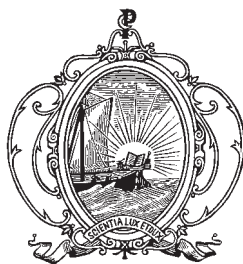


ABYDOS:
THE SACRED LAND AT THE WESTERN HORIZON

edited by

Ilona REGULSKI



PEETERS

LEUVEN – PARIS – BRISTOL, CT

2019

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SERVING THE DEAD: SOME THOUGHTS ON CHANGES IN CULTIC DEPOSITS AT ABYDOS FROM THE LATE OLD KINGDOM TO THE EARLY MIDDLE KINGDOM

Christian KNOBLAUCH¹

Abstract

The University of Michigan Abydos Middle Cemetery Project has excavated a wealth of data that sheds light on private offering cults from the late Old Kingdom to the early Middle Kingdom. This paper presents preliminary insights into the study of pottery assemblages resulting from the performance of such cults and examines how the data may be used to reconstruct rituals which are otherwise principally known from their architectural setting and textual sources. Key questions that the paper will address are whether the performance of offering cults changed over time, and if so, in what ways? The paper also considers how we might understand these changes in the light of social and religious processes at a local and supra-regional level.

Introduction

Egyptian tombs were the focal point for a variety of different rituals. From a textual and iconographic perspective they can be classified temporally as rituals performed in the context of the burial (funerary rituals), and rituals performed post-burial (mortuary rituals). Identifying these different ritual stages in the archaeological record, however, is notoriously difficult. The case of burial equipment in a closed tomb chamber or a back-filled shaft is relatively (but not always) straightforward, while material found in accessible areas of the tomb, for example a tomb-chapel or an adjacent courtyard, is less easily classified for the obvious reasons that both funerary and mortuary rituals were performed in these same parts of the tomb and cannot be distinguished from one another reliably on the basis of their material remains. This is especially problematic as many aspects of their performance overlapped. For this reason archaeologists working in Egypt often employ a simplified, spatially based dichotomy between

so-called ‘burial goods’ (that is, objects placed in the burial chamber with the deceased) and ‘cult’ objects (found associated with the superstructures of the tomb [i.e. Seiler 1995, Bárta 2003]). While such a dichotomy is obviously artificial, it is one that can be dispensed with only in exceptional circumstances, and thus it is employed here.

In spite of this clear distinction in theory, there are a number of practical difficulties in dealing with such deposits. Firstly, it must be acknowledged that cult objects found in context rarely, if ever, represent the entirety of evidence for ritual activities in a cult structure, but rather a conscious selection of waste generated by the cult for deposition at the tomb by those performing rituals. In every case it should be assumed that these waste deposits provide only an incomplete and biased (as opposed to representative) picture of cult activity. Furthermore, as cult structures were ‘open’, not everything found in association with them need be ‘cultic’. Egyptian cemeteries, after all, were busy workplaces where craftsmen and labourers ate, drank, were paid with rations (Roth 1994) and, presumably, dumped their trash. Post-depositional processes such as tidying, robbing, recycling and modern excavation can also be expected to have altered the original composition of assemblages and resulted in secondary and tertiary deposits of material in ‘open’ structures, and thus the commingling of different deposits that may have once been spatially, functionally and chronologically unrelated. Finally, decomposition will, in most cases, have led to the disappearance of any organic items that were once part of waste deposits. For these reasons, when we talk of ‘cult deposits’ in Egyptian archaeology, more often than not we really mean utilitarian or coarse ceramic vessels lying in disorderly heaps around a tomb superstructure, or in rare cases, in a clear primary context.

¹ ‘Beyond Politics, Material Culture in Second Intermediate Period Egypt and Nubia’ (FWF-Y754-G19), OREA, Austrian

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This paper gives a first insight into the problems and possibilities of working with material of this type, drawing on the results of excavations by the University of Michigan in the Abydos Middle Cemetery (AMC) (see Richards this volume).² The chronological focus is on the late Old Kingdom to the early Middle Kingdom, a pivotal period in local history during which Abydos was transformed from a provincial centre to a cult place of national and royal significance, chiefly because of its association with the emergent cult of Osiris (O'Connor 2009; Bussmann 2010). But although thousands of tombs of this date have been excavated at Abydos since the mid-19th century (Snape 1986; Seidlmayer 1990, 352–53; Richards 2003; 2005; Yamamoto 2009–10), the number of assemblages published from cult chapels and tomb superstructures can be counted on a single hand (Yamamoto 2011). The attention paid to such assemblages, therefore, is in an inverse proportion to the importance usually ascribed to tomb-cult structures at Abydos (Simpson 1974; O'Connor 1985; Richards 2010). Such structures were not only the site of localized cults of dead relations, and in rare case distant ancestors who were revered as 'saints' (Richards this volume), but were also increasingly bound into the Abydene festive cycle of the Osiris cult during the course of the First Intermediate Period and early Middle Kingdom. This was, in part, because of the desire to be close to the god and share

in the offerings of the temple festivals, but no doubt also by the identification of the private person with the dead god and the importance of Osirian rituals for the rebirth of the deceased in the afterlife. Objects found in connection with superstructures of this date are, therefore, an almost entirely untapped resource for exploring the continuities and changes in ritual behaviour and the engagement of the living with the dead at Abydos during a period of intense political, religious and social change.

In order to make some preliminary observations on this type of material at Abydos and the types of interpretations it allows, the paper compares two major deposits of pottery from cult buildings that date to the beginning and the end of this time period: a deposit from the so-called Central Mastaba tomb built in the narrow space between the northeastern corner of the tomb of Weni the Elder and the southwestern corner of the tomb of Iuu (**Fig. 1**), which belongs to the local Phase II (late Old Kingdom–early First Intermediate Period);³ and a deposit found on the floor of a small mud-brick chapel built adjacent to the Weni mastaba (**Fig. 4**). This chapel apparently served as the focal point for funerary and mortuary rituals for individuals buried in an adjacent burial shaft complex during Phase III (late First Intermediate Pottery–early Middle Kingdom).⁴ These two phases are separated by at least half a century (if not longer), which broadly

² Special thanks are due to Lucia Hulková and Marilys Horgue for their work on the ceramics during the 2014 season, and to Geoff Compton, Korri Turner, Peter Lacovara and Janet Richards.

³ Setting the relative and chronological parameters of this phase is made difficult by the absence of well-published and dated assemblages at Abydos with which the Abydos Middle Cemetery (AMC) may be compared. Moreover, excavations in the AMC have yet to provide any evidence that anchors this phase to Egyptian dynastic chronology, other than it must postdate Phase I (Merenre to early in the reign of Pepi II) (Knoblauch 2010, 245, 250). Given that the changes visible in the ceramic corpus in relation to Phase I are of an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary nature, there is no reason to suggest that Abydos Phase II is separated from Phase I by any great length of time. One assumes that there would have been sufficient time for the development of this corpus during either the long reign of Pepi II, irrespective of whether a shorter (min. 34 years) or longer reign (min. 62/63 years) is assumed (e.g. Baud 2006, 156), or in the succeeding short Dynasty 8. Broadly similar material occurs in Phase ID in the Kom el-Sultan at Abydos (Adams 2005, 372, 376 fig. 3.5 Levels IC, ID, 412–14, 416 fig. 3.25) and at a supra-regional level in Phase I at Dendera (Marchand 2004, 214–15), Qau Phase IB (Seidlmayer 1990, 148–53), and the late Old Kingdom level in the cemetery at Elephantine (Seidlmayer 2005, 282–86, Abb. 1). While it is conceivable that Phase II

overlaps with the earliest years of the First Intermediate Period that directly followed the founding of the Herakleopolitan kingdom (Dynasties 9 and 10) before the founding of the Theban Dynasty 11 (Seidlmayer 2006, 165–67), circumstance speaks against this: the pottery of early Dynasty 11 in Thebes represents a new pottery tradition (Di. Arnold 1968; Do. Arnold 1972) that appears at Abydos in roughly contemporary contexts—our Phase III. As there are almost no points of contact in terms of style and morphology between the pottery of Phases II and III, it is reasonable to propose that they are separated by a longer, rather than shorter, period of time. Thus an earlier date for our Phase II fully within the Late Old Kingdom (second half of the reign of Pepi II–Dynasty 8) is to be preferred.

⁴ According to ceramic evidence as well as inscriptional data, Phase III was broadly coeval with the later FIP–early MK horizon in the Abydos settlement at Kom el-Sultan (Adams 2005, 392–403) and in dynastic terms it probably encompasses much of Dynasty 11 and very early Dynasty 12. Local Phase III is a period of intense building, burial and offering activity in the AMC. Not only were older tombs appropriated but the cults of local 'saints' reached a new scale (Richards this volume). At the same time, the older elite tombs of Phase I and II became the nucleus for new burial complexes and associated offering chapels (Richards 2010).

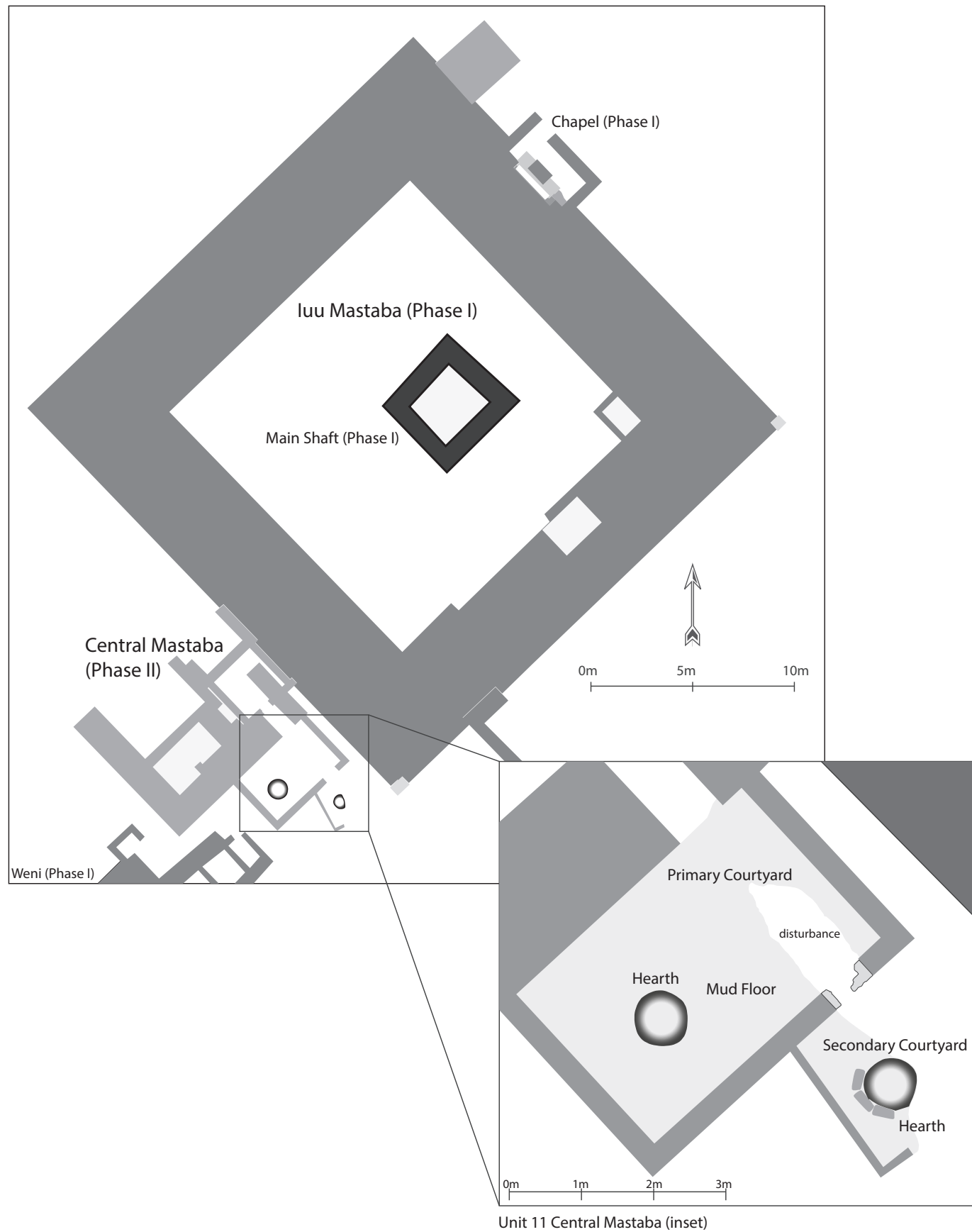


Fig. 1: The Central Mastaba. Schematic diagram by author, after G. Compton.

corresponds to a hiatus or period of less intense activity in the AMC. The identity of the chapel-owner(s) is unknown, but given the level of expenditure for the construction of the tomb structures and their placement in a politically and religiously charged area of the AMC, they were likely to have been of a considerably high status. It follows that the description of funerary and mortuary rituals given below cannot be assumed to typify the complete range of this type of activity at Abydos.

The late Old Kingdom–early First Intermediate Period horizon (local Phase II)

The pottery ‘deposit’ from the Central Mastaba is in fact a pottery-rich layer that directly abutted the ‘local’ southern exterior wall of the primary courtyard and sealed the floor of a secondary courtyard of the Central Mastaba. In total, the layer contained over 246kg of sherds that could be subdivided into two major groups on the basis of technology and ware, which in turn relate to a profound functional dichotomy within the assemblage. Around 95% of the assemblage comprises sherds that come from vessels that were roughly hand-made of a poorly sorted, coarse alluvial silt fabric. Of these, sherds belonging to cylindrical jars (**Fig. 2d–g**) used for the short-term storage and distribution of beer are the most common (beer jars, 625 diagnostic sherds) (Faltings 1998). The next most frequent pottery type are sherds belonging to moulds used for the baking of small conical loaves of bread (bread moulds, 160 diagnostics) (**Fig. 2a–c**). Fragments belonging to coarse ‘trays’ are less common. Presumably such trays were also bread moulds and were used to bake flattish oval or round-shaped loaves (Bárta 1995, 22–23; Wodzińska 2009, 218, figs 18–19).

The pottery assemblage from the Central Mastaba, therefore, consists almost entirely of vessels intended to be used in the primary production of food and the storage and distribution of drink, in particular the main staples of the Egyptian diet—bread and beer. Whether the vessels in question had actually been used to produce/store and distribute these items is unknown, but they are certainly technologically identical to vessels from contemporary settlements which had been used for these tasks. Presumably, the vessels were used as containers to deliver bread and beer to the cemetery from bakeries and breweries in the settlement on the desert edge. While the logic of this for the beer is straightforward, why the heavy moulds for bread were

used is less clear, as it would have been far easier to remove the loaves from the moulds and carry a number of them together in a sack to the cemetery. For this reason, it is worth considering whether the moulds themselves had a symbolic or iconographic character of their own independent of their (supposed) contents (see below).

The remaining c. 5% of the assemblage belongs to a separate ware group and represents a separate sphere of activity. It consists of well-made, red-slipped and polished bowls and plates of a medium fine silt fabric (**Fig. 3**). Particularly characteristic are shallow bowls with a carination below the rim—so-called Meidum Bowls (**Fig. 3c–e**). This type of bowl is ubiquitous at all Old Kingdom Egyptian settlements (e.g. at Abydos, Adams 2005, 410–16; or at Giza, Wodzińska 2009, 217) and is considered to have been intended as ‘tableware’ as it could be utilized as both a drinking cup and as a dish for serving food (Hendrickx et al. 2002, 277–79). In addition to these last there were shallow bowls with modelled (**Fig. 3a–b**) and direct rims (**Fig. 3f**) of an identical ware to the Meidum Bowls that accordingly should also be considered regular tableware.

During the sorting of the sherds, it became clear that the two main groups of pottery could be differentiated not only by ware, but also by their state of preservation, which suggests that although they were found in the same context, they may have had different depositional histories. The sherds belonging to tableware vessels usually represented only a small percentage (on average less than 7%) of a complete vessel. In comparison, the sherd material from the vessels used for drink and food production consisted of relatively large pieces that could be reconstructed to near-complete vessels. Given this difference, it may be proposed that the tableware vessels were used and broken elsewhere, and then only secondarily deposited in the courtyard of the Central Mastaba as sherds. The generally excellent state of preservation of the food production vessels, in comparison, indicates that their primary deposition probably occurred in or close to the courtyard where they were subsequently found. As such, the deposit represents two spatially and functionally distinct activities.

An important question is whether the different depositional processes that formed this layer were contemporary or not. Unusually for the AMC, where heavy mixing of material is normal, there is no material from the deposit in question that is *obviously* of an earlier or later date. This would rather suggest that the layer was

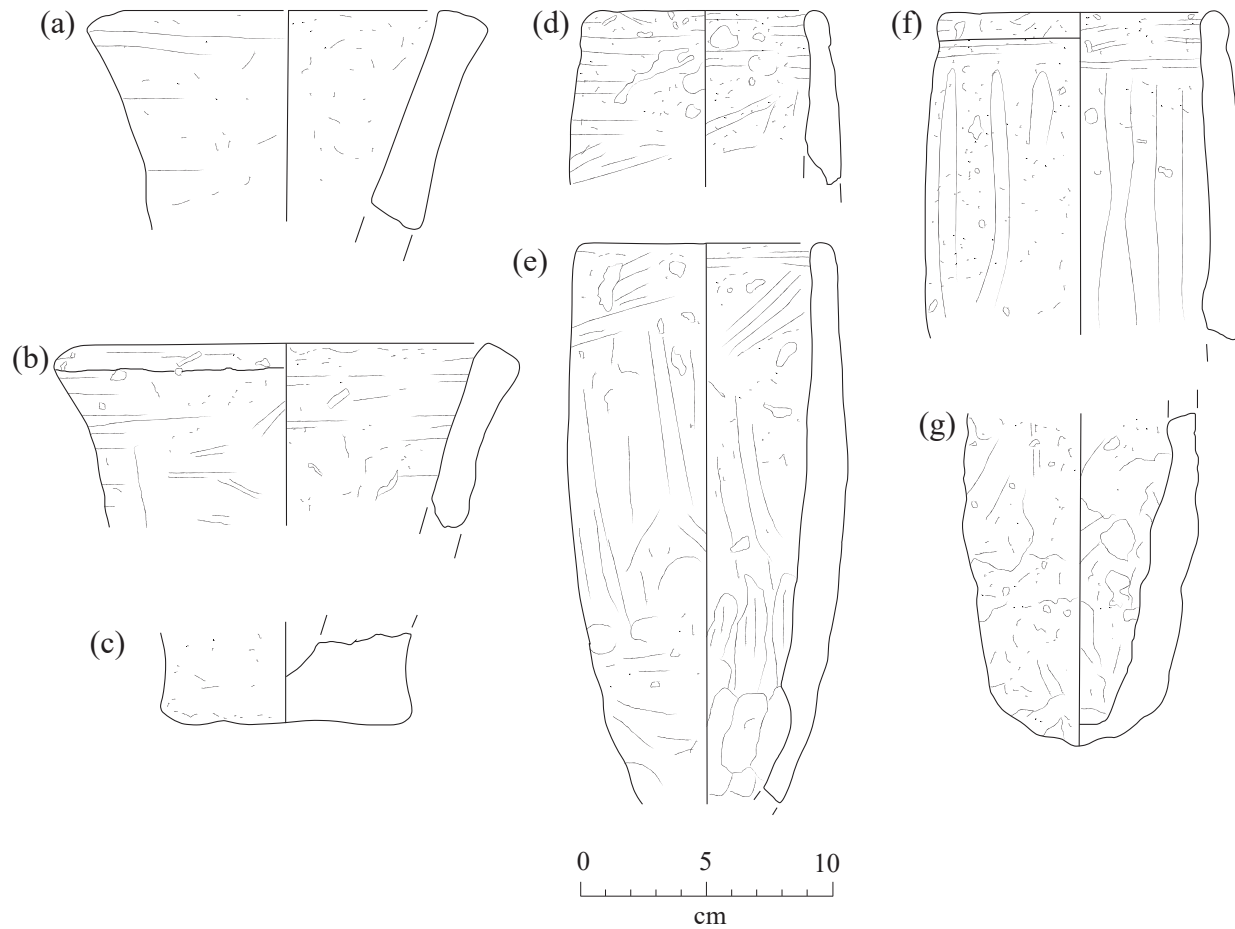


Fig. 2: Coarse wares from the Central Mastaba. Drawings by author and L. Hulková.

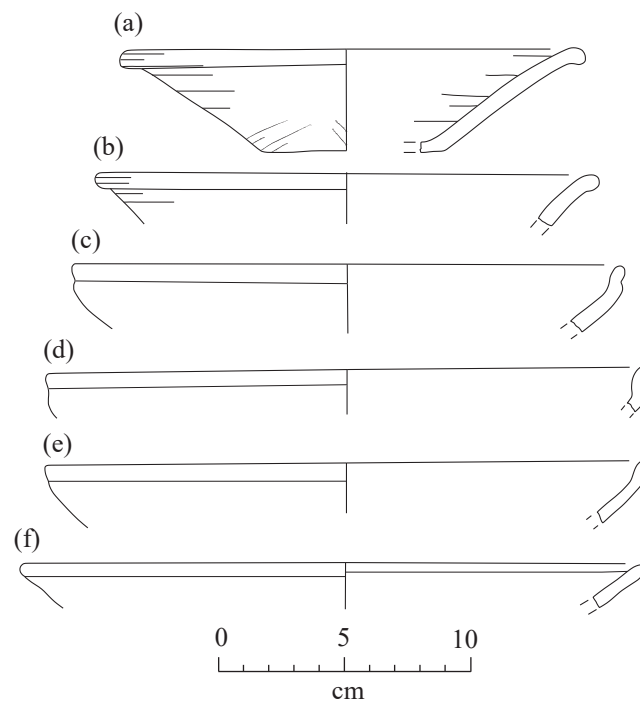


Fig. 3: Fine red-slipped wares from the Central Mastaba. Drawings by author and L. Hulková.

chronologically homogeneous and formed during a single phase of deposition. Moreover, it has been noticed that precisely the same combination of types occurs in other sealed deposits elsewhere in the AMC and comprises a coherent archaeological horizon or phase across the whole cemetery. This does not make it certain, *a priori*, that the primary activities in which the different groups of pottery were utilized were contemporaneous, but the pottery types and their chronological ranges make this a strong possibility.

Turning now to the interpretation of this deposit, both the great quantity of the pottery and the very limited number of different types indicate that the layer was primarily formed by the deliberate deposition of waste resulting from a specialized, intense and repetitive activity revolving around the supply of bread and, in particular, beer, or the supply of empty vessels routinely used for the production and delivery of these items. A non-ritual interpretation for the activities, for example the payment of craftsmen responsible for the construction of the tomb with rations of bread and beer for their labour (e.g. Roth 1994), can never be excluded. However, the fact that the pottery vessels were deposited in the secondary forecourt of the tomb and not in the fill of the tomb superstructure—where ‘workmen’s waste’ in the form of beer jars and bread moulds is usually thought to be deposited—makes it reasonable to propose that they related to the intended use of the cult chapel and courtyards (specifically their role as a focal point of funerary and mortuary rituals), not to the construction of the tomb. This major depositional activity was augmented by a less intensive re-deposition of waste created by a different type of activity utilizing tableware close by.

Taking these factors into consideration, we can propose that the presence of the beer jars and bread moulds attests to the supply of items (real or symbolic) for ritual meals that were to be offered to the deceased during the course of one or more of the various funerary and mortuary rituals (for example the ‘offering ritual’ and the ‘ritual of the opening of the mouth’) that were to be performed at the tomb. According to Old Kingdom offering lists that stipulated what was to be presented to the deceased during these meals (Barta 1968, 72–73; 1982; Lapp 1986), bread and beer were the most commonly listed items of food and drink, composing a kind of dietary basis for the dead. The connection of these two items with the concept of food offerings is so close, in fact, that the signs for bread and beer were used as determinatives for the

words that denoted the ‘supplies’ of the mortuary cult as well as the ‘offerings’ presented to the deceased (Lapp 1986, 96 Abb. 14, 15, 133). The supply of bread and beer for the deceased, of course, could be achieved through various magical and symbolic means, but the choice to use large quantities of actual bread and beer (or at the least the containers for these products) indicates that the priests employed to organize the mortuary cult in the Central Mastaba interpreted the offering ritual in a relatively direct—or ‘non-abstract’—way. This, of course, is not a new phenomenon, and represents the continuation of an ancient approach to the offering meal that was first attested in Dynasty 2 (Köhler 2003) and that continued uninterrupted throughout the entirety of the Old Kingdom. Similar concentrations of beer jars and bread moulds have been discovered *outside* contemporary tomb-chapels at Saqqara West and appear to represent the same phenomenon (Rzeuska 2003, 125), which is further evidence for similarities in some aspects of mortuary and funerary–mortuary rituals at the two sites in the late Old Kingdom (Knoblauch 2010; forthcoming).

While the beer jars and bread moulds were intimately blended with the concept of offerings (Rzeuska 2011), it should not be uncritically assumed that they were ‘offering vessels’ in the sense that they alone were employed to physically present offering meals and the other items recorded in the offering lists to the deceased. Rather, given the requirements for ritual purity of both people and objects entering ritual spaces in ancient Egypt (Grieshammer 1984), it is conceivable that some (or perhaps all) offerings were transferred to more appropriate, purified, cult utensils before they were brought into the chapel. As such, the location of the deposits of beer jars and bread moulds could be an indication that these vessels, and the servants who carried them, came this far, but no further. The decision to leave the vessels where they were probably emptied, and not take them back to the settlement, may be typical for objects used in rituals, which were afterwards deemed unsuitable for further profane or ritual use. But it is worth considering whether these discarded pottery vessels were not simply passive, but collectively ‘functional’ in the same way that two-dimensional representations of offerings on an offering stone or in offering lists on the walls of tomb-chapels were. By depositing the vessels connected to the production of bread and beer within the tomb courtyard, the intention may have been to secure the continuous supply of these vital items for the deceased in the afterlife.

It is highly unfortunate that no pottery was found inside the Central Mastaba that would enable an investigation of whether, and in what ways, the pottery assemblage from inside the cult chapel differs from the assemblage outside the mastaba. Certainly, textual and iconographic evidence suggest that there should be a difference, as the performance of the cult required an array of vessels: for example, ewers, basins and jars (Arnold 1984), incense burners and bowls (*'i* in Egyptian) (e.g. Barta 1968, 85, Wb 1, 158.13–18). An insight into what a pottery assemblage from a late Old Kingdom tomb-chapel could look like is offered by some well-preserved chapels at Saqqara West (Rzeuska 2001; 2003, 125; 2006, 474–78). The pottery assemblages there consisted almost exclusively of well-made, red-slipped and polished bowls and stands that evidently formed the permanent inventory of the cult chapel. It is interesting to note that we can observe precisely the same types of vessels (Rzeuska 2001, pls 28–29; 2003) represented by the sherds of red-slipped pottery that were recovered from the forecourt of the Central Mastaba. As such, it is a possibility that the latter fragmentary vessels were also cult utensils that had been originally used in the interior of the chapel, removed from the chapel after they had been broken, then secondarily deposited in the courtyard. If this identification were to be correct, it suggests that our terms ‘cultic utensils’ and ‘cult vessels’ do not denote items produced only for use in rituals, but rather designate ordinary, everyday vessels that were ‘ritualized’ by their use in a ritual context. Thus, amongst the pottery waste of the cult in the Central Mastaba, we cannot identify a specific ‘ritual’ class of vessel. Finally, whether the vessels were broken accidentally or perhaps deliberately—in the closing rite of the offering ritual, which included breaking red-coloured pottery (Barta 1968, 75; Seiler 2005, 170–72, 178)—must remain the object of speculation.

Although the pottery remains from the Central Mastaba do not give a complete account of the ritual activity that took place at the Central Mastaba, they nonetheless allow us insights into the nature of the performance and supply of a late Old Kingdom offering cult at Abydos, as well as how the waste produced by a cult was treated. In the first place, the pottery indicates that one of the main aims of the cult was to provide the deceased with a ‘continuous’ supply of offerings of real food and real drink (or perhaps magically through the vessels used to produce or distribute these items, presumably filled with a symbolic

substance). Of these items, beer was the most important, followed by bread. Secondly, the ways food and liquid were presented to the deceased probably reflected the way in which food and drink were presented and consumed in a living household, namely with regular tableware (rather than the coarse pots used to prepare the meal). Significantly, there do not appear to be any items produced specifically for the funerary–mortuary sphere; rather the waste created by the offering cult would not be out of place in any settlement.

These points all suggest a close correlation between the dietary and the table habits of the living and the dead at Abydos during the late Old Kingdom. These findings are largely in line with the other studies of different types of evidence for ritual engagement with the dead during the late Old Kingdom. An analysis of objects placed with burials of this period, for example, showed that these items were largely (but not exclusively) objects of ‘daily life’, as opposed to objects specifically produced for the burial (Seidlmayer 1990, 427–29). In a similar vein, the process of mummification was focused on preserving the physical appearance of the deceased through wrapping, plastering and dressing the deceased in clothes of the living (Lacovara et al. 2015), and the corpse was placed in the grave on its side in a semi-contracted pose that evokes the image of the deceased as a sleeper (Seidlmayer 2001) and ultimately death as a relatively ‘natural’ and ‘lifelike’ state. In this regard, the evidence from the Central Mastaba, which indirectly documents the (ongoing) interaction of the living with the dead, is in agreement: if the requirements of the dead were the same as those of the living, this rather indicates that there was a conceptual equivalence of death with life.

The late First Intermediate Period–early Middle Kingdom horizon (local Phase III)

The uniqueness of this approach towards the engagement of the living with the dead in the late Old Kingdom is striking when compared with the ceramic assemblage found in association with an offering chapel from Phase III that paints a different image of cult activity during this phase. The assemblage of complete vessels—201 individual pieces—was found placed on the mud pavement of the chapel ‘forecourt’ between the front wall of the chapel and the wall of the Weni mastaba, and on, or close to, the floor of the interior of the chapel in front of the offering niche (**Fig. 4; Pls 1, 2**).

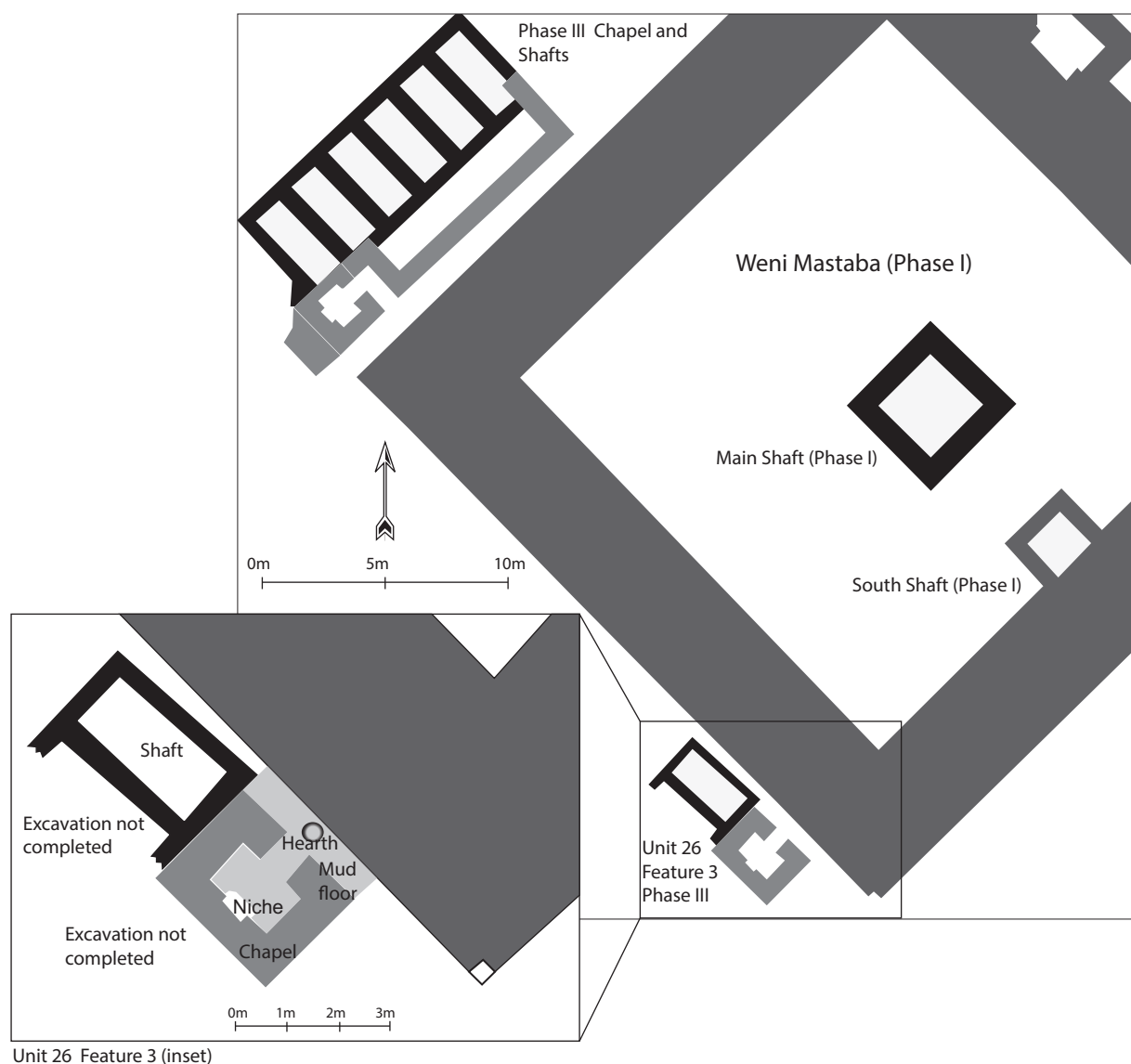


Fig. 4: Chapel in Unit 26 (Feature 3). Schematic diagram by author, after G. Compton.

The assemblage is largely characterized by new features relative to Phase II that extend far beyond stylistic and morphological change (which, given the interval between the two phases, is to be expected anyway). Significantly, vessels used for the production of actual food and drink now play only a very minor role in the overall composition of the assemblage. Bread moulds, for example, do occur but in very small numbers (less than 1%), whereas vessels probably used for the production of beer (or models of such vessels) are represented by four examples (Fig. 5c; Pl. 2 left). From this perspective, the practice of offering actual food and drink to the deceased during ritual meals gives way to new impulses and traditions.

Central to this new tradition are medium-sized drop-shaped jars which are also common in settlements and tomb assemblages at Abydos and that comprise c. 35% (70 examples) of the assemblage (Pl. 2, Pl. 3 bottom row). Given the shape and size of the vessels, they were particularly well suited for carrying small quantities of liquids (e.g. Seidlmayer 1990), and it is presumably for this purpose that they were brought to the cemetery, although at least one was partially filled with mud. Curiously, nearly all the examples of this vessel type from the vicinity of the small chapel had a very carelessly applied pale slip around the rim and neck, or in rare cases the entire body (i.e. Pl. 3 left). According to Christiana Köhler (pers. comm.) drop-shaped vessels



Plate 1: Chapel in Unit 26 (Feature 3), interior view. Photograph K. Turner.



Plate 2: Pottery from chapel in Unit 26 (Feature 3). Photograph K. Turner, G. Compton.

in the contemporary Abydos settlement at Kom el-Sultan (see also Adams 2005, 392–403) did not exhibit the distinctive surface treatment of the vessels from the AMC. Thus, while the vessel form fulfilled a function in ‘daily life’ that may have included holding beer, the examples of this vessel type from the surrounds of the offering chapel were produced specifically for use and deposition in the cemetery.

The creation of a distinctive repertoire of ‘cemetery pottery’—pottery made specifically for deposition in the cemetery—at Abydos at this time can also be observed in the small broad-shaped conical vessels with a wavy or crenellated rim (Fig. 5e; Pl. 2, Pl. 3 top right) and pointed base that comprised c. 56% of the assemblage (113 examples). Such vessels, while common in contemporary cemeteries in Upper Egypt, were not common in the First Intermediate Period settlement at Kom el-Sultan (Christiana Köhler, pers. comm.). Thus, vessels made specifically for their employment in the cemetery comprise around 90% of this assemblage (in other assemblages from the AMC it is close to 100%). Regarding the function of these conical vessels, it can be noted that they were extremely coarsely made and many were found filled with fine mud, indicating that the vessels were perhaps ‘symbolic’ or ‘model’ vessels (i.e. non-utilitarian), filled with ‘symbolic’ contents. The use of symbolic offerings of this type at Abydos is not a new invention, but can be traced back to AMC Phase I (early Dynasty 6, not discussed here), when some of the many beer jars buried in the Weni mastaba superstructure were filled to the rim with solid mud (Knoblauch forthcoming). It feels significant that the conical vessels from the chapel in Unit 26 filled with mud were made of the same coarse fabric and by exactly the same rough coiling and pinching method as these ‘beer jars’ of Phases I (and II). In fact the final products were so similar that body sherds and bases from these types can be easily confused for each other during processing. By the late First Intermediate Period, when nearly all pottery was made on the wheel, such vessels were anachronisms that may have tapped into a deeply held cultural aesthetic about how vessels traditionally associated with cult-places



Plate 3: Pottery from chapel in Unit 26 (Feature 3).
Photograph K. Turner.

should feel and look.⁵ The vessels and their contents may have simply symbolized the supply of generic ‘offerings’ to the cult, or a more specific item such as beer. It is obvious that such vessels filled with mud represented the possibility of acquiring and depositing large quantities of offerings at little expense.

The remaining 6% of the assemblage consists of vessels that *were* common in settlement contexts at Kom el-Sultan. But it is significant that many of these ‘everyday vessels’ either show traces that indicate that their use in this context was unlikely to have been identical with their intended use in daily life, or they evince modifications for their use in a ritual context.

A group of drop-shaped vessels, for example, that does not appear to have been specifically made for use in a ritual context had been painted with white decoration post-firing (Fig. 5d; **Pl. 4**), perhaps re-creating the pale slip of the ovoid vessels produced specifically for use in the cemetery mentioned above. The ‘redcoration’ of these vessels was presumably closely linked to their use in this specific context: a bowl used as a

⁵ The author, therefore, does not follow the suggestions put forward by Yamamoto in his excellent article that the vessel form is based on prehistoric vessel forms (Yamamoto 2011). Rather, according to the author they are the next-to-last manifestation of

the late Old Kingdom ‘beer jar’, reduced to a symbolic, model form. The final manifestation is the classic ‘Abydos Middle Kingdom offering cone’. The author also does not agree with Yamamoto’s suggestion that the mud-fillings are mud lids.

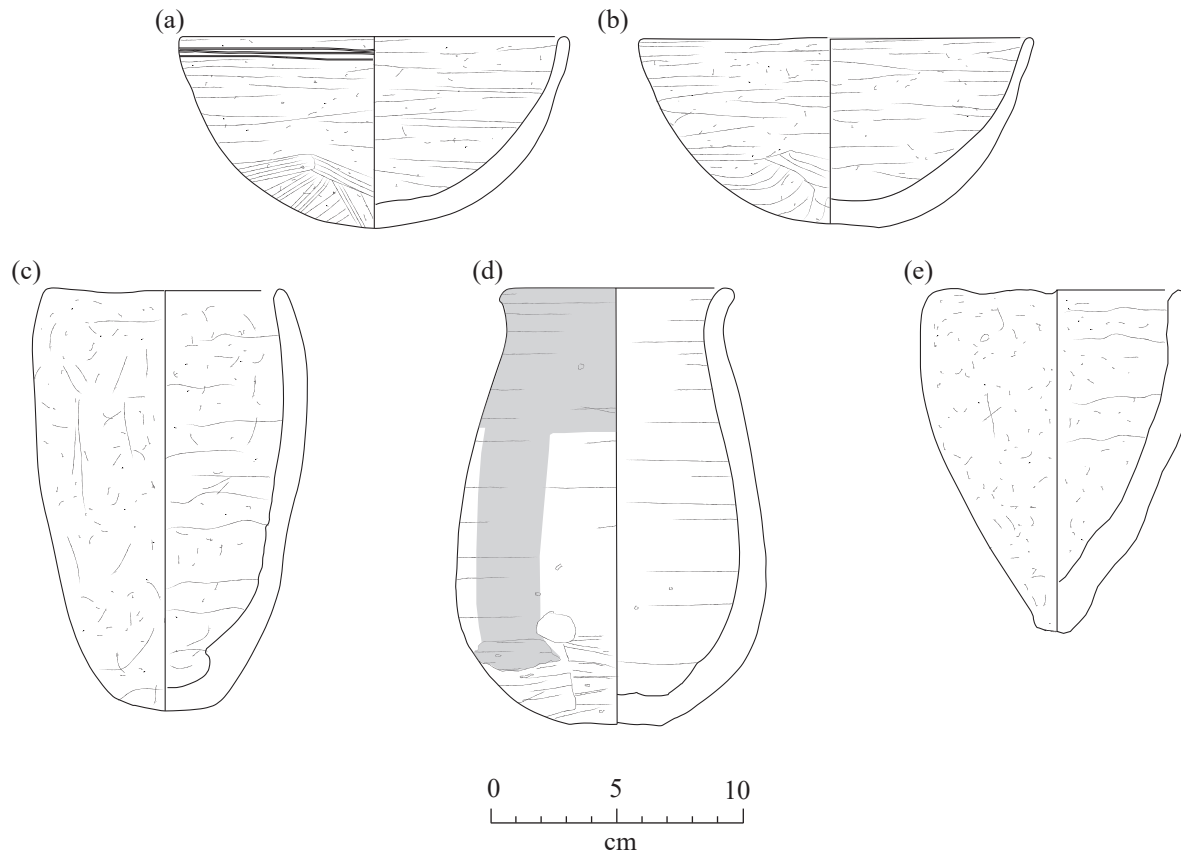


Fig. 5: Pottery from chapel in Unit 26 (Feature 3). Drawings by author and L. Hulková.

palette for white paint was found deposited in the chapel along with the other vessels (Pl. 2 at left). The use of white paint to decorate pottery used in a cultic context appears to be a tradition originating in the Memphite region during the late Old Kingdom (Rzeuska 2003), but this is so far the earliest attested case for this practice at Abydos. The colour white symbolized the purity of objects during rituals in which purity was required (Seiler 2005, 115–17) and it might be suggested that the white paint was intended to purify or rededicate profane objects for use in the rituals at the chapel, or alternatively to signify that the vessels contained a substance, for example water, that was used in libations and rituals of purification.

The other common household vessels from the cult chapel are small red-slipped bowls (Fig. 5a–b; **Pl. 5**). Such vessels were precursors of the classic Middle Kingdom ‘drinking cups’ (e.g. Seidlmayer 2005, 286–91), and they are ubiquitous in the contemporary settlement at Kom el-Sultan. However, nearly all of the vessels of this type from the chapel have very characteristic traces of burning on their interior that make it likely that they were used as incense burners, and one



Plate 4: Red-slipped jar with white-painted decoration from chapel in Unit 26 (Feature 3).

Photograph: L. Hulková.

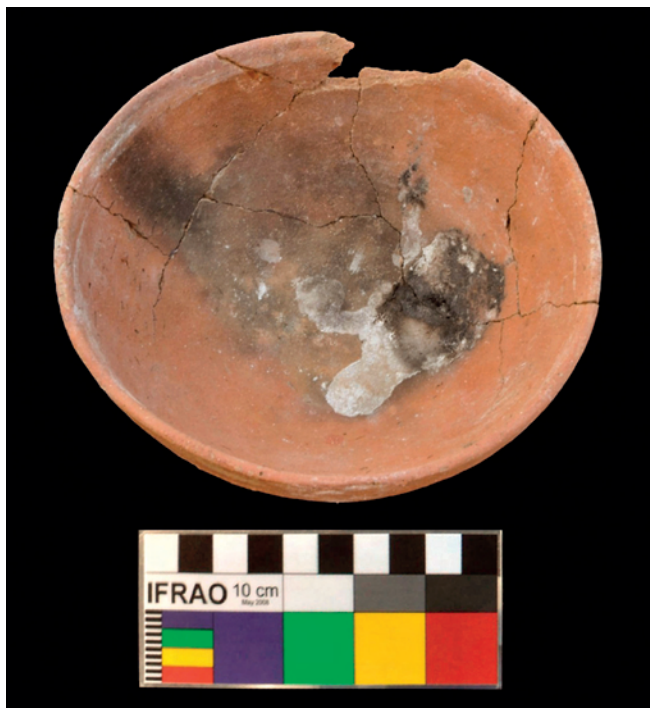


Plate 5: Cup from chapel in Unit 26 (Feature 3) with traces of burning. Photograph: L. Hulková.

vessel was found with the charcoal still intact (Pl. 3 centre). Such vessels constituted 3% of the assemblage (7 examples).

In summary, the pottery waste of cult activity of Phase III differs considerably from Phase II. Firstly, there is the development of a clear class of ‘cemetery pottery’ which accounts for nearly all pottery used in this context. Related to this phenomenon is the observation that those vessels that were (apparently) not specifically produced for use in this context were either adapted using white paint, or had a very specific function that differed from their use in daily life. The waste of the funerary–mortuary sphere in the late First Intermediate Period, therefore, is very unlikely to be confused with settlement waste, which was certainly not the case in the late Old Kingdom. The second major difference to Phase II has already been implied. The adoption of a specific corpus of ‘cemetery pottery’ went hand in hand with the almost complete disappearance of vessels clearly linked to the production and primary distribution of food and drink. This, it must be surmised, attests to the decreasing importance of actual food and drink as the basis of offering meals (or at least the ceramic vessels used to produce and distribute these items), and an end to the concept of the offering cult as an institution that provided an endless supply of food and drink for the deceased in the afterlife. Rather, the

dead were now reliant on generic ‘offering jars’ and generic ‘offerings’ whose importance derived from their production for the cultic context and not their association with any particular product in daily life. This may remind us of a trend in the burial customs of the same period for an increase in objects produced specifically for their inclusion in burials and a growing tendency to replace real objects and offerings with models and symbolic offerings (Seidlmayer 1990, 427–28).

If, as suggested above, the use of daily life vessels and real food and drink during Phase II can be tied to a correlation between the living and the dead and between the states of death and life, what do the changes just mentioned suggest about the relationship of the living and the dead in the late First Intermediate Period at Abydos? At a most basic level, it suggests that mediation between the living and the dead, as expressed through the material culture employed in funerary and mortuary rituals (and left behind as waste), had shifted. The transactions with the dead had become less direct—or more ‘abstract’—as though the dead had become an even more special category of being, further removed from the world of the living than was previously the case. The needs of the dead were no longer equated directly with the needs of the living, and contact with the dead was no longer closely modelled on the commonest transactions of daily life.

Such a proposal, speculative as it is, is consistent with the interpretation of other evidence of interactions between the living and the dead during the late First Intermediate Period and early Middle Kingdom. This is most obviously the case with changes in the nature of burial customs, whereby categories of objects and actions that had previously stressed the continuum of the physical and social self after death during the late Old Kingdom were augmented by an array of objects and processes that are understood as attesting to the transformational nature of death and the altered state of the deceased in the early Middle Kingdom (Seidlmayer 1990, 428–29; Seidlmayer 2001, 230). These included a new level of expenditure and techniques in the preparation of the corpse which went far beyond the cosmetic procedures of the Old Kingdom (Knoblauch 2016, 345–52); the placement of the deceased in a stretched, rigid pose that was no longer based on the Old Kingdom naturalistic pose (Seidlmayer 2001, 230); and the iconography of the burial mask, which now included gender-neutral or non-gender-specific elements and features that were not, strictly speaking,

attributes of the deceased when they were alive (Seidlmayer 2001, 230).

The development of a new repertoire of cultic vessels and practices at Abydos during the late First Intermediate Period was, however, unlikely to have been a strictly religious phenomenon and it would be folly to argue that it was. Many of the practices (white paint, symbolic offerings, model jars) are not entirely new, although some of their particular manifestations at Abydos might be. All these elements are present in one form or another in the funerary and mortuary culture of the late Old Kingdom elite in the Memphite cemeteries and in a restricted way (mud fillings) at Abydos in the tomb of Weni (Phase I) and perhaps in the Central Mastaba (empty or symbolically filled pottery?). From this perspective, the adoption and then proliferation of these practices at Abydos in the course of the First Intermediate Period represents another case of the assimilation, reinterpretation and further development

at a local level of practices during this period that were previously restricted to a small minority of elites in Old Kingdom society.

On a final note, it can be observed that the changes noticed were not restricted to Abydos. A similar shift in ritual practice is discernible across a number of other nearby Upper Egyptian centres such as at Hawawish (Hope 2006), Dendera (Petrie et al. 1900; Slater 1974) and Thebes (Petrie 1909; Arnold 1972; Seiler in Polz et al. 1999; Seiler 2012) including the royal necropolis of Dynasty 11 at el-Tarif. This begs the question to what extent the cultural and political independence of southern Egypt during the First Intermediate Period was a contributing factor to the development, dissemination and popularity of new ritual traditions. More comparative material from Middle and Lower Egypt is sorely needed, and better data from Upper Egypt might sharpen this picture considerably.

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