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Covering the Deceased's Heads with Pottery Vessels Insight from Late and Ptolemaic Period Necropolis in Saqqara West

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Abstract: Among the more than 700 burials of the Late and Ptolemaic periods discovered by the Polish-Egyptian Archaeological Mission in Saqqara West, in the case of two burials the heads of the deceased were covered, respectively, with a vessel and half a vessel. The paper addresses the unique nature of this practice in view of the Saqqara necropolis in the last centuries BC, when cartonnage masks used for covering deceased heads begin to dominate in the Egyptian funerary tradition. By analysing the archaeological context, textual and material evidence on head protection in Egypt from the Old Kingdom to the Ptolemaic period, the author attempts to determine the origin, the significance and reason for exceptional treatment of these two deceased.

Keywords: Saqqara, pot burials, cartonnage mask, funerary ritual, Late period, Ptolemaic period, Roman period

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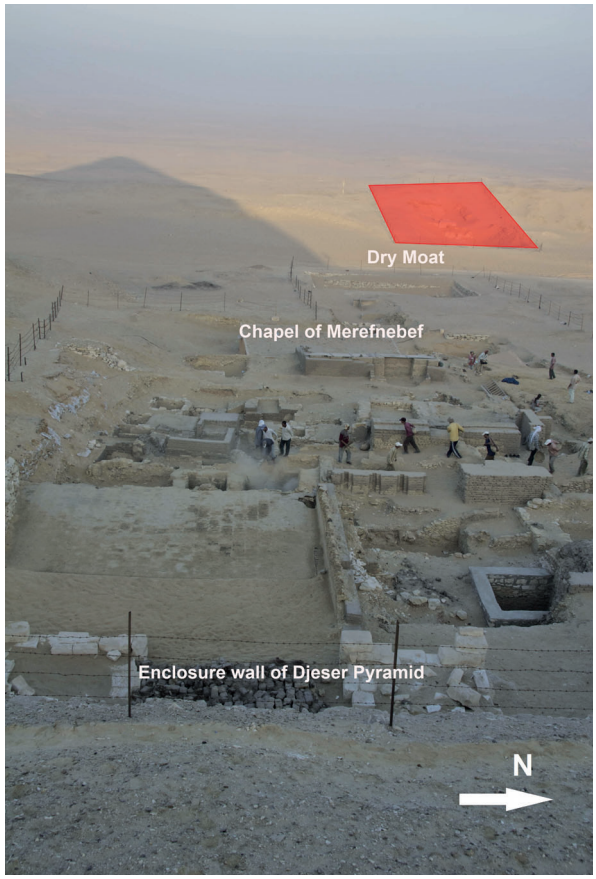
This article discusses two Ptolemaic burials from West Saqqara in which the heads of the deceased were covered with a pottery vessel or fragment of it. Although they could be classified as pot burials, a type of inhumation early and widely attested in Egyptian funerary tradition,[1] due to the position of the vessels on the head they are clearly exceptional, and their symbolic meaning should be analysed separately. This paper aims to interpret them in the context of significance of the head and the need to protect it, derived from religious texts and other sources, including in the context of the necropolis itself.

[1] The earliest pot burials, which took place in Egypt during the Gerzean/Naqada II period (around 3500 BC), are recorded by Beatrix Midant-Reynes (Midant-Reynes 2000).



1. Saqqara West: general view of the site from the east. The area with burials nos 304 and 695 is marked with a red rectangle (Phot. J. Dąbrowski).

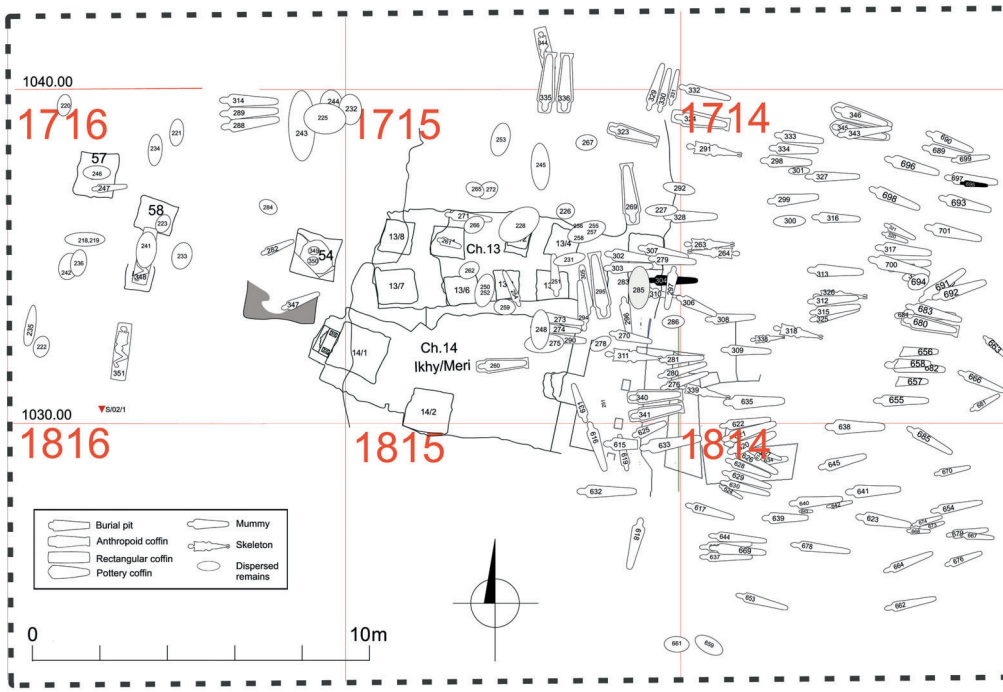
The cemetery with more than 700 burials where the two discussed were discovered adjoins the wall of the Djoser complex to the west (**Fig. 1**).[2] It was the subject of research by the Polish-Egyptian Archaeological Mission in Saqqara in 1987–2017 on behalf of the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of Warsaw University under the direction of Karol Myśliwiec (1987, 1996–2016) and then Kamil O. Kuraszkiewicz.[3] Specifically, these two burials, field numbers 304[4] and 695,[5] were uncovered at the Upper Necropolis generally dated from the Late to Ptolemaic periods. Uncovered during the exploration of the western edge of the Dry Moat, they rested directly on a thick layer of aeolian sand at a depth of 1.5–2.0m from the modern surface, without grave architecture or even a pit. They lay individually, intact, a short distance apart, the first 2m (grid square 1715), the second *c*. 10m

[2] Myśliwiec 2002: 349–359; Myśliwiec *et al.* 2004; Kowalska *et al.* 2008: 29–381; 2010: 27–79, Pls I–XXXI; Myśliwiec *et al.* 2010; Radomska 2012: 339–355; Kuraszkiewicz 2013.

[3] Since 2024, the mission continued works on behalf of the Faculty of Oriental Studies of Warsaw University.

[4] Kowalska *et al.* 2008: 225, Figs 265–266, Pl. CIXc-d.

[5] Unpublished.



2. West side of the necropolis, the Dry Moat area: burials nos 304 and 695 are indicated in black (Drawing: M. Radomska, K. Kuraszkiewicz).

(grid square 1714) from the entrances to the Old Kingdom rock chapels (**Fig. 2**).[6] Burial no. 304 belongs to an adult male aged 30–35[7] (**Fig. 3a-b**) and no. 695 to a child aged *c*. 4 years (**Fig. 4a-c**).[8] Both were deposited along the E-W axis with the head facing west. In the case of the first one (no. 304), the hands were crossed on the pelvis, with the right hand resting flat on the left. The head of the deceased was covered with a large fragment of a vat with a hole pierced before being fired in the middle part of the vessel's body (**Figs 3a, 5**).[9] Other sherds of the same vessel were found near the deceased, in the proximity of the head, while three irregular fragments of limestone at the legs (**Fig. 3a**). The stratigraphy of the site, the archaeological context of this burial and the fragments of other vessels found with it,[10] allow its dating to the Ptolemaic period. In the case of the second burial (no. 695), the arms were folded alongside the body with the hands on the pelvis: the left

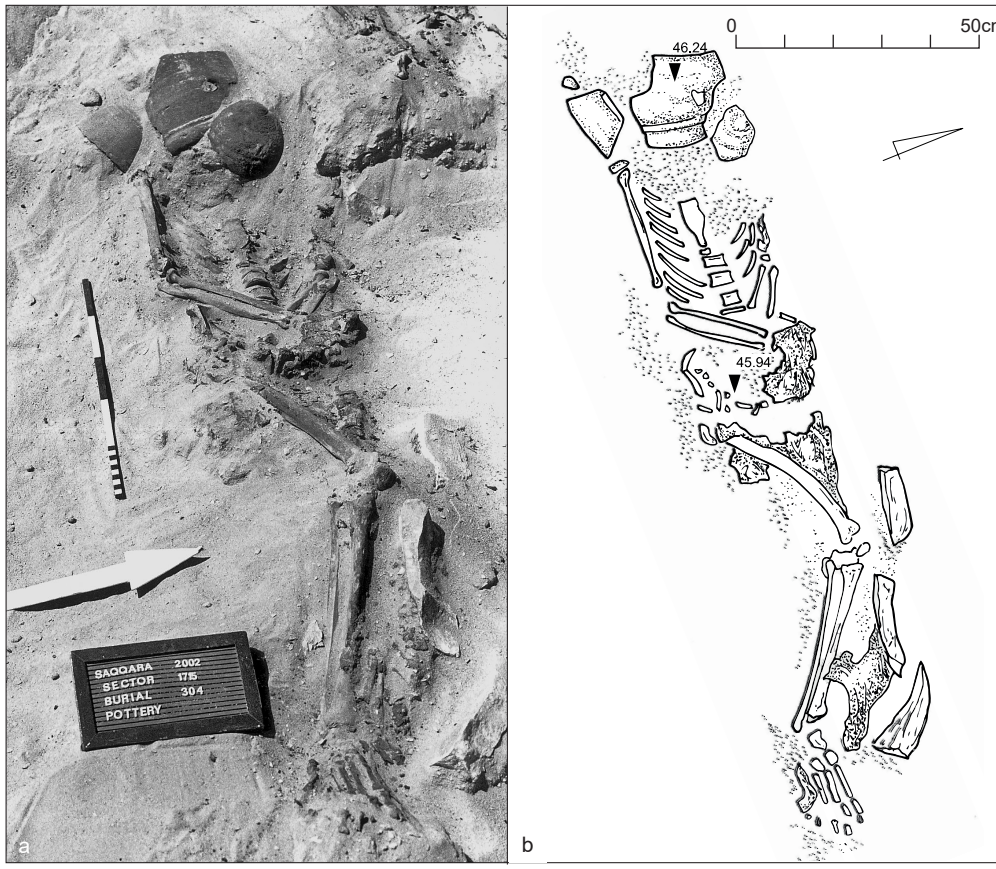
[6] Kuraszkiewicz 2014: 201–216.

[7] Kowalska *et al.* 2008: 225.

[8] Iwona Kozieradzka-Ogunmakin, personal communication. For more information on child burials from this period see: Nenna (Ed.) 2012; more recently: Radomska 2016: 169–202.

[9] Vat SQ 02-1090 (pottery cat. no. 44), terminal Late period–late Ptolemaic period (Rzeuska 2008: 436, Fig. 539, Pl. CCLXIId).

[10] Rzeuska 2003: 150–152, Fig. 9; 2008: 436.



3. Burial no. 304 from Saqqara West with half of the vat covering the head (Phot. M. Jawornicki; drawing: B. Błaszczuk).

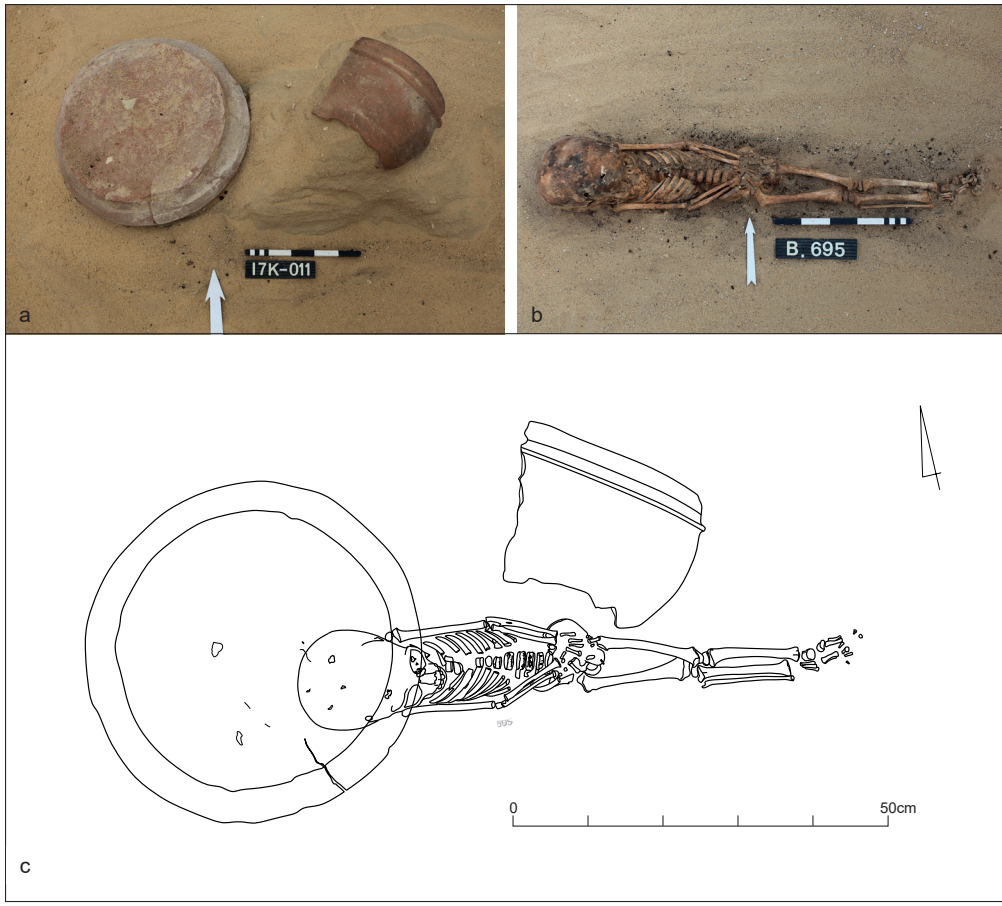
rested on the right. The head was covered by a large, flat, completely preserved pottery bowl (**Fig. 6a**), and next to the body lay half a pottery vat (**Fig. 6b**). The archaeological context of the burial and the vessels deposited on his head and body indicate, that it may also date from the Ptolemaic period.[11]

Within this burial ground skeletal burials and mummies directly placed in the sand, without protection, dominate in the Dry Moat surrounding the pyramid complex. In the vicinity of the discussed burials in an area of 200 square meters, only twelve of 150 burials were placed in coffins.[12] One had its feet covered by a half of a large pot[13] and none were buried in the vessel. Burials in this areas are mostly poor, with very scanty grave goods

[11] SQ 17-2160 and SQ 17-2161 (unpublished). Karol Myśliwiec dates these vessels to the Ptolemaic period (personal communication), pointing to analogous vessels discovered at Tell Atrib. Teodozja Rzeuska proposes to date the vessels from burial no. 695 to the Late period (personal communication).

[12] However, they lie 0.5 to 1.0m deeper than the two burials in question (Kowalska *et al.* 2008: 225–252).

[13] Burial no. 624 (Radomska 2016: 202).



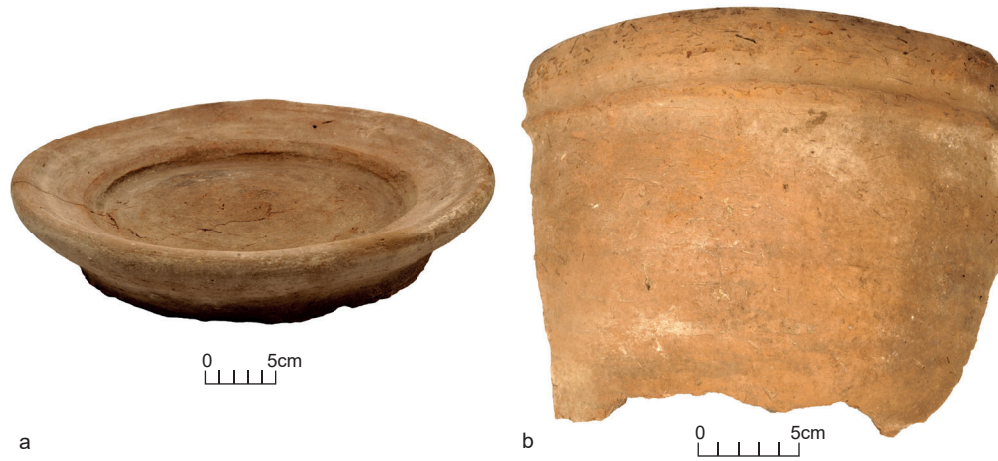
4. Burial no. 695 from Saqqara West: a. before removing the pottery bowl covering the head of the deceased and the fragment of vat next to the corpse; b. after removing pottery vessels; c. drawing (Phot. M. Jawornicki, J. Dąbrowski; drawing: B. Błaszczuk).

(see **Fig. 2**). Only seven out of the 150 deceased recorded within the burial ground were found with any sort of funerary goods, namely fragments of bronze or faience amulets.[14] The types of graves attested in this part of the necropolis are also much more modest than those closer to the pyramid, where the deceased were more often placed in cartonnages, coffins, in rectangular enclosures made of limestone blocks or bricks, in rock-cut anthropoid burial pits or in niches hewn in the shaft's walls of the Old Kingdom period tombs or the brick walls of mastabas as well.[15]

[14] Kowalska *et al.* 2008: 192, 210–211, 236, 247 (e.g. burials nos 244, 283, 329, 344).

[15] Myśliwiec 2002: 349; Kowalska *et al.* 2008: 29–381; Kowalska, Radomska, Kozieradzka 2010: 27–79; Radomska 2012: 339–355.

5. Half of the vat from burial no. 304 with a hole in the middle of the vessel's body (Phot. M. Jawornicki).



6. Vessels from burial no. 695: a. completely preserved pottery bowl; b. half of pottery vat (Phot. J. Dąbrowski).

IDEOLOGICAL JUSTIFICATION FOR PROTECTING THE HEAD

Although pottery have been found in different parts of both discussed burials, their common and most prominent feature – a pottery vessel or its fragment placed on the head – demands a closer look to understand possible ideological justifications of such a practice. The necessity

of special protection of the head, which was considered sacred, can be found both in texts and in the material forms of such protection. Selected examples of evidence illustrating this phenomenon, recorded in epigraphic sources, which have parallels in archaeological material obtained from the context of burials, are presented below.

Written sources

One of the recurring themes of funerary texts is the need to protect the head, to reconnect it to the body[16] and to fuse the other parts of the body together. This is achieved through magical actions and spells during appropriate rituals. In view of the dating of the finds that are the subject of this paper, it is important to emphasise the presence of such spells in the Ptolemaic edition of the *Book of the Dead*:

'Formula for preventing the head of being cut off from him in the god's land' (*BD* 43);[17]

'Spell for a secret head' (*BD* 151a);[18]

'Spell for providing heat under the head of the blessed one' (*BD* 162);[19]

'Spell for raising the corpse, for having power in the eyes and ears and making the head firm when it has been set in its proper place' (*BD* 178).[20]

The head-related spells from the *Book of the Dead* are also known from the Ptolemaic cartonnage masks. The masks of this type from the Theban and Abydos regions were studied in detail by Luca Miatello.[21] He emphasises the importance of spells written on masks and interprets their functions in relation to the head:[22] in *BD* 151a, the mask magically revives and rejuvenates the face of the deceased;[23] in *BD* 19, the 'wreath of victory' on the deceased's head symbolises the resurrection of Osiris and his triumph over his enemies,[24] and in *BD*

[16] Two burials from West Saqqara dated to the Ptolemaic period (nos 14 and 35) have sticks placed in their skulls (Kaczmarek 2008: 468; Radomska 2013: 95). These sticks were placed there during the mummification process in order to reconnect the head of the deceased with the rest of the body and to stiffen the corpse so that it retained its proper shape. This way of securing integrity of the corpse was particularly useful when it was not buried in a coffin.

[17] Quirke 2013: 123. On the different versions of *BD* 43, see Mosher 2016: 10–18.

[18] Allen 1974: 147; for this spell see also Lüscher 1998.

[19] Allen 1960: 285.

[20] Faulkner 1985: 176.

[21] Miatello 2012–2013: 52–53. Louvre E 26834a (*BD* 151 + hypocephalus), Bonn L 879 (*BD* 151 + hypocephalus), Berlin VÄGM 1983-17 (*BD* 151 + *BD* 162), Florence 5708b (*BD* 151 + *BD* 19), London (British Museum) EA 29472 (*BD* 151), EA 29474 (*BD* 151), EA 6959 (*BD* 151), EA 51147 (*BD* 19), Wien ÄS 297 (*BD* 19).

[22] Miatello 2012–2013: 52. *BD* 151, spell with Anubis and the mask is attested already during the Eleventh Dynasty on sarcophagi; *CT* VI, spells 355–787; Faulkner 1978: 154; Varga 1982: 63–65. *BD* 19, spell for the Wreath of Justification/Victory. *BD* 162, Spell Evoking a Flame Under the Head.

[23] Miatello 2012–2013: 72.

[24] An early version of this spell appears during the Twenty-first Dynasty in Deir el-Bahari: *P. BM EA 10490*; see website *British Museum*: EA 10490-1. Later it is attested in papyri and on sarcophagi from the Late and Ptolemaic periods (*Urk*. V, 136–144; Allen 1974: 34–35). For a bibliography on *BD* 19, see Backes *et al*. 2009: 127–128.

162 the head is the seat of the gods.[25] Miatello also points to the role of the mask and the solar eye in transforming the deceased into *akh* and rejuvenating the deceased Osiris, as articulated in the spells written around the edges of the hypocephali on some masks.[26] In one case, a spell from hypocephali even proclaims: 'I am my face of child indeed'.[27]

The importance of the head and the necessity to protect it dates back to the Old Kingdom, as attested in some spells of the *Pyramid Texts*, later in *Coffin Texts*,[28] and in pre-Ptolemaic edition of the *Book of the Dead*.[29]

All these sources emphasise the value of the head in the act of recreating and regenerating the body in the divine, royal and private dimensions, so that the deceased can pass from earthly life to eternal existence in the world of the gods.[30] When all parts of the body are reassembled[31] and brought back to life, the head takes on even greater significance,[32] as it plays a key role in the Opening of the Mouth Ritual. With its help, all vital functions and senses are restored to the deceased and their statues, as evidenced by the subsequent ritual formulas that were performed both on Osiris and each deceased person identified with him. The ritual was practiced in both a sacred context, as the gods were subjected to it during daily worship in temples, and a funerary context, as it was performed on mummies during the burial.[33]

The rank of the head in achieving physical perfection and preventing the killing of the individual in afterlife by the demonic servants of Osiris[34] is emphasised by formulas and incantations from the *Pyramid Texts* and the *Book of the Dead*, which include the identification of parts of the royal head with their divine counterparts.[35] Other spells from

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[25] The first preserved version of *BD* 162 dates to the Twenty-first Dynasty: *P. Berlin 3031*; Allen 1974: 157. For a bibliography on *BD* 162, see: Backes *et al*. 2009: 215–217; Wüthrich 2010: 42–87.

[26] Miatello 2012–2013: 77; Louvre E 26834 (Mask of Shakheper) and Bonn L 879 (Mask of Imhotep).

[27] Miatello 2012–2013: 77; Louvre E 26834a (Mask of Shakheper).

[28] '… attaching the head to the neck ... reattaching the head to the body ... placing the neck in place ...' (*CT* VI, spell 532); Barguet 1986: §§ 80, 390, 532, 904; Carrier 2004: 1724–1725; Schweitzer 2008: 522.

[29] On the Theban and Memphite traditions of the *Book of the Dead* in the Late period, see Mosher 1992: 143–172.

[30] Speleers 1934: §§ 12, 13, 17, 18, 355, 572; Schweitzer 2008: 521; *PT* 373 (T 204, M 15, N 62); Popielska-Grzybowska 2020: 225.

[31] *CT* VI, spell 532.

[32] *PT* 602 (M 227, N 362): Popielska-Grzybowska 2020: 225. *CT* III, spell 232: the formula dedicated to the headrest of the deceased, which is usually found in the front of the coffin; Martin 2013: 300–301 (Doc. 46).

[33] On the Opening of the Mouth Ritual, see Otto: 1960; Pahl 1986: 211–217; Roth 1992: 113–147; Smith 1993; Fischer-Elfert 1998; Assmann 2003: 456–481; Goyon 2004: 85–182; Quack 2005: 165–185; 2006: 69–150; Ayad 2007: 109–116; Hays 2010: 7–8.

[34] Taylor 2010: 188.

[35] *PT* 215 (W 148, T 170, P 257, M 186, N 325, Nt 230); Allen 2005: 32; Popielska-Grzybowska 2020: 97–98; *PT* 213 (W 146), Unis pyramid, south wall, sarcophagus chamber and in the pyramids of Teti, Pepi I, Merenre I, Pepi II Neferkare, and the queens Neith, Iput and Udjbeten; Popielska-Grzybowska 2017: 247. On the identification of the king's face with that of a jackal (an image of the god Anubis) in the *Pyramid Texts* (Pyr. 573a, 896b, 1298b, 1564a, 1749a, 1995a, 2026b, 2098a, 2108a) and in the *Coffin Texts* (*CT* VI, spell 516), see extensive commentary in Popielska-Grzybowska 1999: 8–9, 11. The nose (*PT* 215, *CT* VI, spell 761) and forehead (*PT* 459, 691C) were also identified with body parts of the jackal. *PT* 146, in the Resurrection Ritual

the latter sources refer to deities who protect the face and head[36] and prevent the decapitation of the deceased in the underworld[37] or identify the deceased with Osiris.[38]

The *Coffin Texts* contain an ideological motif, known already since the Old Kingdom,[39] of bodily regeneration, which describes the Eye of Horus being offered to the deceased[40] in order to restore their sight, ability to breathe and swallow.[41] The significance of the head is also evident in the context of royal and divine attributes such as crowns, when the theme of the enthronement of the king in the *Coffin Texts*, already present in the earliest editions of the *Pyramid Texts*, is used as a metaphor for the transition of the deceased to the afterlife.[42]

From Egyptian liturgical calendars, inscribed on the walls of temples, stelae and papyri, one can learn that the head and face even had their own fixed and movable feasts, which were celebrated several times a year.[43]

Material sources

Masks

Besides funerary and sacred literature, the special importance of the head and its parts is emphasised by masks, which were effective and expressive in their function as protection for the head of the deceased, both those worn on the face and those that were elements of cartonnages protecting the entire body.

Masks on the faces of the dead appear as early as the Old Kingdom.[44] They were made of clay or gypsum, and then of cartonnage.[45] They become common in the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, when they usually form separate cartonnage elements.[46] Ptolemaic mummies

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in Unis pyramid, south wall, sarcophagus chamber and passage and in other pyramids; Allen 2005: 31. *BD* 42; Taylor 2010: 162–163.

[36] *BD* 151: Lüscher 1998; for this spell see also website *Das altägyptische Totenbuch*: Spruch 151.

[37] Budge 1999: 34.

[38] *BD* 43; Taylor 2010: 75, 161.

[39] E.g. *PT* 73–74, 78: Allen 2005: 24.

[40] Martin 2013: 420–421 (Doc. 81).

[41] *CT* VII, spell 861: Martin 2013: 172–173, 262–263, 414–415, 416–418, 420–423 (Doc. 5, 38, 79, 80, 81–82).

[42] *CT* IV, spell 334: Martin 2013: 548–549 (Doc. 117).

[43] Evidence of such celebrations can be found in The Great Feast of Head Covering (*ḥbs-tp ꜥ3* [*ḥrw* -]), The Feast of Faces (*ḥb ḥrw*), Beautiful Feast of Revealing the Face (*ḥb nfr n wn ḥr*); see: Herbin 1994: 5, 51, 58, 61, 132–133, 188, 203, 229, 313, 340, 344, 346, 356, 360, 363, 366, 561–562.

[44] The earliest find of this type is a Second Dynasty female mask found at Saqqara: Quibell 1923: 11, Pl. 29; for an extensive study on masks from the Old Kingdom, see Tacke 1996: 307–336.

[45] E.g. from Saqqara West; see Old Kingdom burials with face being covered with a gypsum mask: no. 397 (female) from Tomb of Neferseshemseshat (III) (Myśliwiec 2005: 157; Kowalska, Kuraszkiewicz, Godziejewski 2009: 107–111); no. 551 (male) from Shaft no. 64, anonymous Tomb XIV (Kowalska, Kuraszkiewicz, Godziejewski 2009: 107–111). See also cartonnage mask from Sedment (Eleventh Dynasty); website *UCL Museums and Collections*: acc. no. LDUCE-UC31377.

[46] E.g. from Saqqara West, Ptolemaic period burials nos: 4, 37, 75, 76, 406, 483, 508, 534; Kowalska *et al.* 2008: 49, 93–102, 116–125, 268–284, 325–335, 364–370; Kowalska, Radomska, Kozieradzka 2010: 57–58.

are then given helmet-like masks.[47] In the Roman period, mummies are protected in a wide variety of ways depending on the region.[48] Protection – especially of the head – is provided in the early Roman period, e.g. in Middle Egypt, mainly by shrouds, plaster covers and/or portraits, and plaster or cartonnage masks covering the faces. Objects intended to protect both the heads and entire bodies of mummies seem to have disappeared by the end of the third or the beginning of the fourth century AD.[49]

Masks are an important testimony of the Egyptians' concern to provide the head with proper physical and magical protection. The latter is achieved through the images of the faces of the deceased, amulets, spells, and accompanying scenes depicted on masks.[50] The decorative motifs typical of cartonnage masks from the Ptolemaic and Roman periods include representations whose contexts relate primarily to Heliopolitan cosmogony: to Atum and his Ennead – the sky goddess Nut[51] and Osiris,[52] Isis, Seth and Nephthys. The deceased uses the magic of the images surrounding them to prepare for the transition from the state of being deceased to the state of the new Osiris, who is to be reborn.[53]

The healing and apotropaic function of the mask is also known, as evidenced by its recognition as a remedy for demon-induced headaches, mentioned in the magical medical literature of the New Kingdom.[54]

Headrests

The importance of the head in funerary rituals is also evidenced by headrests belonging to the tomb equipment – one of the earliest forms of protecting the head of the deceased

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On the iconographic and theological programme of the Ptolemaic period cartonnages exemplified by burials from West Saqqara, see Schweitzer 2008: 521–543.

[47] Ptolemaic helmet-shaped cartonnage mask of Hornedjitef from Asasif (see website *British Museum*: EA 6679).

[48] On Ptolemaic and Roman mummy masks from Akhmim, Dush in the Kharga oasis and Ismant el-Kharab in the Dakhla oasis, see: Schweitzer 1992: 18–27; 1998: 340–344; 2002: 269–276; Riggs 2000: 121–144; 2005; Parlasca 2006: 194, Pl. 35. On Graeco-Roman masks, funerary portraits (e.g. Fayum, Hawara, Thebes, Meir, Bahariya, Sedment, Tuna el-Gebel, Abydos), see also: Edgar 1909; Grimm 1974; Wildung 1990; Bierbrier 1997; Aubert, Cortopassi 2004; Stadler 2004; Vasques 2005; Aubert *et al.* 2008. For a summary of the state of research on Egyptian funerary art of the Roman period (coffins, masks, cartonnages and Egyptian shrouds) with an extensive bibliography and references to objects in museum collections, see Hellinckx 2010: 126–156.

[49] Derbala, Müller 2023: 253.

[50] See Derbala, Müller 2023: 242–243.

[51] E.g. cartonnage mask no. III from the early to middle Ptolemaic Period, Tuna el-Gebel, tomb 1/2 chambers A, D (Derbala, Müller 2023: 259).

[52] See the previous footnote.

[53] On the iconographic repertoire of masks decoration developed by priestly schools, see Schweitzer 2008: 523.

[54] *P. Leiden* I 348, spell no. 3; the mask is lowered on the head of the suffering Horus, and divine protectors are assigned to its parts, as in *BD* 151a. The mask against the headache demon is also mentioned in spell no. 18, along with other amulets to be applied to the sufferer: Borghouts 1978: 15–16, 18, 24, Pls 1–4, 11–12; Miatello 2012–2013: 72.

in ancient Egypt.[55] Magical protection, derived from the form or decoration of these objects, was supposed to ensure deceased rebirth in the hereafter.[56]

Hypocephali

Whether hypocephali placed under the head of the deceased should be included among the means of protecting the head of the deceased is debatable.[57] Despite the text from spell 162 of the *Book of the Dead* entitled 'Formula for creating heat under the head of the deceased' appear on hypocephali from the Twenty-sixth Dynasty onwards, the iconographic repertoire of their decoration, alluding to solar renaissance and the repetition of the work of creation, seems to refer in a general means to rebirth and eternal life.[58]

Pottery head covers

For the interpretation of burials nos 304 and 695 from Saqqara West, it is crucial to refer to other finds where pottery vessels were used to protect the head of the deceased only, in contrast to much more widely attested standard pot burials with whole body covered with one or several vessels. Two such cases have been recorded from Roman period. The first is the burial from Berenike by the Red Sea. In this case, the face of the woman was covered with the amphora fragment and the deceased was buried in an oval pit (**Fig. 7**). A stone of regular shape was placed on her pelvis. This burial has been dated to the early Roman period (first century AD).[59] A second example was found during an archival query on documentation from Gebelein, conducted in the collection of the Museo Egizio, Turin. This is a burial of an adult whose face was covered with half of a vessel (**Fig. 8**). However, the burial is documented only by a hitherto unpublished photograph, accompanied by a short note: 'Schiaparelli's excavations site at Gebelein area, near the modern village of Abu Hummas: burial in the plain to the east of the northern hill. The deceased, lying down and apparently without traces of a sarcophagus, has its skull covered with a ceramic fragment'.[60] The burial dates to the Roman period.[61]

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[55] For formula on headrests, see e.g. the inscription on the hematite headrest from Saqqara; Hilton Price 1897: 190, no. 1776. The earliest headrests in Egypt are the stone ones, dated to the Old Kingdom, e.g. London (British Museum) EA 30413 (see the *British Museum* website).

[56] See Hellinckx 2001: 61–95, on the symbolic function of headrests.

[57] On hypocephali, see: Clarysse 1998: 321–328; Mekis 2020.

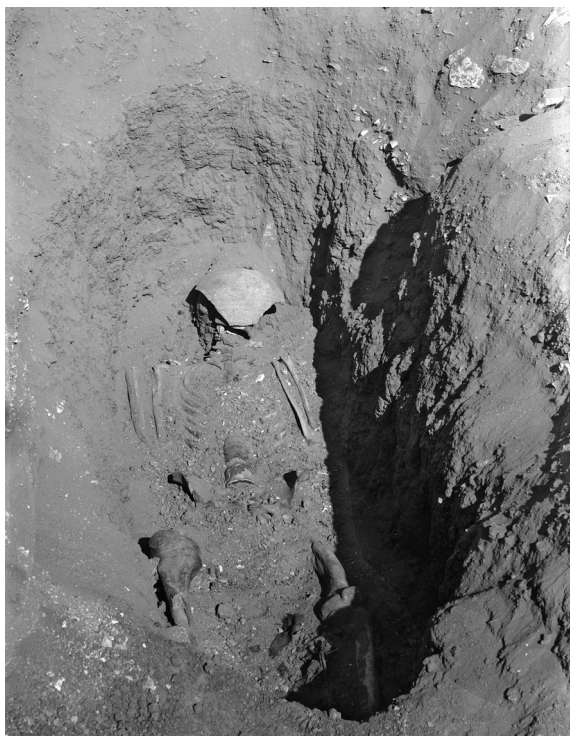
[58] Varga 1961: 235–247; 1968: 3–15; 2002: 117–124.

[59] Trench BE15-104 (Zych *et al.* 2016: 325, Fig. 7).

[60] See website *Museo Egizio Archivio Fotografico*: C00687.

[61] Dating according to the head of Gebelein Archaeological Project, Dr Wojciech Ejsmond, to whom I would like to thank for bringing this burial to my attention. A similar practise of a covering of the face of the deceased with large pieces of pottery was observed in early Christian burials in Nubia (Bedawi 1976: 22). Iwona Kozieradzka noted the apotropaic function of this practice, which aimed at protecting the head of the deceased from demons entering the body through holes in the skull (Kowalska *et al.* 2008: 225).

7. Female burial from Berenike with head covered with half of an amphora (Phot. S.E. Sidebotham; courtesy of PCMA UW).



8. Burial from Gebelein with head covered by a pottery fragment (Museo Egizio, Italy, Archivo fotografico, no. C00687; CC0 1.0 Universal).

INTERPRETATION OF POT BURIALS

The two discussed burials from Saqqara West belong to the category of so-called pot burials known throughout Egypt and Sudan from the Protodynastic to the Graeco-Roman periods.[62] While interpreting burials with head covered by vessels or vessel fragments it is necessary to refer to the ideological interpretations of the pot burials category. Originally, the term 'pot burial' was used to describe the burials of children, newborns and foetuses deposited in complete vessels.[63] As confirmed by the research of Ronika K. Power and Yann Tristant, this category of burials was not exclusively reserved for them.[64] The bodies of deceased adults were also placed in complete vessels or covered by fragments of broken vessels. The authors therefore define pot burial as 'the primary burial of the human body in or under any pottery vessel'.[65] This definition allows one to include in this category also the two discussed burials from Saqqara West, as well as an another one, already mentioned above, with feet covered by a vessel fragment. They certify that this form of burial was practised among children and adult members of the Memphite community during the Ptolemaic period.

A wide spectrum of interpretations of pot burials has so far been posited, as well as the practical and symbolic significance of the different forms and shapes of pottery used for this purpose in Egypt and Sudan.[66] They focus, above all, on the burials of the youngest deceased, because pot burials are most often burials of children. They are often found in a settlements context:[67] in houses, under domestic structures, but also in cemeteries.[68]

Different types of vessels were used in pot burials to cover the body. In Saqqara West these were bowl (child burial no. 695), vat (male adult burial no. 304) and large pot (child

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[62] For a geographical distribution of pot burials within Egypt (from Predynastic to Roman period) with the division according age categories, see Power, Tristant 2016: 1477, Fig. 1; see also: Meskell 1996: 39; Patch 2007; Kilroe 2015: 218.

[63] Donadoni Roveri 1969; Masali, Chiarelli 1972; Hendrickx 1998; Power, Tristant 2016: 1475. See also above, footnote 1.

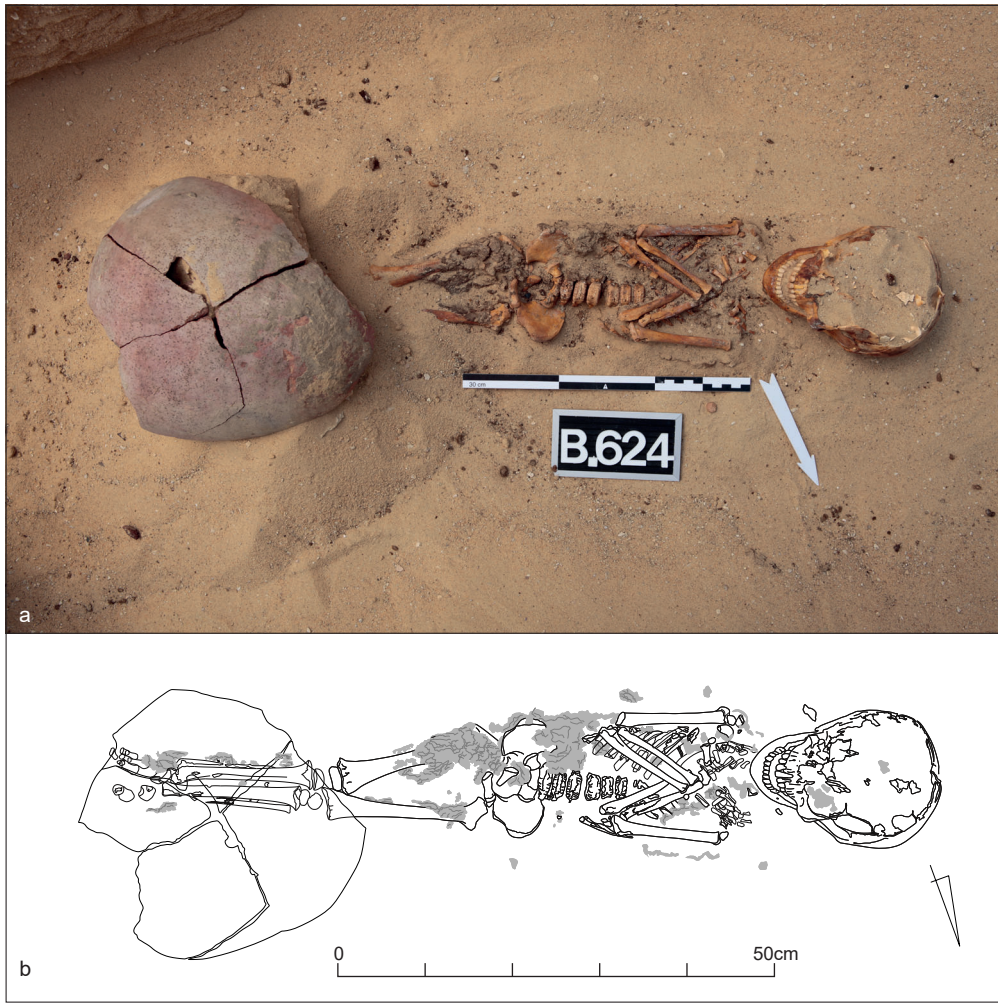
[64] According to Cathie Spieser, after the New Kingdom Period only infants were buried in this way (Spieser 2008). Power and Tristant confirmed, however, that this assumption was false (Power, Tristant 2016: 1476).

[65] Power, Tristant 2016: 1475. For Hellenistic and Roman period, see burials in amphorae, e.g. no. 53/55 and no. 73 from Sekina Bint el-Hussein, east Alexandria (Sabah 2012: 255–256), as well as pot burials from Marina el-Alamein (Daszewski, Zych 2012: 289) and grave no. 677 from Ismant el-Kharab (Dakhleh Oasis). In the very last case in the pit, a child aged eighteenth months was buried, with its head put in a broken storage jar and lower body covered with two large sherds. Alongside the child burial in the same grave three adults aged 20, 30 and 70, covered with numerous broken vessels and placed along the entire length of the pit were detected (Bowen 2012: 359–361, Pls 2–4).

[66] Donadoni Roveri 1969; Ikram, Dodson 1998: 233; Hendrickx 1998; Orrelle 2008; Zillhardt 2009; Kilroe 2015; Saleem, Abd el-Razek Seddik, el-Halwagy 2020; Merheb 2023.

[67] See e.g. Merheb 2023. See also two child pot burials (Middle Kingdom) in the wall and floor of a small house at settlement site at Elephantine (Kilroe 2015: 218).

[68] Children pot burials are known from separated, designated only for them, part of necropolises, as e.g. in Abydos (Patch 2007) and burial grounds formed by children's pot burials only, like in Deir el-Medina (Meskell 1996: 39). Single child pot burials are also recorded on necropolises formed mainly by burials not protected with pottery, both of adults and children, as in Saqqara West.



9. Child burial no. 624 from Saqqara West with feet covered by a fragment of large pot. Traces of black resinous substance on the bones are indicated with grey colour (Phot. J. Dąbrowski; drawing: B. Błaszczuk).

burial no. 624; **Fig. 9a-b**).[69] In Berenike, amphora is attested in such a function,[70] while in Ismant el-Kharab in the late Roman period these were pigeon-pots, water jars[71] as well as storage jars. Additionally in Graeco-Roman Alexandria cylindrical container was used for this purpose[72] and in Tebtynis – cooking pot.[73]

[69] Radomska 2016: 170, 173, 178, 182, 202.

[70] An amphora is the most commonly used type of vessel for burying children, e.g. Cairo (Egyptian Museum) JE 38283 (Saleem, Abd el-Razek Seddik, el-Halwagy 2020: 1393–1398).

[71] Bowen 2012: 360–361, Pl. 4 (grave no. 35).

[72] Alix *et al.* 2012: 97, Fig. 7 (grave no. B.17).

[73] Gallazzi, Hadji-Minaglou 2012: 397, Fig. 5 (graves nos T 05-30 and T 05-31).

Some, but definitely not all, vessels used for child burials were made for funeral purposes.[74] Often, however, these were reused domestic vessels.[75] The durability of vessels made them perfect coffins securing the integrity of the bodies of young individuals.[76]

Several interpretation of the symbolism and meaning of pot burials have been proposed: in the case of the earliest pot burials they are considered the initial phase in the development of body-covering practices, followed by a wooden rectangular coffins;[77] pot burials are interpreted also as a symbolic womb from which the infant could be reborn or thanks to which the mother could become pregnant again; using the 'womb metaphor' for the relationship between the infant and the vessel,[78] one can suggests that returning to the symbolic womb at the time of death increases the chance of rebirth in the afterlife;[79] pot burials are also interpreted as symbolic eggs, understand as the beginning of life.[80]

To summarise, the proposed interpretations point in particular to the analogy between vessels, wombs, eggs and coffins as places of metaphorical or literal pregnancy and rebirth and life, seeing them as a means of facilitating the transition to the afterlife.

The concept of the connection between pot burials and the mother's womb can also be ideologically complemented by emphasising the creative qualities of clay as a component of the earth.[81]

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In order to interpret the two discussed Ptolemaic burials from Saqqara West they should be analysed in the context of the whole necropolis and the frequency of individual types of burials attested at this cemetery, as well as sources that may shed light on the reason for the use of pottery to cover the deceased, the function of both vessels and the symbolic meaning of this act. Individual examples should be considered in the realm of the beliefs of the local community, taking into account its cultural and economic character and diversity. Furthermore, in order to comment on Saqqara burials in both practical

[74] Saleem, Abd el-Razek Seddik, el-Halwagy 2020: 1400.

[75] For children's pot burials and their social impact, see: Donadoni Roveri 1969; Ikram, Dodson 1998: 233; Hendrickx 1998; Zillhardt 2009; Kilore 2015: 217–228.

[76] Donadoni Roveri 1969.

[77] Ikram, Dodson 1998: 195.

[78] The link between pregnant uterus and vessel, questioned by Loretta Kilroe (Kilroe 2015: 222), is found by Power and Tristant (Power, Tristant 2016: 1478) in the depiction of female dancers from Waatetkhethor funerary chapel at Saqqara (Sixth Dynasty; Roth 1992: 141), in the word *ḳḥt* pot, used to refer to 'what is in it' by one of the women during a ritual dance. According to them, this is a metaphor for the foetus, as the purpose of the dance was to remove obstacles to childbirth.

[79] The link between coffins and the belief in rebirth in the hereafter in the Egyptian context was noted by Harco Willems (Willems 1988) and Lynn Meskell (Meskell 1999; 2001: 27–40). Jan Assmann described the placement of the body in the coffin as a 'return to the womb' according to beliefs about the posthumous passage into the afterlife through the body of the sky goddess Nut (Assmann 1972: 115; Orrelle 2008).

[80] Power, Tristant 2016: 1479.

[81] Interpretation proposed for the Ancient Nubian C-Group context by Uffe Steffensen (Steffensen 2007: 133–152).

and symbolic terms, addressing the essential elements of the previous interpretations of pot burials is crucial.

The analysis of other burials found in the vicinity of two burials in question (nos 304 and 695) allows us to define that this part of the necropolis was used by a lower rank part of community. This contrasts with the eastern part of the necropolis, close to the pyramid, particularly in the area between the Nyankhnefertem mastaba and the wall surrounding the pyramid complex, where cartonnages and coffins, or bodies inside a stone enclosures, were much more frequent than in the western part. This area formed the centre of the Upper Necropolis in Saqqara West and was the burial ground of the city's wealthy inhabitants.

If the pottery vessels recorded in these two burials were meant to protect head of the deceased, the choice of exactly this meant of protection appears to be related to the socio-economic status of the deceased and their families. Since they belonged to the poorest social stratum and the cost of ordering even the most modest cartonnage mask was beyond their financial means, as it was for a large part of the population, the choice of this simple replacement was the only possible. It is important to note that despite their poor socio-economic situation, the religious awareness of families of both deceased could have led them to symbolically protect the head and its organs.

When it comes to the original function of the vat used in the case of the burial no. 304, it seems it was made for funerary purposes. The remains of dark resinous substances observed on the inner and outer surfaces of the vessel indicate, according to Teodozja Rzeuska, relations to the mummification process.[82] The body of the deceased bore traces of the use of what was probably the same substance as observed on the vessel. It should be noted that although other fragments of this vessel were found near the head, it was the face that was covered with particular care and with the largest fragment.

The bowl used in the case of the burial no. 695 seems to be reused from household resources, as in the cases of bowls used in child pot burials from Abydos.[83]

Summarising the ideological and archaeological arguments, it must be concluded that the head-protecting measures taken in both cases were closely related to Egyptian religious beliefs concerning the necessity of protecting the deceased's head. Covering one's face with even a fragment of pottery fulfils, or at least substitutes for, the ritual needed to protect life and increase the chance of rebirth in the hereafter to the extent of one's means. If so, one could, however, wonder why such a simple and low-cost means of ensuring eternal life for the deceased was so rarely applied by low ranked members of society, which could not afford cartonnage or masks.

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[82] Rzeuska 2015: 236; SQ vessel 02-1090 (see also above, footnote 9). She notes that vessels that came into contact with the body of the deceased during the mummification process, e.g. during pouring bitumen over the body, must have been buried close to the body.

[83] In the Abydos cemetery, in graves from the Third and Fourth dynasties, both children (e.g. D 116, 120) and adults (e.g. D 122, 123, 124, 126, 127) were covered with large inverted pottery bowls.

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