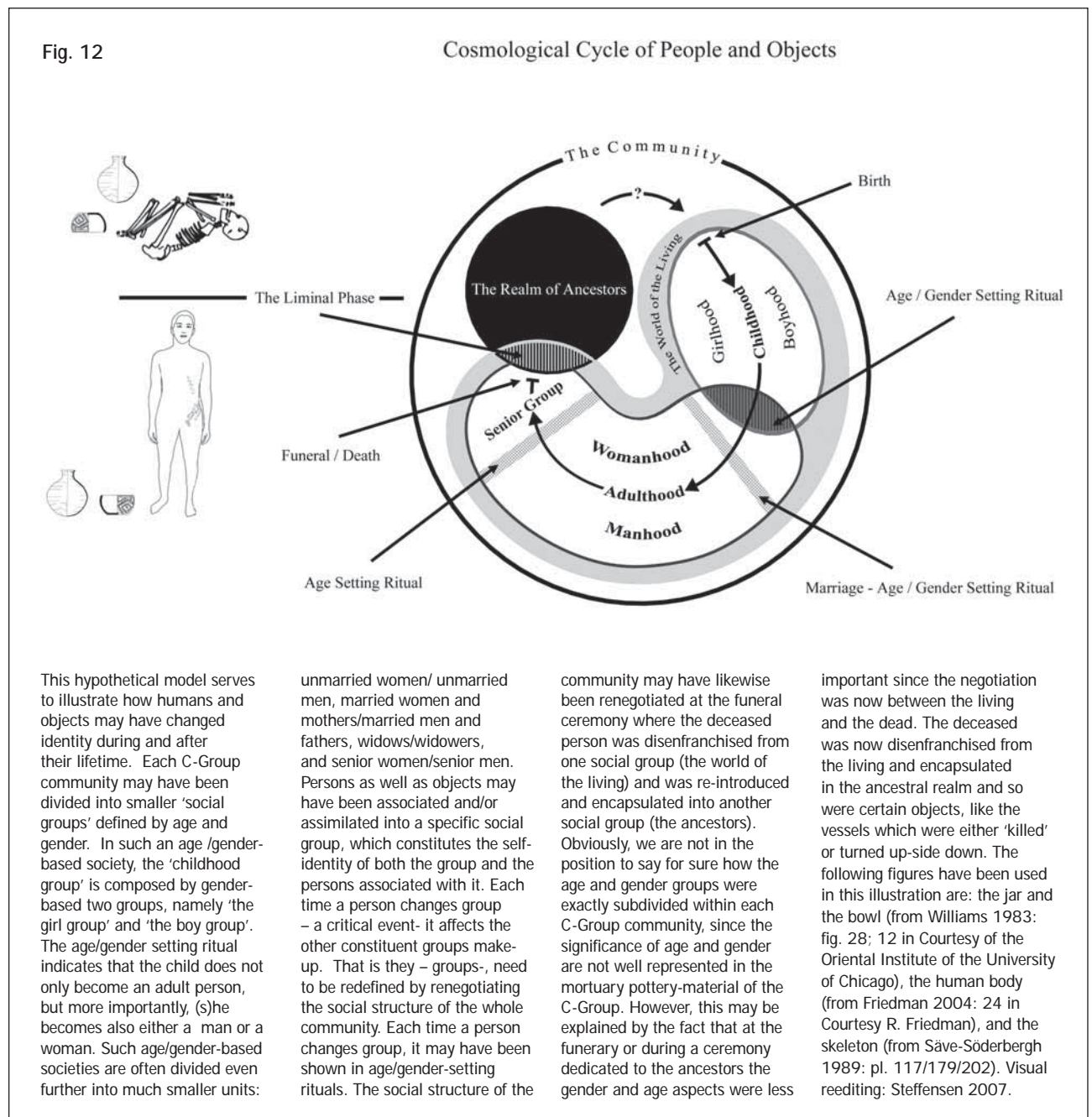
12. Fowler points out that: 'the tension between individuality and community is not always the most relevant tension in a fractal world where the community is internalized in each person, and each person may contain a part of another' (Fowler 2004: 159).

13. Middleton & Tait 1958: 12-15. Like the Nuer tribes, among which each tribe can be defined by a primary tribal group (*Maximal lineage*) that is segmented into secondary tribal groups (*Major lineage*), which are further segmented into tertiary groups (*Minor lineage*) that are finally composed of a number of villages consisting of extended families (*Minimal lineage*) (See Evans-Pritchard 1940:139.)

14. More recently Jan Kuijt has used the definition of 'House' by Levi-Strauss in order to envision the social structure of the Neolithic society in the Levant during the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (Kuijt 2000: 140).



Each C-Group community may very well have been segmented into social groups that were defined by their lineage, age and gender. Persons as well as objects and animals were associated and incorporated into a specific social group; hence self-identity was strongly associated with the group to which a person belonged. The internal social structure of the community was based on the relationship between these groups. So when a person passed from one group into another group (e.g. when a juvenile male was passing from boyhood into manhood), the different groups had to redefine themselves by renegotiating the social structure of the whole community. Such critical events were manifested as age and gender setting rituals. The social structure of the community was likewise renegotiated at the funeral ceremony where the de-



ceased person was disenfranchised from one social group (the world of the living) and was re-introduced and encapsulated into another social group (the ancestors) (see the model presented in **fig. 12**). The offering rituals, which were both connected to the funerary ceremony and to the ancestor cult, constituted gift-exchanges from which both of these groups benefited. While the deceased and the ancestors were endowed with grave-gifts and cult offerings, the community of the living people prospered with health and fertility. Therefore, grave objects should be seen not only as personal items, but rather as media serving to uphold the relationship across the liminal zone which divided these two groups.

### **Concluding remarks**

As stated previously, like their human owners, objects were considered as social components or entities of groups; components which were disenfranchised from one group and re-incorporated into the next group as circumstances dictated. In the ceremonies of the funerary or ancestor cult vessels in general, killed or intact, placed upright or inverted, intervening the gift-exchange between the deceased and/or the ancestor and the living people. In that sense even a funeral of a single person sets the arena in which the living and the ancestors renegotiate and consolidate their relationship to the prosperity for both parties and thereby for the community as a whole. However, contrary to the age-setting rituals that served to redefine a person's affiliation to an age and/or gender domain, funeral/cult rituals created the ground on which the relationship between two parties, namely that of the living people and their ancestors was renegotiated, and in this context the aspects of age and gender were less important. This may explain why the significance of age and gender are not represented in the mortuary pottery-material of the C-Group. Thus, the bodily symbolism that was applied to vessels did not involve any sexual attributes. The ritual use of some vessels, those killed or placed up-side down, suggest that these vessels mediate different stages and aspects of the human body and spirit – living, dying, decaying, and ancestral.

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