

## Chapter 2

# Fragmentary Ancestors? Medicine, Bodies, and Personhood in a Koma Mound, Northern Ghana

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**Abstract** Excavation of a single mound at Yikpabongo, Koma Land, northern Ghana, recovered a significant assemblage of ceramic figurines and figurine parts radiocarbon dated to the early second millennium AD. Rather than haphazard deposition of waste materials, the contextual arrangements suggest meaningful intention, and that the mound might have been a shrine, possibly linked in part to a medicinal or healing function. Potentially, significant statements were also being made about bodies and persons via the figurines, their fragmentation and selection, and their association with selected human remains—skulls, teeth, long bones—and other materials—pottery, lithics, iron, and glass beads. Complex beliefs seemingly underpinned these actions and this is explored in relation to the concept of the ancestors and how this might have helped structure past personhood and ontology.

## Introduction

The recurrence of “ancestors” as an interpretation in European prehistory with particular reference to the European Neolithic has been critiqued (Whitley 2002). This might be a fair criticism in the European context where there is a lack of ethnography attesting to ancestor veneration (Insoll 2004), but is less suitable in West African archaeology where ancestral veneration, based on ethnographic analogy from the region (e.g. Fortes 1983), might be a more apt hermeneutic in exploring past ritual practices, religious beliefs, and “spiritualities”. Yet even in West Africa thinking of

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ancestors as discrete religious phenomena is perhaps incorrect. Ethnography again suggests (Fortes 1945/1969, 1949/1967) that ancestral veneration was probably “bundled” with other concepts, linked to metaphorical relations with animals and plants, sometimes simplistically referred to as “totemism” (Levi-Strauss 1962/1991; Fortes 1987), the ascription of animate properties to materials and locations, belief in a high God, and earth and medicine cults related to fertility and healing.

Structuring much of this religious complexity might have been existential concerns about what it meant to be human, of how personhood was individually and socially constructed, but also with recourse to memory and the ancestors, and invoked mnemonically with substances, materials, and through ideas about the body. The clay figurines from Koma Land in northern Ghana that are the focus here would seem to provide an insight into past ontology in all these various dimensions. This is certainly an ontology that cannot be separated from spirituality, when it is defined, as in *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, as “a spiritual thing or quality as distinct from a material or worldly one” (Onions 1973:2079), but equally cannot be wholly encapsulated within such a definition for it suppresses materiality. The Koma figurines might have been literally ancestors—spiritual constructs—but they were also embodied materially through clay and “medicine” and empowered through context and association.

The Koma figurines indicate, and potentially also suggest for prehistoric archaeological contexts elsewhere, that seeking to interpret past spiritualities in a mono-explanatory way is probably flawed. Instead, complex systems of beliefs involving multiple components, beyond ancestors alone, or not involving them at all, were perhaps the norm. Reconstructing these systems of beliefs in their entirety is unlikely, and they need not have been configured in “modern” forms. However, recognizing complexity is vital for this perhaps forces more nuanced, and ultimately thoughtful, interpretation.

## The Archaeology of Koma Land

The archaeological region known as Koma Land covers an area of approximately 100×100 km within the basins of the Sisili and Kulpawn Rivers in the northern region of Ghana (Fig. 2.1). James Anquandah first recovered the anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines for which Koma Land is renowned through excavations in the mid-1980s (Anquandah 1987, 1998). In addition to figurines, copious quantities of locally manufactured ceramics, grinding stones, iron bracelets and utilitarian artefacts, some human and animal remains, and small numbers of glass and stone beads and cowry shells have also been found (Anquandah 1998; Kankpeyeng and Nkumba 2008, 2009). Anquandah (1998) dated the Koma Land occupation to between c. 1200 and 1800. This has subsequently been revised, with the overall highpoint of Koma Land occupation placed between the sixth and twelfth centuries AD (Kankpeyeng and Nkumba 2009:195, 200).

The makers of the Koma figurines were seemingly settled agriculturalists; this is suggested by the large numbers of grinding stones found, some of which must have

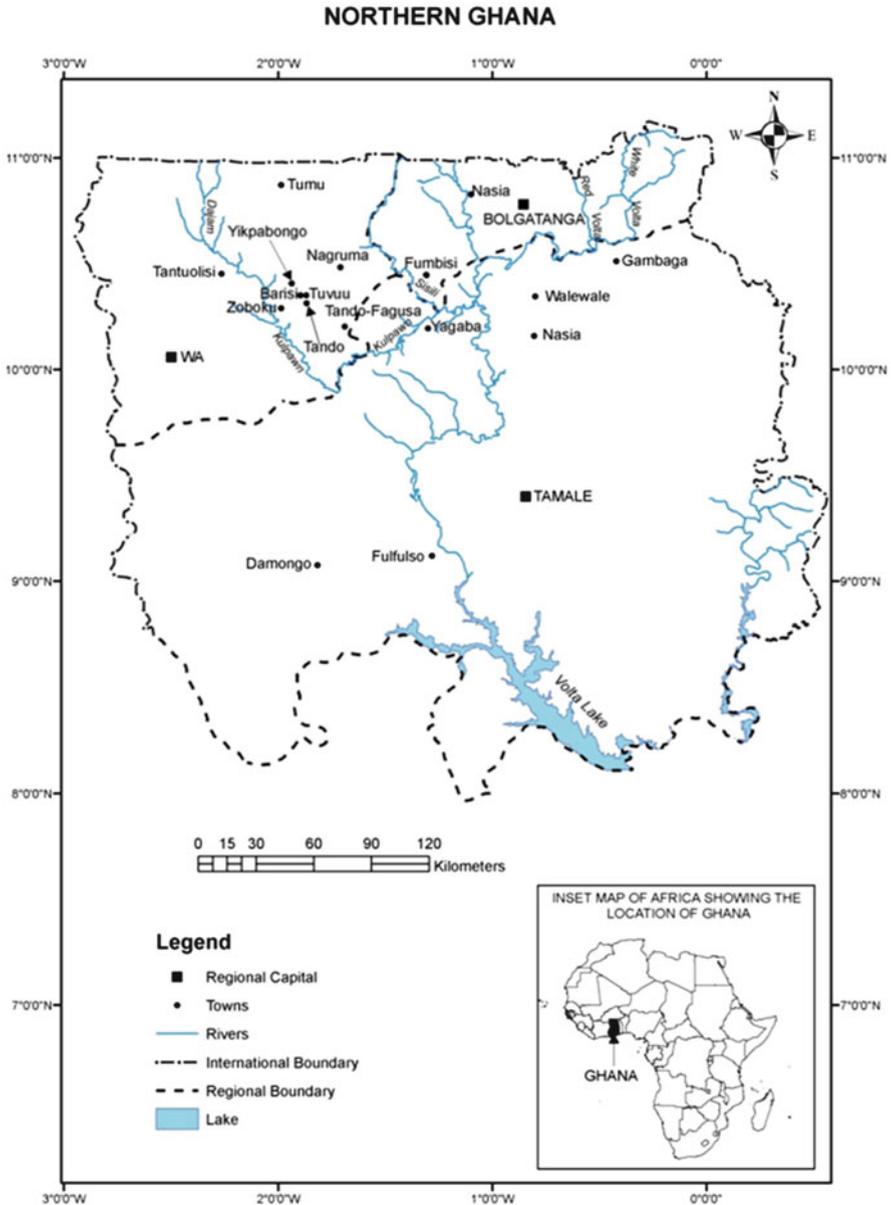


Fig. 2.1 The location of Yikpabongo in northern Ghana

been used for processing cereals such as millet (Anquandah 1998:91, 93–94). Remains of cattle, sheep, and fowl suggest these domestic animals were also kept. Besides figurines, the people of Koma Land produced pottery and iron, as the finds of slag indicate, and this was worked into tools such as knives and hoes, as well as jewellery

such as bracelets, rings, and anklets (Anquandah 1998:95–101; Kankpeyeng and Nkumbaan 2009). Participation in trade is suggested by the glass beads and cowry shells found, as well as a small number of figurines depicting people riding horses and camels (Anquandah 1998:78–82).

It would seem that Koma Land was abandoned and that the makers of the figurines have no link with the current population who have only been settled in the region for about 120–130 years (Kröger 2010:1). Depopulation may have been due to changing climatic factors (Brooks 1993:7–25) or diseases like river blindness (Patterson 1978:101, 116). Alternatively, it might be due to migration as a result of insecurity caused by slave raiding. This could have been from any or multiple directions, though perhaps a northern focus of slave raiding, if valid, is the most probable, to connect with the trans-Saharan slave markets in cities such as Timbuktu and Gao in Mali (see Insoll 2003). Certainly later in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Koma Land formed part of the middle belt in northern Ghana that suffered extensively from slave raids (Kankpeyeng 2009:213). Anquandah (1998:34) has suggested that the area might have been previously occupied by an “ancestral ‘Bulsa-type’” population and argues that the figurines depict various features he identifies as proto-Bulsa, for example, cowry decorated calabash helmets, amulets, and pendants, and he argues there are resemblances between ancient Koma pot forms and decoration, and recent Bulsa material culture (*ibid*:34, 49, 163–164). Ethnographic analogy is useful in broadening interpretive horizons rather than seeking direct resemblances (Insoll 2004:113–116), but whether such precise ethnographic parallels as those suggested by Anquandah (*ibid*) can be projected over this period of time is uncertain. The construction of ethnicity in northern Ghana and throughout West Africa has been shown to be historically situated, variable, and far from immutable (e.g. Lentz and Nugent 2000).

Since 2006 renewed research has been undertaken in Koma Land under the direction of B.W. Kankpeyeng. T. Insoll has participated in the project since 2010, and S. Nkumbaan since 2006. A key cluster of predominantly mound sites is located in and around the village of Yikpabongo. These were initially interpreted as burial mounds (Anquandah 1987), but are possibly the remains of shrines (Kankpeyeng and Nkumbaan 2009:201), perhaps functioning in the context of healing (Kankpeyeng et al. 2011). One of these mounds (YK10-3, subsequently coded YK11) was made the focus of excavation in January 2010 and January 2011 as part of a training excavation for students from the Universities of Ghana and latterly also from Manchester.

Mound YK10-3/YK11 (N10°14'48.0"W001°34'05.2') is approximately 18 m east–west and 15 m north–south. It has been excavated using arbitrary levels of 10–20 cm depth where natural levels are not readily recognisable and a 1-m grid reference recording system. The mound stratigraphy is simple with an inconsistent depth of archaeological material of between 20 and 30 cm depth overlaid by a thin layer of modern dust and rubbish (*c.* 1–3 cm), and below by sterile or nearly sterile soil (*c.* 10 cm) before the natural red gravel filled deposits are reached at a depth of 40–50 cm from the surface. The mound was radiocarbon dated to Cal AD 1010–1170 (970±40 BP) (YK10-3-N-10-L2, Beta-274104). This concurs with the four thermoluminescence and one other C14 dates obtained from elsewhere in Yikpabongo that range between the sixth and early fourteenth centuries AD (Kankpeyeng et al. 2011).

## The Figurines

### *Frequency and Types*

A total of 251 figurine and figurine fragments were recovered from mound YK10-3/YK11. These comprised 238 figurine fragments, 7 complete figurines and 6 largely complete figurines. Fragments thus dominate the assemblage. Of these, 240 had old breaks and 6 new breaks caused during excavation. Refitting has not been a focus of the research to date, so it is possible that a greater number of the fragments conjoin, but based on field observations only two instances of refitting were noted, a leg joining a torso (YK11-L12) and a finger possibly joining the rest of a hand (YK11-M11). The majority of the figurines would seem to have been modelled in one piece, but in one instance a larger seated figure was made with separate legs that were attached to the torso using a ball and socket joint (YK10-3-N11 [2]), visible as the figurine had fractured along the joint (Fig. 2.2).



**Fig. 2.2** YK10-3-N11.  
Figurine with ball and socket joint (overall height of figurine 18 cm, width at shoulders 7.5 cm)

**Fig. 2.3** YK11-H14/I14.  
Human and fish figurine  
(overall length 13 cm,  
maximum width 7 cm,  
maximum height 8 cm)



It is not possible, based on the frequently small fragments present, to provide a figurine typology, but the broadly salient groupings represented are human, animal, part human and part animal, and anthropomorphic cone figurines. Much more detailed attempts at classifying Koma Land figurines are provided by Anquandah (1998:129). What can be interpreted of the human figurines regarding parts represented, gender, age, and lateral understandings is considered below. The complete examples of these figurines are represented standing (e.g. YK10-3-N11 [1]), seated (YK10-3-N11 [2]), and possibly kneeling (YK11-H14/I14 Feature [Figurine 9]). The figurines are all of a small size, not exceeding 200 mm in height. The anthropomorphic cone figurines are a numerically much larger group. Forty-four fragments from shafts or bases of the cone figurines were found and it is likely that a significant percentage of the 43 heads recovered also come from these figurines. The facial features on the complete cone figurines found are either stylized but reasonably realistic (YK10-3-O11 [Figurine 4]), or very stylized (YK10-3-I15 [A]). They lack limbs and end in a cone or point at their base, the possible purpose of which is discussed below.

Part human and part animal figurines were rare. These included a figurine that possibly combines elements of humans and fish, represented by a human face with a Mohican crest or fin along the top of the head and a truncated limbless body (YK11-H14/I14 Feature [Figurine 1]; 130 mm × 80 mm × 70 mm) (Fig. 2.3). The single wing fragment found (YK11-O9) is almost certainly representative of a part human part bird figurine of a type recorded in previous excavations in Yikpabongo. This is a type of figurine that has been interpreted by Kankpeyeng and Nkumba (2009:201) as “probably reflective of people that practice witchcraft or are objects used in a ritual activity to cleanse people of their witchcraft”.

**Table 2.1** Incised cavities recorded on the figurines and figurine fragments

Top of head	Ear	Mouth	Nostril	Internal (visible through breakage)
32	26	5	23	4

The only figurine without any human characteristics was a complete chameleon (YK10-3-4-I15-B; 140 mm×45 mm×25 mm). The chameleon is still represented in craft production in northern Ghana; in contemporary Balsa metalworking, for example, a brass figurine surmounted by a chameleon is illustrated by Kröger (2001:491).

In general, the depiction of human features could be described as solemn. The majority are stylized and lack expression or emotion and are framed in static standing or seated postures. The exception is provided by a few examples of figurines with open mouths (e.g. YK10-3-P13). Anquandah (1998:164) has drawn specific parallels between the open mouths and Balsa dirges, eulogies, and war cries. As already mentioned, these precise ethnic analogies are unlikely, and the open mouths could equally express pain or terror, or the admission of libations, or for inserting substances.

### *Incisions, Cavities, and Healing*

The possible use of the figurines for libations or the insertion of substances is suggested by the cavities sometimes pierced into the figurine singularly or in combination, from the mouth, ears, nostrils, or top of the head (Table 2.1).

Computed Tomography scanning of five figurines indicated that these cavities could be incised deep into the figurine (Insoll et al. in preparation). For example, a cone figurine (YK10-3-4-I15A) has an incised cavity running c. 20 mm deep into the body of the figurine from the top of the “head” (Fig. 2.4), whilst in an adult female figurine (YK10-3-O11-2) cavities in the ears, nostrils, and top of the head were visible in the CT image. Another cone figurine (YK10-3-O11) has an interesting irregular cavity running up the centre of the figurine, but this might be a correlate of manufacturing rather than an intentionally formed cavity. The single animal figurine found, the chameleon, had no cavities. Based on a single example it is not possible to state that all animal figurines were excluded from having cavities incised.

Parallels from elsewhere in Africa exist for the cavities evident on the Koma figurines. Radiographs of a wooden Songye figurine from eastern Kasai in the Democratic Republic of the Congo indicated the presence of “magical substances” located in the head, anus, and abdomen. These were interconnected with channels running to the mouth (Hersak 2010:43). The head and stomach were thought by a Songye subgroup, the Bala, to house the *kikudi*, the “essential spirit”, which after death left the body through the mouth (ibid:44). A similar interpretation invoking

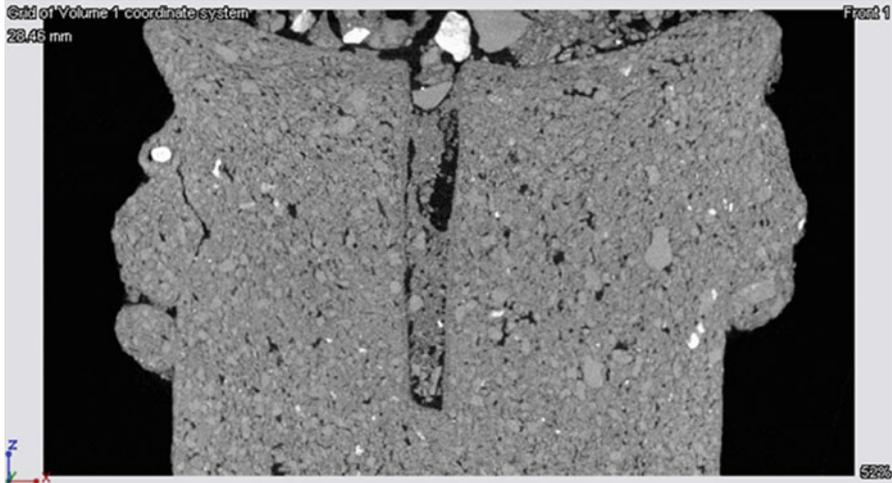


Fig. 2.4 CT scan of a figurine head (YK10-3-4-I15A)

“spiritism” (Apoth and Gavua 2010:211) might be attractive to apply to the Koma Land figurines and their cavities, but is weak without any form of supporting ethnographic analogy.

A significant number of archaeological terracotta figurines from Mali have also been CT scanned (Van Dyke 2009:76). Unfortunately, most are seemingly without provenance, which limits their usefulness. However, they do clearly indicate various types of cavities, including one figurine that had a round clay patch filling a hole leading to a stomach cavity below the figurine’s breasts. This cavity was “filled with substances of various, yet discernible densities” (Van Dyke 2009:83).

Besides being used potentially for offering libations, piercing cavities into the Yikpabongo figurines could have served other purposes as yet unknown. For example, the focus upon sensory organs—ears, nostrils, mouth—would appear significant beyond technical or aesthetic choice. Ancestors, if this is what the figurines were, could have been perceived as seeing, hearing, and speaking. The action of piercing, of breaking or travelling through surfaces might have been significant, as amongst the Yaka of south-western Congo where smelling was “the olfactory mediation between inner and outer” (Devisch 1991:297) and listening perceived as “a horizontal movement from outer to inner” (Devisch 1991:295).

Jacobsen-Widding (1991:36) notes that in many African cultures “the prime mediating metaphor is constituted by *fluid elements*” such as wetness in the body or blood. Equally, penetrating might function as mediating between inner and outer surfaces via the agency of fluids in relation to healing. This is especially so in the African context where the frequently found idea exists, according to Willis (1991:278), “that the invisible or ‘subtle’ counterpart-body has a causal relationship with the outer, visible body, such that changes in the first lead to corresponding changes in the second”.

## *Medicine and Power*

It is not known what substance or substances, if any, might have been used for libations or contained in the cavities of the figurines, but it is possible that both served a medicinal function. The term “power object” (Hersak 2010:38) would seem as apt to apply to the Koma figurines as “medicinal”, for the latter can be a problematic term to apply to African materials as “medicine” can have much wider meanings than in the West (Kankpeyeng et al. 2011) where it is often “narrowly defined as a specific physical remedy to a physically manifested complaint” (Page 2009a:438). It can, as with the Hausa concept of *magani*, include much more in that it may “refer to anything which corrects or prevents an undesirable condition” (Lewis Wall 1988:211), and emphasis is often placed on associated psychological, social, and supernatural factors (Twumasi 2005). Medicines could be packed into sculpture and figurines, poured over them, or tied onto them in packets (Ghent 1994; Biebuyck and Herreman 1995; Page 2009a, b). Libations are, as Page (2009a:438) notes, “sometimes also called medicine”, and “to medicate a sculpture was to call its powers into an active state from a somnolent one”.

The *minkisi* of the former kingdom of Kongo in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola provide the best-known category of objects in sub-Saharan Africa that combine container and a “medicinal” substance that empowers them. The *minkisi* can be a wooden figure, or a clay pot, raffia bag, or even a snail shell (MacGaffey 1993:43), but their activating medicine was the important component. These were various and included minerals such as quartz, white clay, and red ochre; and seeds, leaves, fungi; and other materials, hair, horns, charcoal, often collected for their metaphorical qualities (MacGaffey 1993:62; Page 2009b:92). The ingredients were then reduced to scrapings, ashes, and other small fragments, the power of which was constrained within their container (MacGaffey 1993:63).

The addition of materials might also have served to activate the figurines’ powerful essence (Insoll and Kankpeyeng in press). For example, Kankpeyeng and Nkumbaan (2009:196) recorded the use of iron ore for the eyeballs on several figurines they previously excavated at Yikpabongo. This is potentially, as they suggest (ibid), a representation of an association between the pre-eminence of iron ore as a material linked to iron smelting which was of particular ritual and symbolic importance in sub-Saharan Africa (cf. Herbert 1993; Schmidt 1997) with the pre-eminence of eyes as part of the human body.

Various forms of adornment are shown on some of the figurines and figurine parts, such as bracelets, necklaces, belts or waistbands, and straps criss-crossing over the torso. The majority of these could have served aesthetic or utilitarian purposes. For example, an almost complete standing figure (YK10-3-N11 [1]) has a necklace, waistband or belt, two anklets, four large bracelets on the lower right arm, four large bracelets on the upper left arm, and one bracelet on the lower left arm. Between the first and second bracelets on the upper left arm, there is a bulge or packet depicted fixed in place by and between these bracelets and extending above the first bracelet and the shoulder. Anquandah (1998:173) describes similar features

**Table 2.2** Figurine parts represented

Part	Total
Torso (can include arm)	13
Janus head	4
Head	39
Eye(s)	4
Eye(s) (+one facial feature)	9
Eye(s) (+two facial features)	2
Hand	5
Arm (can include hand)	29
Tongue	1
Chin and lips/mouth	15
Foot	8
Wing	1
Top of figurine (not cone)	5
Flat base of figurine	3
Part of cone figurine (no facial features)	44
Unidentified	51

to these, albeit modelled in greater detail, as *Nifelin*, or sheathed daggers, based on Balsa parallels. The absence of detail on YK10-3/YK11 examples does not allow such an interpretation, and alternatively, they might represent a protective amulet filled with medicinal/powerful substances. A similar feature is represented on the upper left arm of another seated figure (YK10-3-N11 [2]).

### ***Bodies, Gender, and Age***

The figurines and figurine fragments provide some potential information on gender, age, and understandings of the body (Table 2.2). First, it has to be asked whether the fragments were used as part of healing rituals focused on the body parts deposited—arms, heads, hands, feet, and torsos? This seems unlikely as such an interpretation could not account for the Janus heads, wing, pieces of bases, and unidentifiable fragments as anatomical elements.

Of the single body parts with a laterality that can be identified, right arms predominate at 16, with 7 left arms found. One right hand is also present and no left. Left and right eyes are equal at four each, and one right leg, three left legs, and one left foot are identifiable. Overall, right elements total 22 and left 15. These patterns, particularly in relation to the right arm, are of interest considering the near universal importance ascribed to the right hand (e.g. Hertz 1960). Hertz (1973:120, 121, 123) eloquently indicates how the right hand is linked with “communication with sacred powers” and the left hand “is directly concerned with all that is demoniacal” and “the needs of profane life”. We do not know if such thinking also related to the makers of the Koma figurines, but it is not an unfair supposition to suggest it might have.

The presence of 43 heads would appear significant especially as a single skull was also found (see below). The importance of the head in African concepts of the body has been remarked upon. Drewal and Drewal (1983:166), for example, refer to the head in Yoruba (Nigeria) belief as “the site of one’s personal essence, potential and destiny”. Hairstyles accentuated the head (Sieber and Herreman 2000), scarification and painted patterns emphasised the head (Bohannon 1988), medicines incised under the skin empowered the head (Drewal and Mason 1997), and head-rests supported the head (Nettleton 2007). The majority of the heads are single, but four Janus heads were also found. Jacobsen-Widding (1991:37) argues that Janus figurines represent “the power of fertility in Central and West African cultures”.

The corpus of figurines and fragments provides some insight into thinking about gender. The majority of figurines and fragments, 221, have to be classed as gender unknown or not applicable based on the elements present. Seven males (including two possible males potentially represented by stylized beards), 3 females, and 20 androgynous/genderless identifications were made. Females were identified through the presence of breasts (e.g. YK10-3-N11), and males through the presence of features such as beards (e.g. YK10-3-N11). On one male, the penis bulge is seemingly modelled (YK10-3-N11 [1]), but none display genitals, unlike previous figurines recorded (Anquandah 1998:164–165). A possible exception to the absence of genital representation is provided by examples of modelling around the libation hole on the top of some figurines (e.g. head, YK10-3-N10). This can be interpreted as representing the female sexual organ with the labia clearly depicted and the libation hole the vagina. Alternatively, on certain examples it might represent a cowry shell (e.g. head, YK10-3-N10).

What is significant is that the vulva/cowry motif is found on figurines that are otherwise best defined as androgynous/anthropomorphic/“genderless”. Chapman and Gaydarska (2007:57) define androgyny as the “importance of a union celebrating the complementarity of the two genders”. In the absence of the depiction of genitals and other anatomical features, a precise “androgynous” interpretation cannot be made, but is suggested by the faces and bodies represented that are not easily attributable to either male or female. If this is what was sought, it might perhaps engage with the recurrent theme in African religious beliefs remarked on by Zahan (1979:11), that “the idea of androgyny, the ideal form of the human being, reflects the concern for perfect equilibrium between male and female and for their total reciprocity in equality”. Fertility might also be relevant in thinking about the androgynous figurines as the complementary fusion of both the sexes and genders. Identifying age patterns represented by the figurines is somewhat subjective. It would seem that no children are depicted, with 53 adults represented, 2 possible adults, and 196 classified as not known or not applicable.

Ancillary elements that are represented such as hairstyles, putative scarification and keloids, and items of decoration and dress, such as the bracelets and waistband/belts previously referred to, are not particularly informative. Excluding the latter, these include part of a hat (YK10-3-I13), possible keloids on an upper right arm (YK10-3-N10), an arm perhaps indicating the individual was wearing a skin (YK11-H14/I14), the depiction of a skirt (YK10-3-O11, Figurine 2), a crest of

Mohican style hair (YK10-3-P11), and putative scarification on a foot (YK11-L12), and an arm and shoulder (YK11-O9). However, it is important to note that the majority of the figurines are not seemingly meant to be realistic; they perhaps serve “as compressions and distinctions” (Bailey 2005:201). They depict elements of quotidian reality, but are not fully representative of the real world and everyday practices and life for they transcend this.

## Figurine Contexts and Associations

The dispersal patterns of the figurines and figurine fragments varied across mound YK10-3/YK11 with the highest concentration in square N10 at 41. Other significant concentrations included 34 recorded in squares H14/I14, which was also in part associated with a feature discussed below, and 16 in square O11. In two contexts, figurines were found associated with the remains of possible libation structures. In square YK10-3-I15, a layer (3) composed of arrangements of potsherds was recorded at a depth of *c.* 15–20 cm. The potsherds were in at least two instances from the same vessel as represented, for example, by a large pot pierced at its base. These were associated with a clay structure, perhaps a libation hole, and a stone quern. This was over a layer containing two recumbent figurines: a stylized anthropomorphic cone and the chameleon described previously, as well as a figurine fragment, a head. The putative clay libation structure was directly above the pointed figurine. An iron razor, ring, point, and part of an iron bracelet were also found in this layer.

In contrast, in square YK11-012 three figurine fragments and a pointed anthropomorphic figurine, again associated with a spherical stone quern, were recovered from above a possible libation structure. This was found at a depth of *c.* 15–18 cm from the surface and was made of low-fired clay (daub) and arranged in a circular pattern interwoven with potsherds. The inference that can be made from these features is that presumably liquid offerings were being made to the earth through the agency of the holes in the clay structures. This would appear to be ancillary to the figurine usage for libations, as also suggested by the variable patterning of figurines found both above and below the libation structures.

A different feature was recorded in squares YK11-I13/I14/H13/H14 at a depth of between 30 and 45 cm from the surface. A dense concentration of material of *c.* 120 cm×80 cm and composed of two complete figurines, an androgynous adult with a flat base (YK11-H14/I14 Feature [Figurine 9]; 160 mm×67 mm×50 mm) and the human/fish figurine described previously, as well as 15 identifiable figurine fragments, 12 unidentifiable figurine fragments, spherical stone querns, fragments of quartz, numerous potsherds, and 5 pottery discs was noted (Fig. 2.5). The pottery discs were formed from potsherds and seem, based on ethnographic parallels, to have been stoppers for horn containers, usually horns filled with medicine (Akamasi Williams, January 17, 2011, personal communication). Twenty-eight were recorded in the 2011 excavations. This interpretation might be further supported by the recovery of eight small (*c.* 60–65 mm length) clay conical shaped objects, sometimes



Fig. 2.5 YK11-I13/I14/H13/H14 feature

paired (e.g. YK11-H13B) from the 2011 excavations. These, it has been suggested based on previous finds (Kankpeyeng et al. 2011), were perhaps referencing horns that provided healing and transformative powers to shrines through the addition of powerful substances in the cavities found on the top of these objects.

The material in the YK11-I13/I14/H13/H14 cluster had been deliberately arranged and deposited, literally “structured deposition” (Richards and Thomas 1984). To the north of this cluster, fragments of clay, the residue of a semicircular structure, were evident, possibly again associated with some sort of libations activity. This was the largest intact feature recorded in the two seasons and is significant in again indicating that the mound essentially represents ritual actions bringing together important or powerful materials over short time periods—single events even, multiply represented—but cumulatively over longer time periods as represented by the complete mound.

Beneath the main cluster, a second defined smaller, c. 60×40 cm, cluster containing two further figurine fragments was recorded. This also produced a small iron razor or knife. Considering the probable overall shrine context and possible medicine and healing related nature of much of the material found (Kankpeyeng et al. 2011), it is conceivable that this knife/razor and the other example from YK10-3-J16 might have been used for scarification, circumcision/excision, and surgical procedures. A similar “knife” recorded amongst the Nankanse as used for “tattoo(ing)” (scarification), is illustrated by Rattray (1932/1969:330).

Human and animal remains were rare and the bone recorded was friable and degraded. However, taphonomy cannot solely account for its rarity as Anquandah (1998:87–91) recorded fragmentary human remains, and bones from cattle, sheep, fowl, and monkey in his excavations in Yikpabongo. Rather, selectivity in what was interred in mound YK10-3/YK11 is apparent. This was evident in a feature (see Beta-274104 above for radiocarbon date) recorded at a depth of 30–40 cm below the surface in square YK10-3-N10 where a fragmentary human skull had been buried beneath deposits containing a largely complete cone figurine, 22 identifiable and 18 unidentifiable figurine fragments. The skull had been placed upside down with the front facing into the earth. Fragments of human long bones were placed to the southwest and southeast of the skull, the latter in association with a human jawbone.

A pile of human teeth had also been placed directly east of the skull. Identification of the teeth recovered from the vicinity of the jawbone and in the separate pile by Mr. Peter Burrows (March 14, 2010, personal communication) indicated that they were mixed and from two individuals, a younger adult of about 20 years old (19 teeth) and an older adult (8 teeth). It is not possible to state with whom the jawbone was associated, whether the younger or older adult. Two of the teeth (upper right and upper left lateral incisors) of the younger adult showed evidence for tooth filing. This is a practice that persisted. Rattray (1932/1969:331) refers to the then widespread distribution of tooth filing in the first quarter of the twentieth century amongst many ethnolinguistic groups of northern Ghana, but provides no detail on the teeth that were filed.

The features described are seemingly representative of the *in situ* residue of ritual action and support the argument that the majority of artefacts, including the figurines, are in their original positions as deposited. This is supported by the repeat deposition evident with layers of similar material culture in comparable patterns “superimposed on each other” (Kankpeyeng and Nkumbaan 2009:196). As, for example, in the recurrent patterning of the spherical stone (quartz and granite) querns and the discs formed from potsherds overlying the layers containing figurines that were noted as a repeated contextual feature (Insoll and Kankpeyeng in press).

## Insights into Ritual Posture and Practices?

Of the 46 figurines and figurine fragments for which positional data were available, 6 were upright and 40 were recumbent. Cardinal orientation also varied with this data available for 35 examples. This indicated that 11 were oriented northwest–southeast, 8 east–west, 7 north–south, and 9 northeast–southwest. As argued elsewhere (Insoll and Kankpeyeng in press), this would seem to be indicative of how they were originally placed rather than post-depositional disturbance. Equally, the low height of the figurines and their associated arrangements would appear significant. The figurines rarely exceed 15 cm in height and are laid out in horizontal spreads and not vertical clusters. It is possible that crouching, kneeling, squatting, or sitting rather than standing were the postures adopted in depositing and arranging

the figurines and their associated material culture. These are ritual postures that have been recorded ethnographically in northern Ghana (Kröger 1982:Plates 1, 2, 3a, 3b; Mendonsa 1982:120; Fortes 1987:59) and elsewhere in West Africa (Badel-Mathon 1971:229–233).

The ritual actions possibly associated with these postures could have varied. Offering libation is suggested by the structures recorded, and squatting might have been the posture adopted to offer libations to some of the figurines as well, especially the pointed cone figurines. It is possible that they were produced with a point or cone at their base for placing or inserting in the ground, rather than for hafting as Anquandah (1998:129) has suggested. The recurrence of pierced holes in their tops might also correlate with their being offered libations after insertion in the earth, presumably via a low posture such as squatting or sitting as only *c.* 8–10 cm of the figurine would have been exposed (Insoll and Kankpeyeng in press). However, the recumbent position of the majority of figurines and figurine fragments for which positional data is available suggests this was not necessarily the ritual action completed at the mounds themselves.

Offering libations could have been directed to the figurines themselves within a framework of ancestral veneration, but potentially also as a reflection of chthonic beliefs directed to the earth through the agency of the figurine. Small clay cups and small clay vessels modelled on gourds or seeds that have been found (Kankpeyeng and Nkumbaan 2009:196) might represent the types of receptacle used for offering libations. These and the small size of the cavities in the figurines suggest libations were poured into, rather than from, the figurines. From context YK10-3-L13 the rim of a small clay pouring vessel with a pronounced lip was recovered, and in YK10-3-N11 half a ceramic gourd or seed was found. The latter was drawn from a single lump of clay, a technical choice that could likewise be linked into frameworks of chthonic beliefs related to the power of clay as a product of the earth. This interpretation is perhaps strengthened by the presence of six lumps of clay in mound YK10-3/YK11 that were unmodified except for being fired. Their occurrence would seem to reinforce the idea that clay, as a substance, was important.

## Discussion: Fragmentary Ancestors?

It is apparent from the evidence that the figurines and figurine fragments seemingly served multiple purposes relating to medicine and healing (Kankpeyeng and Nkumbaan 2009:201), ritual practices, power, protection, memory, personhood, identity construction and maintenance, and indirectly, memory. Yet these could all be subsumed within an interpretive framework centred on ancestors. Anquandah (1998:159) has argued that the figurines of Koma Land functioned within an “ancestral cult”, which seems a reasonable interpretation, but he also suggests they are “the materialisation of belief patterns which have survived in modern Bulsa *Wen-bogluta Jadoksa* and animal totemic practices”. It is likely that this level of analogical precision drawn from specific recent practices in relation to ancestral *Wen-bogluk*

(see Kröger 1982:6) and totemic beliefs associated with a contemporary ethnolinguistic group is insupportable for reasons described earlier.

Chapman and Gaydarska (2007:4) suggest that “bonds predicated on material culture” can be used to create and maintain “lasting bonds between persons or groups” via deliberate fragmentation “and the use of fragments in enchainment processes”. In thinking about the Koma Land figurines perhaps wholes have been privileged when fragments may be equally meaningful, but following Brittain and Harris’s (2010) recent critique, it is suggested that both wholes and fragments are significant, not one or the other, and enchainment could be via both. Rather than the sole detritus of accidental breakage of ritual objects brought together, perhaps the fragments represent, in part at least, deliberate processes of fragmentation and breakage linking individuals and kin groups through ancestors represented by the figurines, or were fragmented after an individual’s death, enchainning the living and deceased to ancestors/figurines. The ubiquity of fragments compared to whole figurines suggests some meaningful intention might underpin their fragmentation and deposition, processes that were perhaps as meaningful and important as the creation and curation of the much rarer complete figurines themselves.

Personhood may also have been constructed through relationships with the fragments, within the concept of “dividuality” where “people are composed of social relations with others to the degree that they owe parts of themselves to others” (Fowler 2004:8). More specifically, “partible” personhood, a form of dividual personhood derived from Melanesian ethnography (Brittain and Harris 2010), may be of broad interpretative relevance. Fowler (2004:25) describes how this can be related to substances and the essences they form, and that these “can be continually circulated, monitored, transformed”, and is again linked with enchainment and fragmentation. Thinking in this way suggests the importance of relationships with shrines, ancestors, and kin groups, and potentially allows for the incorporation, recycling, and movement of objects and substances perhaps represented by the figurines, their contents, and their fragments.

Equally, it would be unwise to subjugate the individual in thinking about personhood in relation to the Koma material. It is an error, as Morris (1994:146) notes, to think of African concepts of the person as a “cipher of the social collectivity”. Individuality is potentially represented in YK10-3/YK11 by archaeological objects such as a stone lip or earplug, the occasional cowry shell, teeth, iron bracelets and rings. This too could be in relation to ancestors, individuals, perhaps loosely analogous to those that are involved in the Talensi concept of *Yin* or destiny where unique configurations of ancestors are served via unique ritual relationships by the individual whose destiny these exemplary ancestors control (Fortes 1983; Insoll 2008:383); ancestors who are materialized in the *Yin* shrine via objects linked with the ancestor such as a man’s tools or weapons or a woman’s brass bracelets or beads (Fortes 1987; Insoll 2008:392).

It is possible that the YK10-3/YK11 figurine fragments were used for enchainment perhaps also linked to the possession of body parts, as represented by the skull, jawbone, teeth, and long bones recorded, in so doing joining together—enchainning—the living, the dead, and the figurines. Perhaps this was part of a cycle

constructing full personhood analogous to the Talensi processes. Morris (1994:128) summarises as “attained by degrees over the whole course of life, and is focused on the male elders who are transposed after death into an ancestor”. The human remains could come from the newly deceased that were contemporary with the figurines or represent earlier corporeal relics. Previously, a skull was also recovered from another mound in Yikpabongo (YK07/D3/D4/C3/C4) indicating this was not a singular instance. This skull had been placed face downwards with 27 ceramic discs surrounding it, but associated with no other human remains (Kankpeyeng and Nkumba 2008:100). Again, within exploring the concept of partible personhood, Fowler (2004) describes how social circulation of physical parts of the deceased could be significant along with relations of “accumulation” (Chapman 2000:47 cited in Fowler 2004:66).

The removal of the skull as part of secondary burial rites linked with ancestors has been recorded ethnographically in West Africa, but not in northern Ghana. Meek (1925/1971:18) refers to skull removal and reverencing among the Mama, Vere, and Mumuye of northern Nigeria, where if a village relocated, the “ancestral skulls” were also “moved to a shrine near the new village” (1925/1971:18). Similar practices, where the skull was kept in a pot with holes perforated at the bottom to allow the passage of rain and libations of beer are also described for the Ganawuri, Berom, Jarawa, Chamba, and Anaguta of the same region (Meek 1925/1971:129). The coincidence with the YK10-3/YK11 deposits and their perforated vessel sherds and putative libations evidence is noteworthy even if analogically meaningless. More pertinent is the existence of the secondary burial practices themselves, which suggest at a general level according to Kujit and Chesson (2005:175), “the idealization of links between the living, the deceased, and collective ancestors”.

Boddy (1998:271) has made the point that it is not uncommon in Africa for a person to be viewed as “composite, multiply sourced, and constituted through reciprocal engagement in a recursively meaningful world”. Together the human remains and the figurines and figurine fragments could tie into such frameworks and seem to make powerful statements about ancestry but also linkages to place. Place, claims to autochthony, and ancestry are often coterminous in northern Ghana. Possession of the land is made through first-settler status claims (e.g. Lentz 2006). The density and number of mounds in Yikpabongo would suggest that it was linked with what Chapman and Gaydarska (2007:12) describe in the context of Balkan prehistory as “place-value”, i.e. “the self-perpetuating place-value, nourished and maintained by increasing ancestral power”. Approximately 85 house and stone circle mounds have been identified in Yikpabongo and the number is certainly higher but the current settlers have disturbed or built on the mounds.

Finally, other ancestral “clues” are potentially represented. First, the possible emphasis on androgyny, and second, absence of depictions of children might be significant. Children are unlikely to have been accorded ancestral status, and the androgynous ancestor recurs in African mythology as amongst the Bambara and Dogon of Mali (Zahan 1979:11, 135). Third, prominent external navels are also modelled on nine figurines and figurine fragments (e.g. standing largely complete figurine YK10-3-N11-1). Nakamura and Meskell (2009:217) make the interesting

point in relation to navel modelling on figurines from Neolithic Çatalhöyük in Anatolia that besides providing a visual marker of the link between the unborn and the living, it may “extend beyond offspring to producing ancestors, both in a literal and symbolic sense”. Fourth, the Janus heads and the model of the chameleon might represent time, the ability to look into the past and the future, manifest via two heads on one individual, and the independently swivelling eyes of the chameleon, ethnographically understood as “beings created in primordial times” (Roberts 1995:51).

## Conclusions

The ideas explored in this chapter are preliminary and provisional. A larger corpus of figurines will help in testing them further. Equally, extrapolation beyond mound YK10-3/YK11 is unwise, as this interpretation is contextually specific rather than generically applicable to all Koma Land figurines across time and space. Figurines have been given prominence here but these would not be understood without examining their context and association from an inter-disciplinary perspective, otherwise the trap of what Bailey (2005:13) refers to as “figurine essentialism” where “figurines just *are* important” could be fallen into. The Yikpabongo figurines are spectacular objects, evocative and powerful aesthetically, but it is their context that unlocks their meaning.

Context suggests that within assessing their place in the “archaeology of spiritualities”, their role was vital, multi-functional, and pre-eminent in explaining, configuring, and sustaining life and personhood via their substance, form, and biography. Ultimately, although it is unlikely that the concept of “art” applies to the Yikpabongo figurines (Kankpeyeng et al. 2011), Willis’s (1991:278) point has to be agreed with that mobiliary “art” in Africa does not represent ancestral spirits: “they also *are* such spirits”. It is suggested that similar beliefs were in existence over a thousand years ago and that the YK10-3/YK11 figurines, both fragmentary and whole, are their representation; they too are material ancestors.

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