

The stone circle sites of Komaland, northern Ghana, in West African archaeology

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Abstract

An Iron Age complex which flourished around the fifteenth to the seventeenth century AD is currently under investigation in Komaland, northern Ghana. The complex is known chiefly from its numerous burial sites characterized by stone circles and earth mound superstructures, and containing human and animal burials, domestic pottery, milling stones, metal implements and cast figures, together with ubiquitous and distinctive terracotta sculptures. This paper discusses the findings from the first season's excavation and their significance in West African archaeology.

Résumé

Des recherches actuellement en cours portent sur un complexe de l'Age du Fer, qui a prospéré entre le 15e et le 17e siècle après J.C., en Komaland, au nord du Ghana. Le complexe est connu surtout par ses nombreux sépultures caractérisées par des cercles de pierres, avec comme superstructures des tumulus de terre où se trouvent des inhumations de humains et d'animaux, de la céramique domestique, des molettes, des outils en métal, et des figures coulées, avec des sculptures en terre cuite ubiquistes et distinctives. Cet article présente des résultats de la première saison de fouilles, et discute de leur signification dans l'archéologie de l'Afrique Occidentale.

Introduction

The region of northern Ghana southwest of Sandema and Fumbisi (10°–10° 30'N., 1°–2°W.) which is drained by the Sisili and Kulpawn tributaries of the White Volta River (Fig. 1) is inhabited today chiefly by Koma people. The Koma speak Konni, a language genetically closely allied to Buli, the language of the Balsa who today occupy the area immediately north of Komaland (Naden 1985; Koelle 1854).

Present-day Komaland comprises tree grassland, the commonest tree being the shea, *Butyrospermum parkii*, whose nuts are used for producing cooking oil, pomade and oil lamp fuel. The modern Koma practise mixed farming, including: cultivation of millet, guinea corn,

groundnuts, yam and cassava, which are stored in cribs or bins made of grass and twigs; rearing of sheep, goats, cattle, pigs and guinea fowls; fishing; and limited hunting. They build cylindrical mud houses with conical grass-thatched roofs. They practise traditional medicine and, until a few decades ago, iron technology and potting.

According to oral traditions, the first Koma arrivals in the area encountered a thickly wooded country marked by the ruins of old settlements, hence they named the place *Dzikpiebongo*, meaning 'ruins in the forest'. With the aid of local oral information, ethnohistory and preliminary systematic surface reconnaissance undertaken in 1984, it was ascertained that some 27 Koma villages located in an area roughly 23 km by 20 km within the Sisili-Kulpawn basin have, located near them, numerous stone circle tombs which exhibit identical cultural contents and associations (Fig. 1).

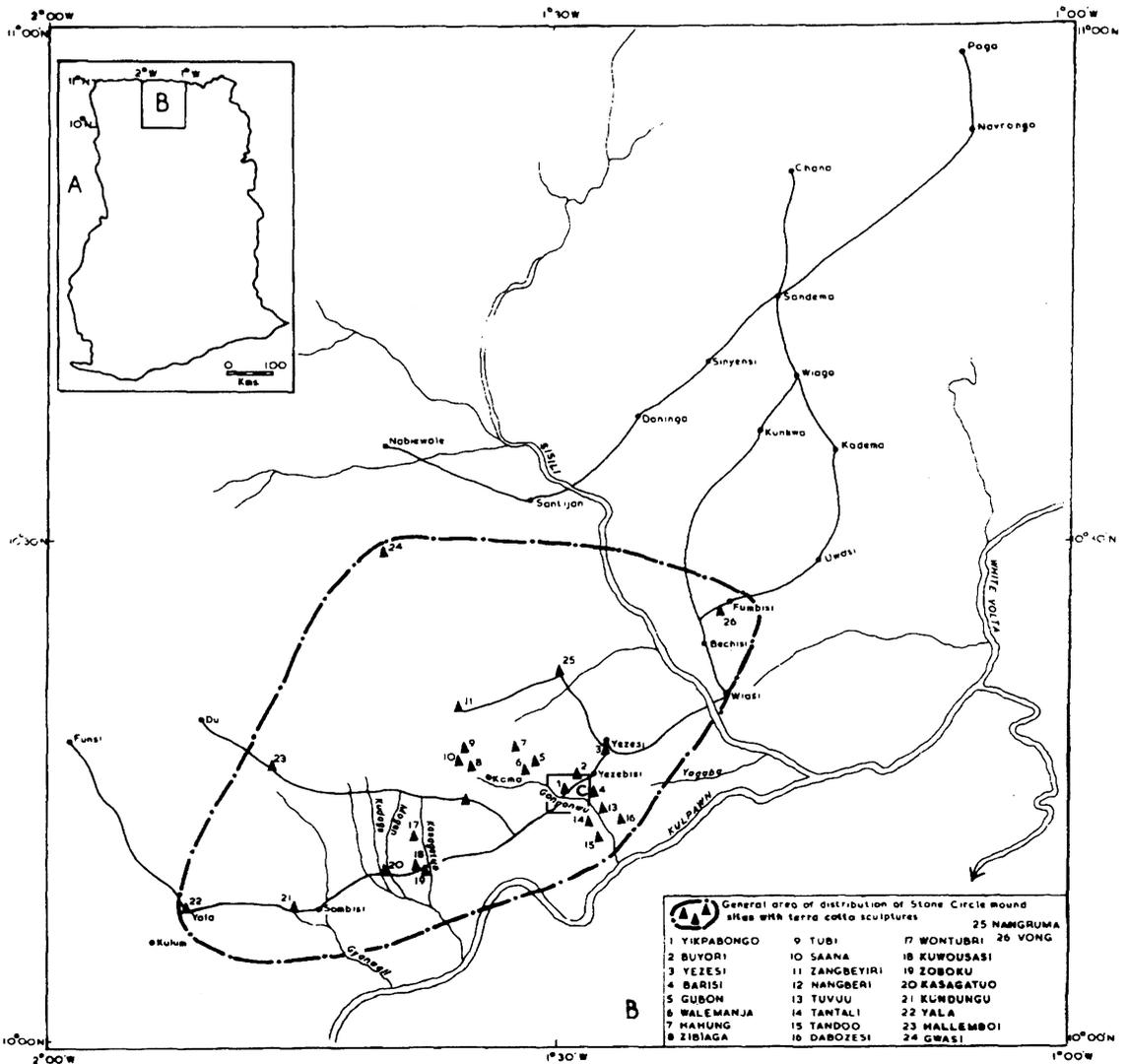


Figure 1 Stone circle mound sites of the Sisili-Kulpawn basin, northern Ghana.

The Sisili-Kulpawn basin is the meeting-point of three geological series, namely Voltaian sandstones and metamorphosed sedimentary rocks, granites, and metamorphosed lava. These rocks probably provided generations of Komaland people with raw materials for milling equipment, building and tomb construction. Also, the basin has a strategic central location athwart the trade routes linking the Sahelian and Sudanic trans-Saharan trading centres of Jenne and Gao with the states of Mossi, Dagomba, Mamprussi and Akanland. In fact, Jenne and Gao are respectively located only 400 km and 500 km from Komaland.

Survey and Excavation

During the first major season of research conducted from January to March 1985, attention was focused on the sites of Yikpabongo East and Yikpabongo-Bakodeng (10°15'N., 1°34'W.), located near the centre of the stone circles' distribution. At least 600 mounds have been counted in this area.

At Yikpabongo East, a 30-m grid was laid out extending 420 m from north to south and 360 m from east to west. The area was levelled and a contour map was drawn (Fig. 2). All mounds, with their dimensions, were marked on the map so that it might serve as a quick source reference for subsequent research. Altogether 105 mounds were mapped, ranging from 4 m to 35 m in diameter and up to 4 m in height. They may be grouped in three major size-categories, as follows:

2 mounds over 18 m in diameter

7 mounds 11–18 m in diameter

96 mounds 4–10 m in diameter.

Owing to limited time and resources, the first season's excavations were restricted to investigation of two large and two smaller mounds:

Yikpabongo East

Mound L 370 (4 m diameter, 0.6 height): fully excavated

Mound H 310 (12 m diameter, 1.2 m height): almost fully excavated

Mound I 220 (4 m diameter, 0.6 m height): half excavated.

Yikpabongo-Bakodeng

Mound (11 m diameter, 0.6 m height): half excavated.

The test excavations were aimed at ascertaining the general character of the stone circle complex and testing the hypothesis that the bulk of the sites represent stone circle burial mounds akin to those of Senegambia and Mali.

The quadrant method was employed in the excavation, each quadrant being excavated in turn, leaving baulks between. The method of stripping by means of arbitrary levels in 10 cm spits was adopted. The details of the excavation and the findings are described in a monograph (Anquandah and Van Ham 1985). From the selected units excavated, the general stratigraphy of the mounds shows two major horizons, first a substructure dug into the ground about 0.3–0.5 m below ground level and found to contain human and animal remains, pottery, grinding stones, iron implements, pottery discs, cowries, brass castings and terracotta sculptures; and secondly a superstructure consisting of the earth mound, varying in diameter and height and circumscribed at the top by a circle or ring of stones numbering between ten and fifty, depending on the size of the mounds (Fig. 3).

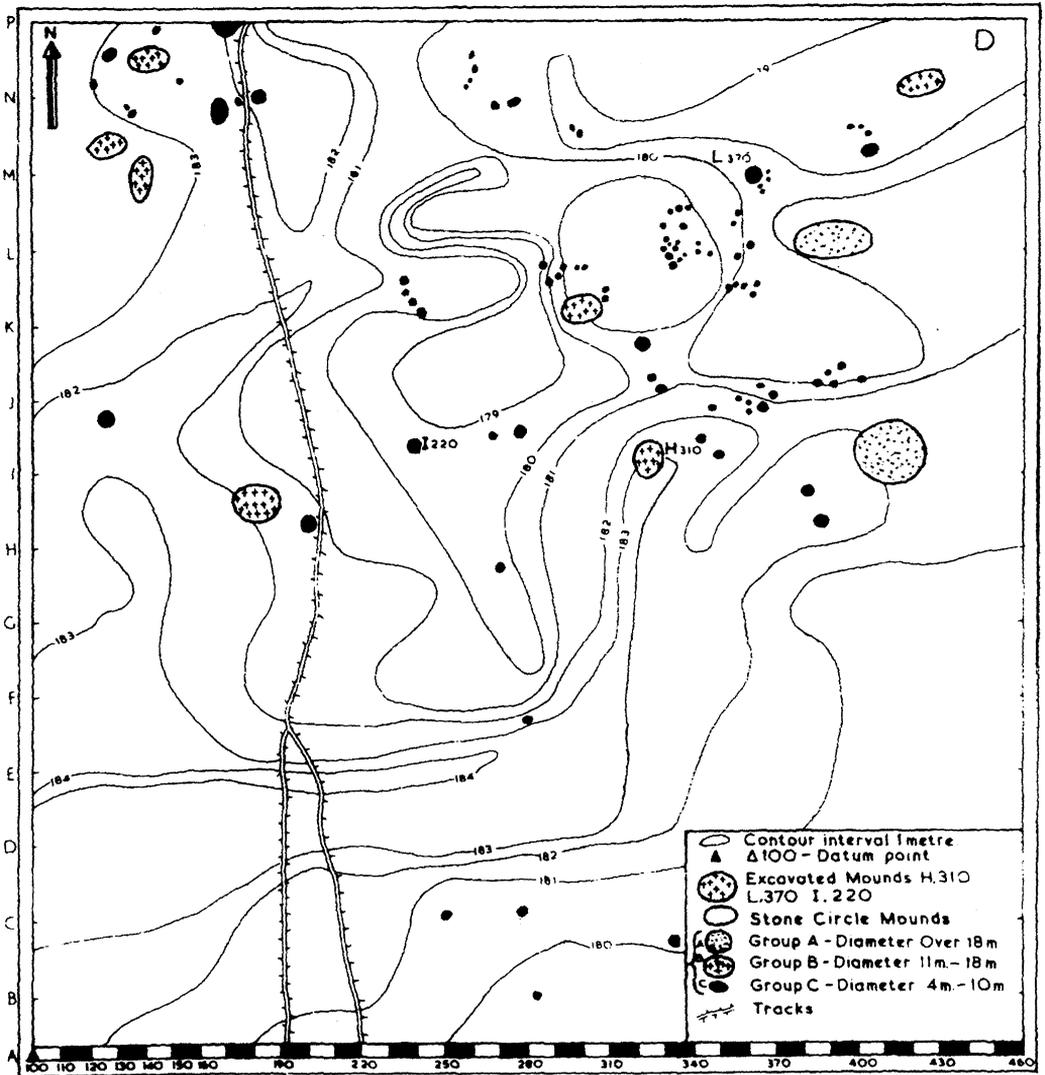


Figure 2 Plan of the Yikpabongo East excavations, 1985 (scale in metres).

Reconstruction of funerary practices

From the excavations, it is possible to make a hypothetical reconstruction of the funerary customs of the Iron Age Komalanders. It appears that a mud-structured burial chamber or platform was prepared on which the body was laid. The orientation of the body varied, but there was a tendency for the head to be aligned to the southeast. Two or three pots were arranged around the head and some pots were perhaps used as head-props for the deceased. Other pots containing drink-offerings were arranged along the sides and near the feet of the corpse. A cow, sheep, goat or pig was sacrificed and buried opposite, and near to, the human burial (Fig. 4). The larger mounds contained multiple human and animal burials and probably belonged to persons of higher political or socio-economic status.

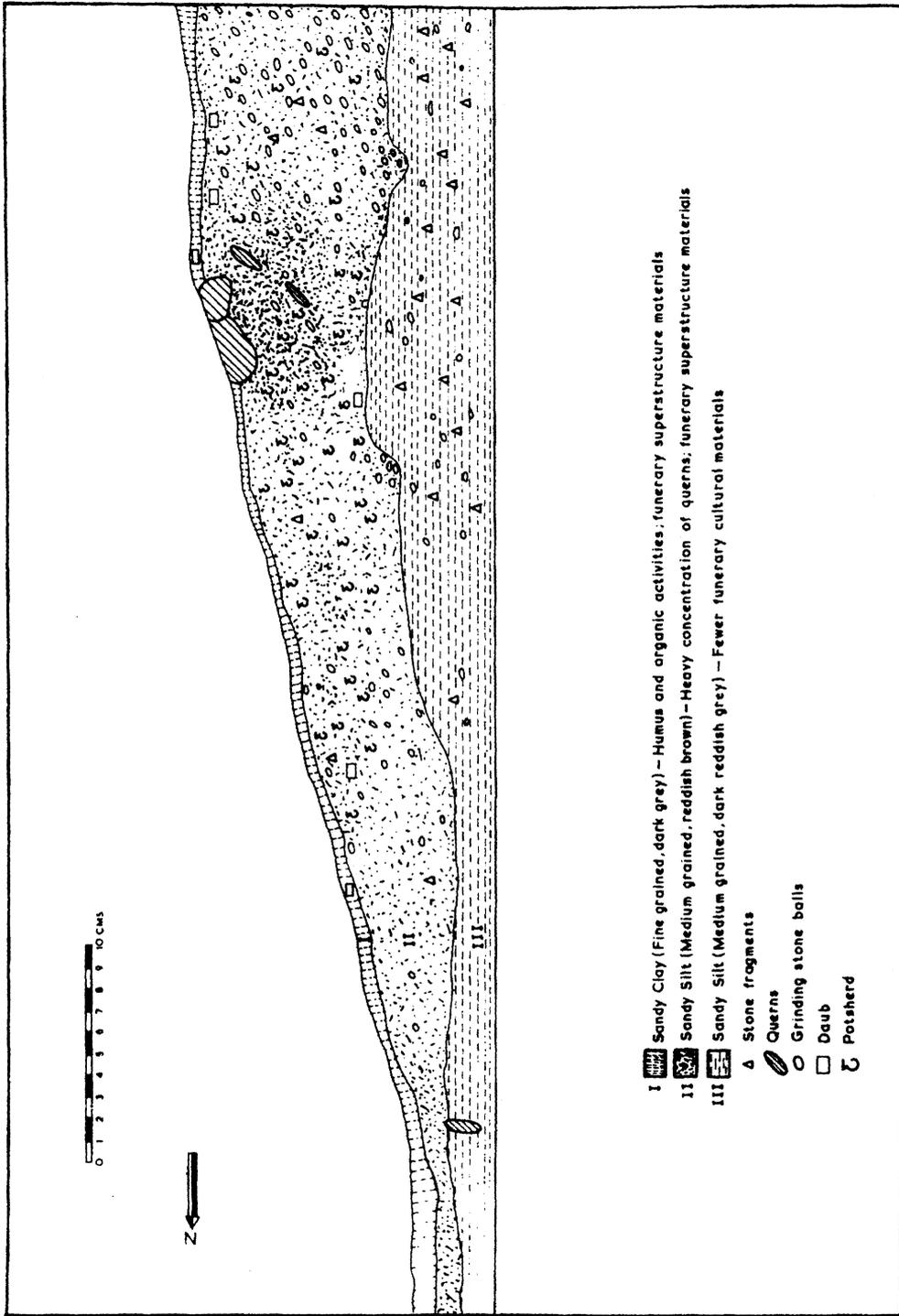


Figure 3 North-south section through stone circle mound H310, Yikpabongo East, 1985.

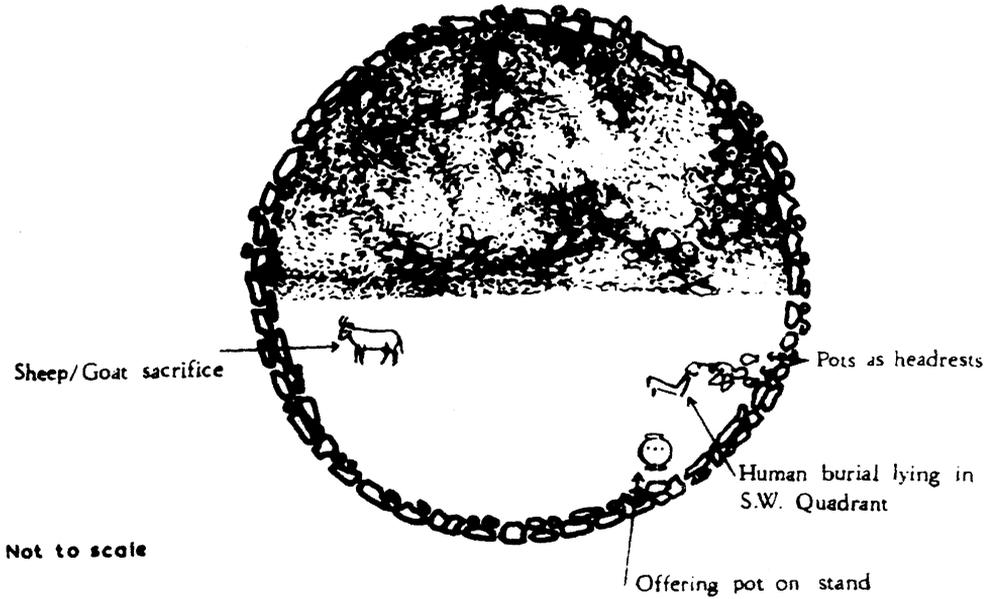


Figure 4 Artist's impression of stone circle mound L370, Yikpabongo East.

The body itself was decorated with brass or copper anklets, bracelets and necklets. What appears to have been the personal property of the deceased was also deposited in the tomb, namely, venus or cowrie shells which perhaps served as money, pottery discs thought to have been used as gold weights, iron daggers, arrowheads, knives etc. At some stage in the burial ceremonies, it appears that the clan relations of the deceased dumped on the burial their kitchen equipment and utensils including hundreds of domestic pots, and food milling equipment such as stone querns and balls together with numerous terracotta sculptures. Some of these depict humans, perhaps representing departed clan ancestors or clan deities, others depict animals or cultural objects, such as stools which perhaps represent clan totems.

When the ceremony was completed, a superstructure was built over the burial by heaping sandy clay and silt from the surrounding area on to it. In the process of raising the superstructure, more kitchen ware and equipment, pots and terracottas were thrown in at all levels. In one small tomb (L370), at Yikpabongo East (Fig. 4), field analysts counted some 5179 potsherds, 41 milling stones, 19 terracottas and 29 pieces of daub. A large tomb (H310) also located at Yikpabongo East contained 34,453 potsherds, 1786 milling stones, 258 terracottas, 77 pottery discs, 6 copper ornaments, 8 iron ornaments, and 85 pieces of daub. In half of one mound excavated at Yikpabongo-Bakodeng, some 226 terracottas were found associated with cowrie shells, *Cypraea annulus*.

Cultural materials and their significance

Modern Koma lifestyle appears to be on the whole unrelated to that represented in the archaeological sites, and present-day Koma have no knowledge of the authors of the mounds. However, there is no doubt that the complex is an indigenous one. The domestic pottery and the terracottas are made from local clays. Much of the pottery is coated with red slip and decorated with roulettes of carved wood, plaited grass or cord—styles which are commonly found in Ghanaian Iron Age sites located north of latitude 8°N. (Anquandah, 1982). The pottery comprises bowls, jars and cups. A few pots have a distinctive decorative motif which imitates cowrie shells, a motif which is common in the terracottas.

The terracottas may tentatively be classified as follows: Class A—human figures (over 90%) (Fig. 5); Class B—animal figures (about 5%); Class C—activity figures such as camel and horse riders (about 0.5%); Class D—cultural figures, such as stools (about 1%). The artists were obviously familiar with animals in their environment: dogs, lions, baboons, snakes, birds such as owls, and aquatic animals like hippos and crocodiles. Other animals like horses and camels probably reflect trade and cultural contacts with Saharan, Sahelian and Sudanic regions. Two terracotta pieces depicting camels with riders found in the Tantala-Tuvuu area (Anquandah and Vam Ham 1985) and one depicting a horse and a rider found in an unspecified location in Komaland are all surface finds. The horse-and-rider terracotta is paralleled in a figure found recently at Jenne with an age estimation of the eleventh to the thirteenth century AD (Cole 1983: Fig. 2). In parts of Africa south of the Sahara, to own and ride a horse is a symbol of affluence, power and leadership; and African sculpture of equestrians is thought to be a strong expression of ideology and belief (Cole 1983).

The Komaland anthropomorphic terracottas (Class A) may be classified according to whether they have a single head, a double or 'Janus' head, or multiple heads. Those in the first two categories are often depicted wearing turbans or helmets; some sculptures are elaborately ornamented with 'cowrie money' and jewellery, or clad with daggers or knives on their shoulders; and water-bottles are slung on the shoulders of others.

Iconography has been defined as studying the subject matter and meaning of a work of art (Rubin 1985:24). Vansina (1984:101) states: 'art objects are physical images which are the materialization of mental images associated with definite meanings, that is icons'. A consideration of Komaland terracotta iconography is therefore pertinent here. It appears that the stone-circle artists were probably guided by religious and social motives to produce symbolic, naturalistic or stylized representations of clan deities, ancestral spirits, or stool and

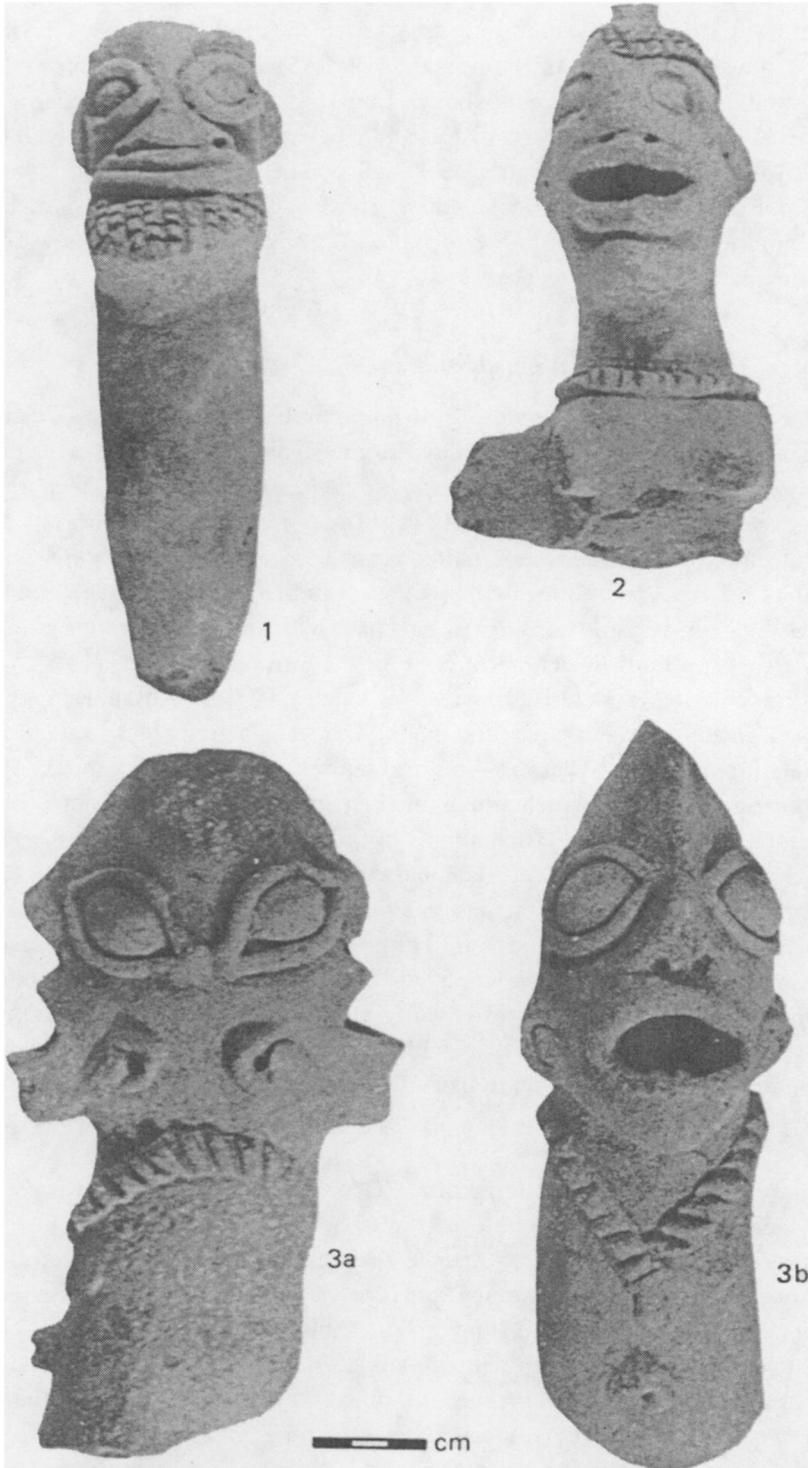


Figure 5 Komaland terracottas: 1, 2. from Yikpabongo-Bakodeng; 3. from Yikpabongo East mound H310 (two views).

animal totems and motifs, symbolic of wealth or fertility comparable perhaps to the *Akuaba* concept in Akan woodcraft or art (Cole and Ross 1977). Recent studies of traditional religion in the neighbourhood of Komaland have revealed some similarities between the funerary ideas and practices of modern Bulsa and those of ancient Komaland, especially in the use of terracotta heads depicting calabash hats decorated with cowries, the Bulsa use of the *Jadok* concept of spirits embodied in animals, and the cult of burial under stone and mound superstructures (Kroger 1982). The dynamism and variety of pattern and concepts exhibited in the Komaland terracottas suggest that the artists had unwritten traditional art-producing systems of formulae and modifiable schemata.

The terracottas provide pictorial documentation of Iron Age craftsmanship, religious ideas, sex and beauty, dress styles, an ecosystem suggesting wetter conditions than today and populated by forest and aquatic fauna and flora, hints of long-range commerce with Saharan regions based on camel transport, and social festivals or court ceremonies entailing the use of horses. It is not yet possible to say who may have been involved in the long-distance Saharan trade postulated here, or which trade goods and trade routes were involved. But the Indian Ocean cowrie shells found in some of the excavated mounds, the terracotta art motifs indirectly attesting to use of cowries and camel transport and horses—all suggest the existence of a Komaland 'kingdom' which may have been linked with the trans-Saharan trade system. This commerce probably enriched the populace, enabling them to pay for the labour of erecting so many hundreds of packed tombs of various sizes and to patronize numerous skilled and creative artists and *cire perdue* metal workers.

Although the Koma art work differs in style from Akan art of middle and southern Ghana, the multiple-head and 'Janus' traits (Fig. 5:3) suggestive of community or extended-family solidarity and joint social responsibility and consultation are a feature that is common in seventeenth- to nineteenth-century Akan art in the media of ceramics, woodcraft and gold weights (Anquandah 1982; Cole and Ross 1977). So far the writer has seen one nearly life-size human representation in terracotta, and a fragment of another, at the Yikpabongo sites. It is, however, likely that more examples will be found in the future. If so, the ceramic art of Komaland may well compare with that of Ife not only in the way it combines naturalistic and stylized features (Anquandah 1986) but also in its production of life-size terracottas (Willett 1971, 1967).

The ancient Komaland funerary customs are roughly akin to those represented in the Senegambian and Malian megalithic tombs, although the Koma stone superstructures are much smaller (Thilmans, Descamps and Khayat 1980). In a number of respects, therefore, the cultural complex of the Komaland stone circle sites may have traits and features represented in other West African cultural contexts but, on the whole, the Koma sites may be said to constitute a unique complex in Iron Age West Africa.

Age estimations

So far, two thermoluminescence age estimations have been obtained for the Koma sites. Both are derived from terracotta sculptures obtained from the surface of burial mounds. The results are 405 ± 135 yr (Max Planck Institute, Heidelberg: K-144) and 480 ± 80 yr (Clamart Laboratory, Paris: 53855). Radiocarbon age determinations are expected shortly from analysis of bone samples obtained during the 1985 excavations. Meanwhile, the TL

results, together with the Indian Ocean cowries found in the excavations, suggest that the Koma complex flourished around the fifteenth–seventeenth centuries AD, during the heyday of the Mali and Songhai empires and the trans-Saharan caravan trade (Anquandah 1986).

Conclusion

In the coming seasons, it is expected that greater attention will be paid to the retrieval and study of human skeletal remains from as many tombs as possible within the entire area of distribution so as to afford some idea of Iron Age demographic patterns. If it can be demonstrated, as I hypothesize, that ancient Koma funerary custom required all clan relations of a deceased person to dump domestic pottery, milling equipment, totems and 'Jadoks' of terracotta and *cire perdue* metal castings on the tomb, then it should be possible to relate computable items of material culture such as tombs, pots, terracottas or grindstones to the demography of their users (Willigan and Lynch 1982:41; Shaw 1981; Sutton 1981).

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