

From uterus to jar: the significance of an infant pot burial from Melora Saddle, an early nineteenth-century African farmer site on the Waterberg Plateau

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ABSTRACT

The interment of infants in ceramic receptacles was a fairly widespread funerary practice in southern Africa during the Iron Age. Using the rich source of ethnographic data on child-death and mortuary practices among Southeast Bantu speakers, we explore the cultural significance and symbolic meaning of an infant pot burial uncovered on Melora Saddle, an early nineteenth-century African farmer settlement on the Waterberg Plateau, Limpopo Province. The skeletal remains belong to a perinatal individual, aged between 34 weeks gestation and newborn. The short-necked jar was interred in an upright position either inside, or close to, a house. Ethnographic data show that a conceptual link was made between a woman's reproductive capacity and the land's fertility, as well as between potting and procreation. A close symbolic link existed between pots, wombs, mothers and their houses. Child-birth and child-death were fraught with ritual danger that had to be averted to ensure the well-being of the family and the community. Any deviations from the natural order of things generated pollution (heat or dirt), which threatened a woman's fertility and a lineage's continuation. Such ritual impurity not only destabilised the social order, but also disturbed the natural order, as a result of which the rains, the ultimate sign of a community's well-being, might stay away. To counter the ritual danger, and thereby to restore a woman's fertility and avoid a drought, fetuses and infants were buried in jars, either in a cool, wet place in the bank of a river, or inside a house or in the shade under its eaves. As in the case of the Melora Saddle jar, the bases of such burial vessels were often deliberately perforated, evidently a symbolic act to ensure that a woman would become pregnant again. Ash, representing an extinguished fire, served as an important cooling agent in such burials, which would account for the location of several midden burials uncovered in Iron Age sites.

KEY WORDS: fertility, foetus, miscarriage, neonate, perinatal, pollution, pot burial, ritual impurity, symbolisation, uterus, Iron Age, Waterberg.

During a rescue excavation of an eroding ceramic vessel on Melora Saddle, an early nineteenth-century African farmer settlement on the Waterberg Plateau, Limpopo Province, the remains of an infant skeleton were uncovered. Relatively few pot burials are known from the South African Iron Age, and even fewer have been uncovered intact. The Melora Saddle pot burial constitutes one of the better-preserved examples and should, therefore, shed valuable light on beliefs and rituals associated with child-death and burial among Southeast Bantu-speaking societies. This article seeks to explore the incidence of and possible symbolic meaning attached to such infant pot burials in Iron Age contexts. Only by relating the infant pot burial from Melora Saddle to its encompassing socio-cultural context, will it become possible, albeit partially, to discover the deeper meaning of the ritual and the symbolic structure which underpinned it. As point of departure, we subscribe to Kelley's observation (1997: 362) that "African social life is richly imbued with elaborate symbolism, and the material aspects of society are similarly endowed".

THE SITE AND ITS CULTURE-HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Melora Saddle is located on Landmans Lust 595 LR (1:50 000 Topographical Sheet, 2328CD Melkrivier), a farm which now forms part of Lapalala Wilderness, a nature reserve in the Waterberg Biosphere, near present-day Vaalwater in the Limpopo Province (Fig. 1). The Saddle site, designated 2328CD1, nestles against the southern base of a prominent hill, locally known as Melora. The site was initially investigated by Jan Aukema (1988), who, in his field notes, recorded the hill’s name as Malora or Malore. Subsequent enquiries have revealed that the correct rendition is Melora. In the Sotho-Tswana language cluster, *melôra* constitutes the plural form of *molôra*, a noun which may refer to either ‘ash’ or the chaff-flower, *Achyranthes aspera* (Cole 1995: 230; Snyman 1990: 89).

Severe sheet erosion on Melora Saddle has exposed archaeological features and artefacts, such as stone-built granary platforms, hut rubble, potsherds and broken pot lids, lower grindstones and upper grinders. Small finds recovered from the surface include copper bangles, a copper earring, iron slag and implements, glass beads, a clay spindle whorl and clay figurines, including that of a rhinoceros. The erosion probably stems from the initial impact of Iron Age occupation, which was subsequently aggravated by farming practices prior to the establishment of the nature reserve in the 1980s. Site 2328CD1 comprises the remains of a cluster of more than 50 cone-on-cylinder houses, several stone mounds on which grain bins could have been raised, a few indeterminate

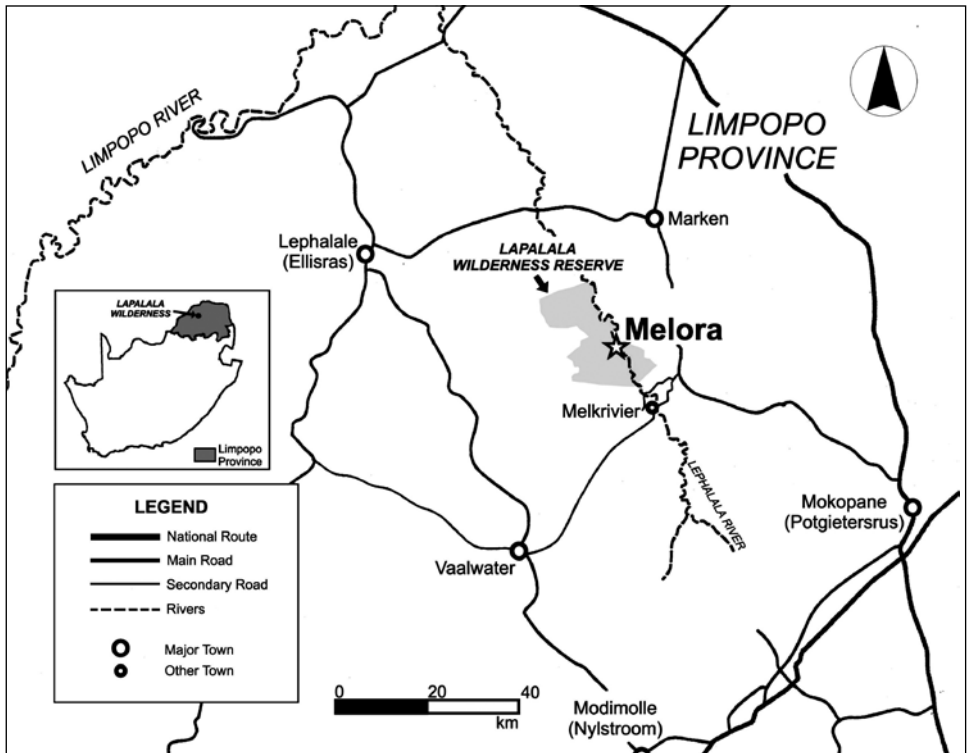


Fig. 1. Melora and the Waterberg Biosphere, Limpopo Province.

stone walls, and what is either an Iron Age copper mine or, more probably, a historical prospect pit (Reeks 2007) on its southwestern edge (Fig. 2). During a recent site survey, evidence of extensive Late Iron Age (or early historic?) settlement was encountered all along the base of Melora Hill, but the relation of Site 2328CD1 to this larger complex remains to be determined.

The initial excavations on Melora Saddle unearthed wall rubble and fragmented floors of six highly eroded rondavel-type houses constructed of poles and dagha (mud) (Aukema 1988, 1991).¹ Wood charcoal from House 1 (M2.1.1) yielded a date (Pta-5139) of 120 ± 45 years b.p. Following the retrieval of the pot burial in 1997, another eroding clay pot was uncovered in 2002, but it contained no cultural or human material. Subsequent excavations in 2003 focused on a shallow midden, which yielded a small faunal collection, two stone-walled arcs, and an additional house/dagha patch.

Due to fluctuations in the atmospheric levels of radiocarbon in recent centuries and the resultant wiggles in the radiocarbon curve, it is impossible to determine the occupation span of the Melora Saddle site on the basis of the above date alone. The archaeological context, however, suggests that it was occupied by African farmers early in the nineteenth century AD. Such a date can be inferred from the minute opaque pure-white glass bead that was found in association with the pot burial. Glass trade beads are useful chronological markers, and it has been observed that such small seed beads probably began to arrive in southern Africa “around 1830” (Wood 2008: 186). Although this needs to be explored more fully, the general absence of European imports suggests that Site 2328CD1 was probably occupied prior to the permanent settlement of Trekker pioneers on the Waterberg Plateau sometime after 1850 (Natrass 1989: 5). Current attempts to obtain OSL (optically stimulated

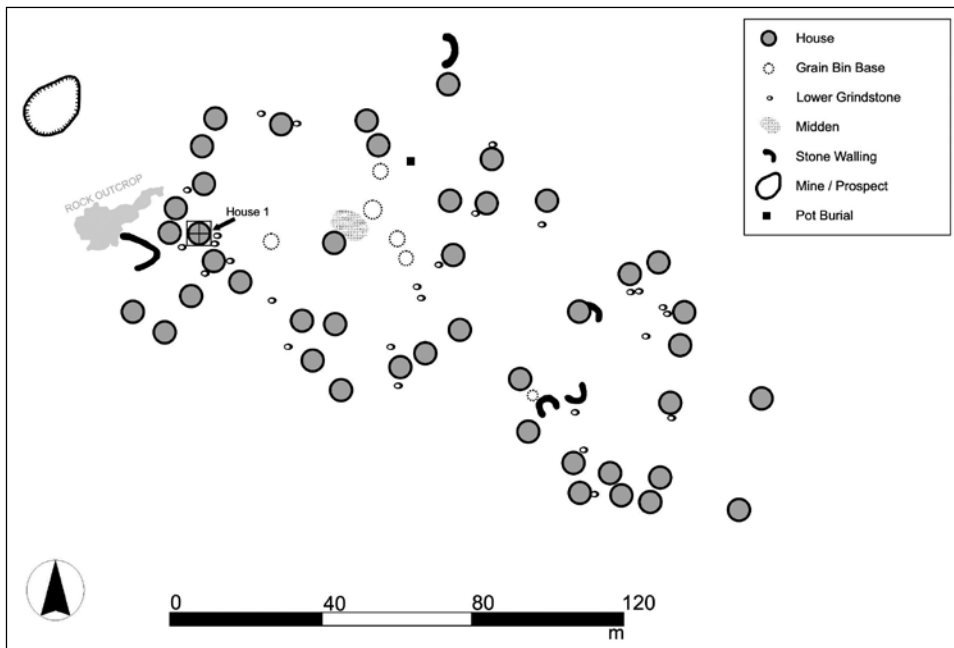


Fig. 2. Site plan of Melora Saddle (2328CD1).

luminescence) samples and dates from the Saddle and Hilltop sites will hopefully resolve the dating issue.

A few scattered samples of Middle Iron Age *Eiland*-style ceramics have been collected from the site's surface, but the pottery from Melora Saddle, both excavated and surficial, predominantly belongs to the late **Moloko** ceramic style. **Moloko** ceramics, which in the case of Melora Saddle are decorated mainly by comb-stamped bands interspersed with graphite and ochre burnishing, are widely associated with the Sotho-Tswana language cluster (Huffman 2002). No formal analysis of the recent ceramics from Melora Saddle has as yet been done, but in terms of Huffman's (2007) reclassification of the Sotho-Tswana and Nguni ceramic sequences, they could provisionally be assigned to a so-called *Waterberg* facies. The latter is derived from the *Rooiberg* facies, which, in turn, is seen as an outcome of a merger between *Ntsuanatsatsi/Uitkomst* and *Madikwe* pottery. The *Waterberg* facies is associated with "various Ndebele and North Sotho people" and is assumed to reflect cultural interaction between these two language groups in the region (Huffman 2007: 174, 433).

The Saddle site also postdates the large stone-walled complex on Melora Hilltop, which has yielded a date (Pta-5129) of 250 ± 50 b.p. from a midden excavation. Based on the evidence of settlement layout, house form, ceramic style and glass trade beads, it has been argued that Melora Hilltop was occupied by Northern Ndebele speakers sometime during the eighteenth century AD (Aukema 1991; Huffman 1990, 2004). Disappointingly, no extant oral traditions have as yet been traced that could shed further light on the identity and history of the inhabitants of either the Hilltop or the Saddle site.

The research at Melora forms part of a long-term study of Iron Age settlements and lifeways in the drainage basin of the Lephhalala River. From a culture-historical perspective, this region is particularly interesting since various Sotho-Tswana and Northern Ndebele speech communities converged on and co-existed in the area until historical times. Historical records suggest that only two chiefdoms of note were present in the Lephhalala drainage basin during the first half of the nineteenth century, namely the Bididi or Tlhalerwa of Shongwane near Villa Nora and the Seleka near Beauty (Cumming 1850: 191; Kirby 1940: 174). Both form part of the Sotho-Tswana language cluster, although they respectively claim long-distant Shona and Ndebele roots. They were located to the north of Melora, along the middle and lower reaches of the Lephhalala River. Their nearest neighbours, the Ndebele of Langa, congregated mainly along the Mogalakwena River to the east (Jackson 1982: 12, 60). Although they have retained some Nguni cultural practices and are fully cognisant of their historical roots, most Northern Ndebele communities over time adopted either Northern Sotho or Tswana as their home language (De Jongh 2002; De Jongh & De Beer 1992; Van der Ryst 1998). It can thus be inferred that, with reference to Melora Saddle, Sotho-Tswana ethnography constitutes an appropriate source of information on ritual practices relating to child-birth, death and burial. The ethnographies of the Shona and the Northern Ndebele should also prove to be of value, but there is unfortunately a dearth of ethnographic information on the latter (De Beer 1986: 14–15).

THE RESCUE EXCAVATION

The eroding ceramic vessel was first noticed by well-known conservationist Clive Walker, at the time managing director of Lapalala Wilderness. As it lay in a game track



Fig. 3. View of Melora Saddle and the rescue excavation.

intersecting the Saddle site and was therefore bound to be damaged, the University of South Africa's (UNISA) Archaeology Division was requested to obtain the necessary permit to recover the pot (Van der Ryst et al. 2001) The exposed pot ($23^{\circ}51'22.4''$ S; $28^{\circ}18'38.7''$ E) was excavated using standard archaeological techniques. Since only the rim was visible above the surface and no other structure or feature was clearly associated with it, an arbitrary one-metre grid was laid out over the protruding pot (Fig. 3).

To determine the nature of the find, an arbitrary first layer was excavated to a depth of about 30 mm around the pot. This revealed an outline (about 60 mm in width) of less compacted soil around the pot, which most probably demarcated the pit or hole into which it had originally been interred. Due to the eroded nature of the site the exact spatial context of the find could not be established. As is apparent from the accompanying site plan, the buried pot was located within a cluster of hut floors (Fig. 2). A few pieces of hut wall dagha were subsequently recorded near the one-metre grid, suggesting that the pot was interred either inside, or close to, a house.

Only the pit outline was further excavated. The pot was gradually exposed, but the internal soil deposit was left in place to act as a stabilising agent. Because various hairline cracks were noticeable, the body of the pot was supported externally by



Fig. 4. Removal of the pot from the burial pit.

several strings as a precautionary measure. The complete pot, with its internal soil deposit, was removed from the burial pit as a single unit (Fig. 4). The rim was broken only in a few places due to pre-excavation impacts, but most of the pieces were recovered.

Initial investigation of the contents of the internal deposit of the pot revealed fragmented skeletal remains of possible human origin. The pot was therefore transferred to the Department of Anatomy at the University of Pretoria for further analysis.

THE JAR AND ITS CONTENTS

The short-necked jar features incisions on the lip/rim, a decorative motif commonly known as 'rim or lip notching' (Fig. 5). This motif is widely associated with the late **Moloko** ceramic cluster and also appears in the *Waterberg* facies. The exterior is fire-blackened, which suggests that the vessel originally served as a cooking pot. As a result of the expanding internal deposit, the pot cracked in the middle along a vertical line. Several smaller cracks are also visible. A smallish hole at the base of the pot evidently did not derive from post-depositional damage, implying that the base had been deliberately pierced before burial, most probably from the inside (Fig. 6). The pot has now been stabilised using reversible ceramic glue, which consists of one part Mowital B30H and three parts acetone.

The dimensions of the jar are as follows:

- 177 mm in height (taken vertically from the lip/rim to the base)
- 243 mm in diameter (taken horizontally at the broadest section or equator of the pot belly)
- 170–5 mm mouth diameter (taken on the outside of the rim).

The deposit inside the jar was put through a fine-meshed sieve, which revealed the following stratigraphic sequence:

- The deposit was capped with the broken base of a very thick ceramic vessel.
- The deposit underneath the sherd contained smaller potsherds, pieces of charcoal and a minute (less than 2 mm in diameter) opaque pure-white glass bead. All these potsherds, as well as others recovered from the deposit around the buried pot, were undecorated.
- The remains of the infant were positioned in the bottom half of the jar.

THE HUMAN REMAINS

The human remains found inside the pot consist of the skeleton of an immature individual (Fig. 7). Of the skull, only small fragments remained. The mandible, although reasonably complete, was found in three pieces. Several unfused vertebrae, ribs, both scapulae and both ilia were present, as well as parts of both humeri, femora and tibiae and the proximal parts of both ulnae. Some other long-bone fragments were also found. Unfortunately, the remains were too fragmented and disjointed to obtain a clear indication of the original disposition of the body inside the jar. Based on the size of the pot, the baby must have been very small if its whole body had been interred upon death. On the other hand, the fragility of the bones makes it less likely that they could have been buried after retrieval from a decomposed body.

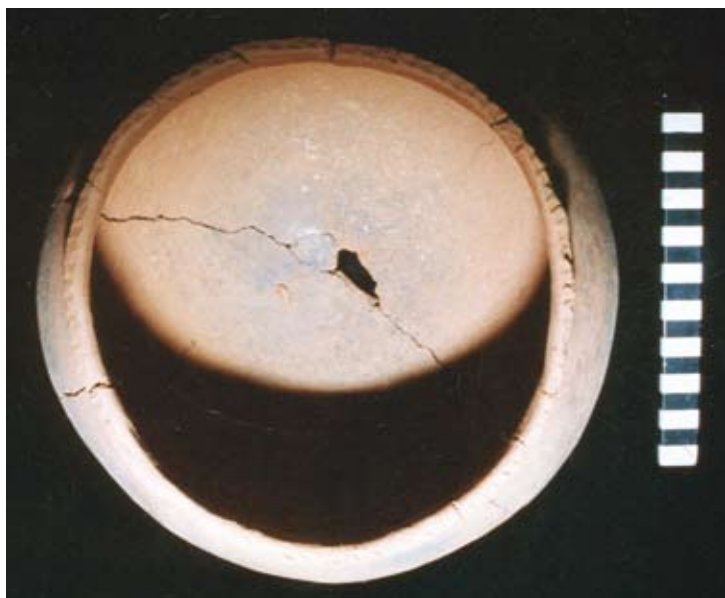


Fig. 5. The Melora Saddle jar.

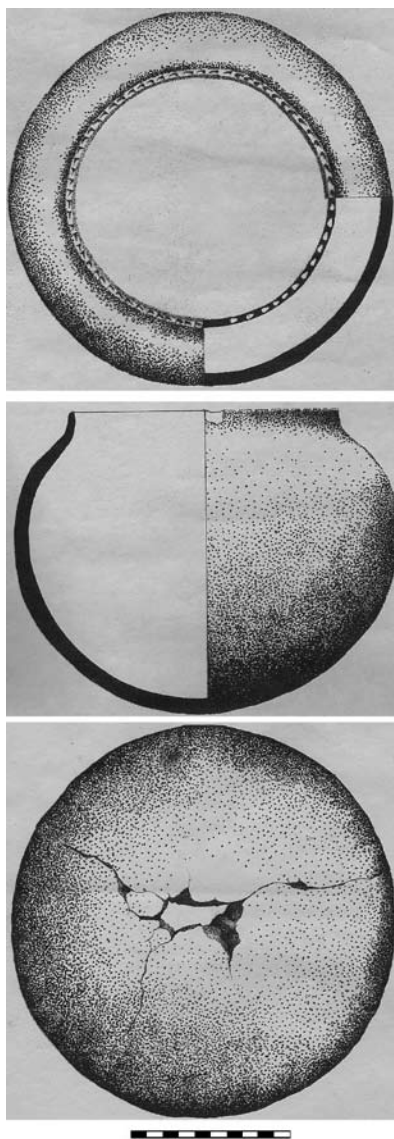


Fig. 6. The Melora Saddle jar: different aspects.

The remains are clearly those of a very young individual. The two halves of the mandible were unfused, and none of the vertebral arches were fused to each other or to the centrum. In the mandible, the tooth germs of both lateral incisors and the left central incisor were present. The degree of development of these teeth indicated an age of about eight months gestation to newborn (Ubelaker 1989). The measurements of the tibia and femur (Table 1) were processed in linear regression formulae as published in Scheuer and Black (2000). These yielded results of about 32–34 weeks gestation. It should be kept in mind, however, that the long bones were slightly eroded at their ends, which could have influenced their measurements. In summary, the age of this



Fig. 7. The skeletal remains of the Melora Saddle child.

baby was probably somewhere between 34 weeks gestation and newborn. The Melora child therefore falls within the perinatal category, a widely used term for infants whose estimated age at death ranges from six to seven lunar months to the first four weeks after birth (Murail et al. 2004: 269).

In addition to the tooth germs mentioned above, a small part of a developing crown of an unidentifiable molar was also noted. No signs of disease could be discerned on any of the teeth, or on the bones. It would appear that the long bones are relatively short in relation to the development of the teeth, indicating retarded growth, but the remains were too badly preserved to make a conclusive statement. Due to the immaturity and fragmentary nature of the remains, no assessment of the sex or population group could be made. The burial context and the associated material cultural remains suggest, however, that the Melora Saddle child belonged to the resident Late Iron Age Sotho-Tswana community.

IRON AGE POT BURIALS

As a first step towards unravelling the cultural significance of the Melora Saddle pot burial, it is essential to note that it does not represent a unique phenomenon in the local archaeological record. Although not many examples have as yet been uncovered,

TABLE 1
Measurements in millimetres of the long bones of the Melora Saddle skeleton
(Buikstra & Ubelaker 1994).

| Dimension | Length | Diameter |
|-----------|--------|----------|
| Ilium | 21.3 | |
| Humerus | | 4.4 |
| Femur | 57.0 | 5.3 |
| Tibia | 49.5 | 4.9 |

the interment of human remains in ceramic receptacles appears to have been a fairly widespread funerary practice in southern Africa during the entire span of the Iron Age. The brief overview below provides a glimpse of the variation observed in such mortuary practice, as well as the commonalities, all of which should enable us to gain a better understanding of the deeply symbolic nature and import of the Melora Saddle burial.

Two pot burials found adjacent to hut remains were recovered from the fifth- to eighth-century AD site of Broederstroom, near the Hartbeespoort Dam in Gauteng (Mason 1986: 131, 167–73; Van Reenen 1975, 1977). One burial contained teeth of an adult and of a child 8–10 years old, while the other yielded the cranium and mandible of a 12-year-old child. The latter was interred in a recurved jar that was turned upside down. The pot has a band of incised diagonal lines just below the rim and a band of triangles, filled in with diagonal lines, on its neck and shoulder (Mason 1986: 172, fig. 62).

At KwaGandaganda, in the Mngeni Valley in KwaZulu-Natal, an almost complete skeleton of a possible premature baby, “between 32 and 36 weeks post-menstrual age at death” (Morris 1993: 95), was discovered in a pot buried at the base of a midden. The upright jar, decorated with incised alternating triangles on the everted rim (Whitelaw 1994: fig. 8.2), was surrounded by iron slag that had accumulated in the midden after its interment. It was probably buried during the Msuluzi phase of the site’s occupation (Whitelaw 1994: 34, 52), which dates to between about AD 650 and AD 750 (Huffman 2007: 305). At Nanda, another site in the Mngeni Valley now flooded by the Inanda Dam, the fragmentary remains of a three-month-old baby were found in an undecorated Msuluzi-phase pot that was exposed in a trench dug during rescue excavations (Morris 1993: 92; Whitelaw & Moon 1996: 60). In addition, the skeletal remains of a child, estimated to be between seven and eight years old, were found to be buried in a pit in association with an undecorated Msuluzi-phase pot with a “neat hole” in its base. It has been suggested that the jar, which had initially been empty, was placed on its side and to the right of the body in the grave. Parts of the child’s body were apparently forced into it before complete decomposition had taken place. The pit, which at first might have been used to store grain, was filled up with potsherds, another near complete upside-down bottomless pot, quartzite heat-spalls, dagha blocks, bone fragments and burnt mussel shells (Morris 1993: 91–2; Whitelaw 1993: 52–4, 72).

At the eighth- to tenth-century AD site of Ndongondwane, on the eastern bank of the Lower Thukela River in KwaZulu-Natal, a pot burial was uncovered in one of three pits excavated in a midden deposit. The dung-lined pits, which were distributed in a semi-circle to the north of a hut floor, had initially served as granaries but were subsequently re-utilised for refuse and filled with a variety of debris. The upper horizon of the shallower Pit 3 in Midden 1 contained a large, inverted globular pot with the articulated skeleton of a three-month-old baby. The infant inside was lying face-down in the deposit, suggesting that the body was originally placed on its back with its face oriented towards the mouth of the pot before being interred (Van Schalkwyk et al. 1997: 71; Greenfield & Van Schalkwyk 2006: 65).

Kulubele, a site in the Great Kei River Valley in the Eastern Cape, yielded a pot burial of a foetus/infant, of which a full archaeological description and an anatomical analysis are still awaited (Steele 2001: 124–6). The recurved jar, decorated with broad cross-hatching on the everted rim, was buried upside down in an undisclosed context. Two dates were obtained from the site: Pta-6982 (1270 ± 50 b.p.) and Pta-3716 (1250

± 50 b.p.) (Huffman 2007: 471). Based on ceramic style, the Kulubele assemblage has been tentatively ascribed to the “transition between the Msuluzi/Ndondondwane phases” (Binneman 1996: 35).

A number of pot burials are recorded in the “grave lists” from the 1936–37 excavations at K2 near the confluence of the Shashe and Limpopo Rivers. In one case, the lower limbs of a premature or newborn baby had been “jammed into a long cylindrical beaker”. The ceramic beaker, decorated with incised triangles, “had been placed in a hole in a rough floor”, presumably that of a hut. The remainder of the body, which lay around the edge of the hole, was found in somewhat dubious association with a small beaker (or drinking cup), eleven greenish-blue cane beads, two land-snail (*Achatina*) shell beads and a broken bone point (Gardner 1963: 46). A more recently discovered burial on the southeastern outskirts of K2 consists of an inverted globular pot, decorated with *Mapungubwe*-style incised pendant triangles, which contained a skull, a mandible, as well as three cervical vertebrae. The articulated remains suggest that the head had been removed from the body before advanced decomposition commenced. The worn teeth signify an age of probably more than 50 years. Dental mutilation is also evident in the shaping of the upper central incisors, which produced a V-shaped gap like that on some of the other adult individuals recovered from K2 (Steyn 1995: 87–90).

Two pot burials from Magoebaskloof in the Limpopo Province, which have been provisionally assigned to the Late Iron Age, each held the remains of a single individual. The burials were located in a heavily wooded kloof in an area described by elderly members of the Makgoba chiefdom as “the early burial place of chiefs and indunas” (Klapwijk 1989: 68). The remains must have been decomposed or dismembered before interment as the rim apertures of the two large, undecorated vessels were too constricted for an intact body to have been inserted. In the first burial excavated, a large stone was found positioned on top of the skull. It also contained a smaller pot, placed on a stone. On removal of these, some postcranial bones were exposed in the larger pot. The rim of the outer pot was partially broken, probably to facilitate insertion of the smaller pot. The larger vessel was supported by several foundation stones (Klapwijk 1989: 65). In the case of the second pot burial several large potsherds were positioned on rocks set around the perimeter of the pot, while others were lying on top of the skeleton. These sherds were presumably used to cover the mouth of the vessel. A small rubbing stone was found against the side of pot. Teeth from the first pot burial were submitted to age the skeleton, but were found to be too deteriorated for age determination. The position of the skull in the second burial precluded the removal of teeth, but it was noted that this individual seemed to be younger (Klapwijk 1989: 67).

Doornpoort, a late **Moloko** site near Winburg in the Free State, yielded a pot burial of a neonate that was interred in a midden close to a hut floor. A large lower grindstone was found on top of the pot burial, and the infant skeleton in the undecorated upright jar was covered by a large sherd (Dreyer 1992: 344, 349–51). The vessel showed signs of having possibly originally served as a cooking pot (Dreyer pers. comm., 13 January 2009). The Doornpoort site most probably dates to the period between AD 1660 and 1820. Similarly, a pot burial was discovered in a midden at Makgwareng (OO1), a Type V settlement in north-central Free State that can be associated with Sotho-Tswana speakers. An upright, barrel-shaped pot with a flat base and a row of finger-pinching on the rim was uncovered beneath a large stone, which was partly

located on the surface of the midden. Half of a large broken bowl had originally been placed on top as a lid, but was broken into pieces as a result of the weight of the stone. Since the stone was partly on the surface, it has been surmised that the pot burial postdates most of the midden deposit. Due to the fragmentary nature of the bones and their partial disturbance “from settling and biotic activity”, the burial position could not be determined, except that the head had been placed upwards and had apparently been supported by some small stones. The skeleton represented a newborn or stillborn child (Maggs 1976: 79–81).

Our last example of an infant pot burial derives from Simunye, a site in northeastern Swaziland, located on the southern bank of the Mbuluzi River. Based on ceramic style, this eighteenth or nineteenth-century site (130 ± 40 b.p.; Pta-8080), has been tentatively associated with Tsonga speakers (Ohinata & Steyn 2001). The fairly complete skeleton of the infant was in a sub-spherical jar buried on the edge of a byre or a midden, with the rim facing downwards. The base of the pot was struck off by a bulldozer when the vegetation was cleared during an environmental impact assessment project. The exterior of the pot was undecorated but the inside of the lip was ‘cut’. From the pattern of tooth eruption, an age of between birth and about one month was inferred for the infant. There were no accompanying grave goods. Red staining on the cranial fragments probably resulted from ochre applied to the body before burial.

From the above, it is clear that at least three types of Iron Age pot burials can be distinguished (cf. Ohinata & Steyn 2001). In the first type, to which the Melora Saddle burial corresponds, the remains were those of foetuses, neonates or infants, where the whole body was placed inside a pot that was buried upright. In the second type, the remains (sometimes of adults) were incomplete and seem to have been decomposed and/or dismembered before being placed inside the vessel. The third type is represented by infant burials in which the pot was inverted. As was noted, the place of burial also varied: pot burials were either associated with middens, stock byres, grain pits or huts. Despite the patterning observed in the archaeological record and the evidence for the longevity of this custom, the cultural significance of this burial practice is not apparent from the material remains alone. To gain a better understanding, it is necessary to turn to the ethnographic record.

THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF CHILD BURIAL

It is generally accepted that ethnographic analogies should be used with circumspection in archaeological studies as the past forms part of an ongoing and often dynamic process of cultural change. Nevertheless, it is also widely agreed that in cases where a direct historical link can be demonstrated between prehistoric and historically known cultures and the time gap is small, ethnography provides invaluable clues for cultural interpretation and reconstruction. In the case of the Simunye pot burial from Swaziland, for example, use was made of Lenge ethnography in an attempt to understand the significance of a particular burial method. The Lenge, a subgroup of the Chopi, who had a close historical relationship with Tsonga speakers to which the Simunye cultural remains are ascribed, buried infants in inverted pots, into the bases of which a hole was pierced. Ethnographic evidence suggests that, among the Lenge, the pot symbolised a female uterus, with the perforated pot base serving to ensure, symbolically, that the woman would become pregnant again (Ohinata & Steyn 2001).

As we have indicated, the historically known inhabitants of the Lephalala River drainage basin have complex historical roots although, linguistically, they can be grouped with the Sotho-Tswana cluster. Additionally, since the archaeological record has shown that pot burials occurred throughout the Iron Age and throughout southern Africa, there is a firm basis to consider not only the ethnography of the Sotho-Tswana, with whom the Melora Saddle material cultural remains best correspond, but also that of other Bantu-speaking societies from the southern African region. Anthropological and archaeological research has confirmed that, historically speaking, the worldviews of patrilineal Southeast Bantu speakers, in particular those of Sotho-Tswana and Nguni descent, show many similarities that are manifested, among others, in beliefs about procreation, death and the role of ancestors (Huffman 2007: 23, 25).

Ethnographically recorded burial practices should thus shed light on ancient mortuary rites, just as their roots and longevity can only be understood through the prism and material imprint of the past. However, a note of caution is necessary: ethnographic accounts seldom provide precise or detailed information about matters which are commonly reflected in the archaeological record, such as the exact place of interment for a specific age category, the type of vessel used in pot burials, or the kind of associated grave goods. Furthermore, the published ethnographies constitute incomplete and distilled accounts of recent or obsolete cultural practice and thus often do not reflect the full range of behavioural variation observable in present or past societies.

Before we consider the ethnographic evidence, three important points should be made. First, some of the most important functions of religious beliefs and rituals are to ensure that the good life is attained and that the social order is maintained. Since infant deaths were not the norm and disturbed the social order, certain rituals had to be performed to ameliorate their negative impact. As to be expected, these rituals were symbolic in nature; in fact, it has been suggested that symbols are to be found “in their richest concentration” in ritual processes (Turner 1975: 157).

A symbol could be defined as “something verbal or nonverbal, within a particular language or culture, that comes to stand for something else” (Kottak 2005: 43–4). This brings us to the second point, namely that there is substantial evidence from a wide range of societies from eastern, western and southern Africa that pots embody people to some degree, an association which makes for symbolic interpretation (Armstrong et al. 2008; David et al. 1988). Since pottery is a female craft among Southeast Bantu speakers, pots are very closely associated with women and the womb, in particular. This apparent symbolic equivalence between pot and womb, in turn, finds symbolic expression in ideas about fertility, procreation and nourishment (Barley 1994: 53, 112).

The third point concerns a general metaphoric relationship between architecture and social organisation and, in particular, between women, their bodies and their houses. In his analysis of the significance and use of metaphors in the study of material culture, Christopher Tilley (1999: 40–1), for example, points out that the “house, a home for and extension of the human body and the social body, has long been noted as a principal model generating spatio-temporal metaphors for, of, and in the world.” According to him, houses “express cosmological ideas in visual form” and constitute a “condensed visual metaphor encapsulating essential characteristics of the cosmos” (Tilley 1999: 43). In their introduction to a series of studies on the house in South America and Southeast Asia, Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1995: 2–3) point out that “houses are frequently thought

of as bodies” and argue that at “some level or the other, the notion that houses are people is one of the universals of architecture”. Because of this strong physical and conceptual link between the body and the house, they “are loci for dense webs of signification and affect and serve as basic cognitive models used to structure, think and experience the world” (Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995: 3). Since the residential zone in settlements associated with Southeast Bantu-speaking societies is primarily the domain of married women (Huffman 2007: 25), it will become evident that the symbolic link between pot and womb can be extended to the house.

Perhaps the most detailed account of the cosmological system of the Sotho-Tswana cluster is contained in Hammond-Tooke’s study of the Kgaga, a Lowveld Northern Sotho group. To the Kgaga, any disturbance of the social order, such as misfortune, illness or death, was closely tied to notions of pollution and ritual impurity. Among them and other Sotho-Tswana groups, to be polluted was generally meant to be hot—*go fiša* (Hammond-Tooke 1981b: 112–14). This contrasts with the Nguni and the Venda, where pollution or ritual impurity was generally associated with dirt or darkness (Hammond-Tooke 1989: 92–3, 99). To deal with this state of hotness, ritual coolness had to be achieved and cooling media were required. Hammond-Tooke (1981a: 16) proposes that the concept of *go fiša* was “certainly derived from the overriding importance of rain” for the Sotho-Tswana, who mainly inhabited the dry interior plateau of the western part of southern Africa. Rain was regarded as “the symbol of spiritual well-being and a manifestation that the social order [was] operating smoothly” (Krige & Krige 1954: 68, quoted in Hammond-Tooke 1981a: 6). Drought on the other hand was attributed to an imbalance in the social order. To remove the heat and return to a state of coolness (*tšhididi*) or well-being, cooling substances, of which water, chime (the semi-solid and partly digested green stomach contents of a sacrificial animal), ash and soot (or charcoal) were the most important, had to be applied in appropriate rituals. Interestingly, the cooling properties of ash (*melôra*) stem from the fact that it denotes a burnt fire and is white (Hammond-Tooke 1981b: 117, 144–6).

Among the Kgaga, such pollution states could be caused by the death of an infant, a stillbirth or a miscarriage. Such an occurrence should, therefore, be neutralised through specific purifying rituals, otherwise the woman would be unable to bear more children and a drought would ensue. In the case of a miscarriage during the first three months, the foetus was buried in an upright ceramic pot in a damp spot near a river. River reed pieces were tied around the neck, arms, wrists and ankles, and the mother filled in the grave with damp soil by means of her thighs, thereby symbolically neutralising the heat and re-enacting the birth process. When a baby was miscarried between the third and ninth months, the burial took place either inside the hut or outside in the shade of the eaves of the hut. It was held that since the baby had never been in the outside world, it should not be exposed to the scorching heat of the sun, as this would keep the rain away and cause the country to become hot and dry (Hammond-Tooke 1981b: 114).

Among the Pedi from Sekhukhuneland, the supernatural concepts of heat (*go fiša*) and coolness (*go tonya*) were closely linked to the concept or symbol of dirt (*ditšhila*). *Ditšhila* connoted ritual impurity, a state which was inevitably acquired under particular circumstances, for instance, by a woman giving birth. This state of ritual impurity was extended to the unborn child, the placenta, as well as the hut where the birth had taken place. The condition of *ditšhila* was regarded as dangerous and affected not only

those who were impure, but also those with whom they came into contact. A man who had intercourse with a woman who had miscarried, would also be ritually impure and contract *makgoma* (derived from the verb *go kgoma*, to touch), “a dreaded disease” which resulted in “the patient fading away” (Mönnig 1978: 66–7).

Immediately after delivery, which normally took place at the back of the hut, the baby would be washed in cool water, which was kept in a broken ceramic pot that was held to be symbolic of the transitional condition of the newborn child. The neonate remained secluded in the hut until the first new moon after birth, after which a coming-out ceremony was performed during which the child received its first babyhood name. The child was placed on the ground under the eaves of the hut on a special hide in which it would be carried on its mother’s back henceforth. The various ritual actions included a smoking rite in which the child was held in the smoke of protective medicine that was burnt in a potsherd over a fire (Mönnig 1978: 99–102).

Should the child be malformed or born with its feet first, or with teeth, it was drowned in a pot. The second-born of twins was also put to death in a similar way. To remedy these conditions of heat and ritual impurity, the ceramic pot with these perceived ‘unnatural’ birth remains was then covered with a lid and buried in a cool, wet place, preferably in the bank of a river. Afterbirths and aborted fetuses were similarly treated (Mönnig 1978: 67, 101). As Mönnig (1978: 67) explains, the antithetical concepts of heat and coolness were probably derived from the polarity or contrast between rain and drought: “To the Pedi, rain is the source of their livelihood. It is the essence of their well-being, the symbol of all goodness. Conversely, drought epitomizes all hardship, suffering and evil”. To counteract conditions of impurity and heat, measures of coolness were therefore necessary to cleanse and purify in order to restore not only the mother’s fertility but also to avert drought (see also Krige 1962: 108).

Among the Lobedu, a Lowveld Northern Sotho group with Venda/Shona roots, beliefs about ritual impurity and pollution were closely linked to the concept of an evil power or shadow (*muridi*), which might harm those upon which it fell. Twins had such a dangerous shadow that sick persons who came into contact with them would die; hence they, as well as babies whose upper teeth appeared before the lower or whose molars appeared first, had to be killed. They also held that a foetus was ‘amorphous’ during the first three months of pregnancy and only took on a human form afterwards. A woman who miscarried during this early stage was associated with a severe form of *muridi* and was regarded as especially dangerous. *Muridi* was believed to cause the blood to be hot, and this had to be treated by cooling the body and removing the dirt of death. Other occurrences that were dangerously hot, and could cause the country to become dry, included babies who died before cutting their teeth, women who died in pregnancy or childbirth, or initiates who died in the circumcision lodge. Even the rain queen Modjadji’s rain-making powers were ineffective unless proper measures were taken to remedy these aberrations. In all these cases, the dead had to be buried in a wet place (Krige & Krige 1943: 218–20, 275).

Similar beliefs about ritual impurity, heat and the fear of drought were found among the Tswana. According to Schapera (1971: 129–33), three categories of rainmaking rites could be distinguished among the Kgatla and other Tswana groups: first, productive rites, or “true rainmaking ceremonies”, which were specifically performed seasonally or annually to summon the rain clouds; secondly, precautionary rites, which were aimed

at averting the occurrence of a drought or the conversion of rain into hail; and, thirdly, remedial rites, which were purposely aimed at removing or counteracting influences or anti-rain charms that had actually prevented the coming of the rains. Child-burial rites would fit into either of the latter two categories.

To counter all dangerous heat (*bothito*) that resulted at birth, the newborn child was washed with cold water from a broken pot after the umbilical cord had been cut. The afterbirth and the cow-dung, which was strewn on the hut floor to absorb the blood and the amniotic fluids, were thrown into a pot and buried in a hole in the floor of the house. The purpose of this action was to ensure that these bodily substances could not be used in witchcraft against the mother, thereby causing her to become infertile (Gollbach 1992: 77–9; Schapera 1939: 233). Should the newborn child be physically deformed, born with feet first, be the second-born of twins, or born with teeth, he or she, together with the placenta, was drowned in a ceramic pot filled with water. The pot was then closed with a lid and buried at a cool place in a river bank to neutralise the heat and to ensure that the rain would fall again (Gollbach 1992: 109). Among the Mogopa Kwena, a chiefdom located near present-day Rustenburg, stillborn and premature babies were reportedly buried in “their mother’s bed room” (Breutz 1952: 99). The Tlhaping of the Northern Cape, too, held that rain could be prevented from falling by a stillborn child, an aborted human foetus, as well as the unburied foetuses of some domestic animals lying in the open country (Pauw 1960: 28). According to Schapera (1939: 217), the first two to three months of gestation were regarded by the Tswana as the most dangerous stage in the development of the human foetus. A woman was therefore considered to be especially hot during the first two months of her pregnancy, and therefore more harmful “to anybody who slept with her than if she had miscarried later” (Schapera 1979: 4, 12).

The custom of child-burial inside or in close association with houses has endured to the present among Sotho-Tswana speakers in the Waterberg region. During fieldwork on the farm Tafelkop 46 KR, close to the Lephalala River on the Waterberg Plateau, a local labourer recalled the burial of a baby under the eaves of a hut (Jonas Moremi pers. comm., 29 September 1997). In June 2005, there was uproar in the Lephalale (Ellisras) area following the apparent accidental uncovering of the corpses of three babies during the demolition of the abandoned houses of relocated farm workers (Mulder 2005: 3).

Accounts of similar practices are found in the ethnographies of other Southeast Bantu speakers, reflecting a striking symbolic link between pots and the mother’s womb. According to Junod (1927, I: 45), a Thonga (Tsonga) child was compared to a ceramic pot that had gone through the firing process. A special ceremony was performed for a first-born child at the end of the first week in which a song was sung that alluded to the fact that the child had been tried as a pot that had fallen to the ground but which stayed intact—it was not shattered and it did not crack in the firing-pit. Miscarriage was perceived to be one of the principal causes of drought, particularly if the foetus had not been buried with the proper ritual precautions or in an unknown place. In times of severe drought the Thonga performed a rite in which the graves of prematurely born children that had been secretly buried in dry ground were opened up, and the contents removed and interred in wet soil near a river (Junod 1927, I: 191; 1927, II: 317–18). Sometimes the exhumed bodies were placed in potsherds before being buried in the mud, after which water was poured into the then empty graves of the premature babies in order to “extinguish the fire” (De Heusch 1977: 33).

The heat (pollution) and ritual danger generated by abnormal births and child-death also extended to twins. De Heusch (1977: 32) argues that traditional Thonga cosmology intimates that the birth of twins could be viewed as “a result of a dangerous conjunction of the sky and the earth”, on account of which twins were imbued with “a death-carrying power” that was associated with “heavenly fire”. Twins and their mother were therefore ritually impure and affected by excessive heat, which could cause a severe drought. In order to lessen the danger, the Thonga formerly ritually killed the weakest infant. This infant’s corpse was subjected to the same mortuary rites that applied to other dead babies: it was interred in a cracked cooking pot that was buried at ground level. The pot’s mouth was partially covered with a layer of ashes, leaving a passage for air and the ‘soul’ (‘breath’) of the child to leave, “otherwise the mother could never again bear children”. According to De Heusch (1977: 32), the layer of ashes through which the breath had to pass indicated “anew the desire to temper the excess of heat” connoted so forcefully and poignantly by the cracked pot.

Similar to the Pedi, the Thonga baby was subjected to a smoking ritual, known as the potsherd rite, before coming out of the maternal hut. Once the umbilical cord had fallen off a few days after birth, a medicine man was called upon. In the case of a male child, he roasted pieces of skin of various wild animals on an old potsherd on the threshold of the house and submitted the infant to the smoke (Junod 1927, I: 43–4). According to De Heusch (1977: 35) the potsherd symbolised “the definitive rupture with the womb” through a rite in which the baby was transformed “into an autonomous object”. The main function of the rite was to “connect the interior of the hut (extension of the womb) and the exterior world”, since it marked the child’s first appearance in public and paved the way for the father to re-enter the hut without peril (De Heusch 1977: 42).

When a Thonga child started to crawl, a cotton string was tied around its waist. Although it did not constitute a protective rite, the custom of tying the cotton string confirmed the official reception of the infant into the community. It had serious implications, though, if another child was conceived before the string had been tied to the one previously born. The tying of the cotton string ceremony could then not be completed and, should such a child attain adulthood or old age, burial in wet soil on death was a prerequisite, or else the rain would stay away. Should a child die after the tying of the cotton ceremony had been performed, it might be buried in dry soil on a hill. If, however, death occurred before the accomplishment of the rite, the burial had to take place in wet soil near a river (Junod 1927, I: 56–8). They also had another custom in which a white bead was tied to a child’s hair as soon as two lower and upper incisors appeared through the gum to facilitate the eruption of the other teeth. This bead was disposed of in the domestic midden behind the hut after all the milk teeth had cut, as were the first deciduous teeth that were shed (Junod 1927, I: 51–2).

The Lenge people, a sub-group of the Chopi that historically had a close relationship with the Thonga/Tsonga, regarded a water pot as “one of the symbols of the womb”. Hence, a woman, especially a pregnant woman, who went to fetch water from a nearby lake had to be careful not to place her water pot in the same spot that had been used by another woman, otherwise she would experience “biting pains” (Earthy 1933: 66). Child delivery would usually take place outside at the back of the hut during the day or inside the hut during night-time (Earthy 1933: 68). All infants born dead, or who died

within a few months, were given a pot burial. A baby who died a few weeks after birth was placed in a cooking pot, which was carried by the baby's grandmother (father's mother) or its father's sister in their hands, not on their head, to a nearby lake. The pot was buried upside down in a hole and covered with black mud, after which the grandmother used a stick brought from the village to make a hole in the bottom. The piercing of the pot was particularly important as it ensured that the mother would conceive and bear another child (Earthy 1933: 153).

It was viewed as abnormal and ritually dangerous if a child cut its upper teeth first, or if its legs came first. Albinos and children with "an abnormality" were killed in the olden days (Earthy 1933: 63, 79). If a woman gave birth to twins, two green monkey oranges (*Strychnos spinosa*) growing together on a single stem were buried with the afterbirth. This measure served as a charm to prevent the woman from having twins in future. Stillborn twins could be buried either together in one pot or separately in two pots (Earthy 1933: 155). The information about the burial place and rites of older children is vague. Earthy (1933: 154) mentions that "older children who have been presented to the moon, their parents having been reunited, are buried when they die in a hole in the ground in their kraal with all their rags". The moon ceremony usually took place during the second month after birth (Earthy 1933: 77), and the reference to 'kraal' should be read as homestead or residential unit, and not necessarily the cattle byre.

Among the Venda, midwives were responsible for killing those babies who were born feet first, cut the upper teeth first, or who exhibited any physical deformity, as such an occurrence was believed to have transpired through an evil spirit. This was achieved by pouring boiling water over the newborn baby. Infants killed in this manner were frequently buried near a wall inside a hut so that their bodies would remain in the shade. It was believed that the mother would suffer from abdominal pains should the infant be exposed to the sun. All children who were born dead, or who passed away shortly after birth, were to be buried in a damp place by the river. Twins were invariably killed immediately after birth by either the mother or the midwife, and this was effected by strangulation or scalding. Both babies were placed in one vessel and likewise buried in a marsh or a damp spot by the river. This resulted from the deeply held belief that twins were carriers of misfortune that could have an impact not only on the family but also on the larger community, should they be allowed to live (Stayt 1968: 91–3). A woman who died while pregnant was also buried in the bank of a river and water was channelled to flow over the grave. The foetus was usually removed and buried separately.

While doing fieldwork in Venda, Schutte (1980: 258–9) witnessed the burial of an 18-month-old child who had died after falling into a basin of hot water. The child's body was interred in a sitting position with the legs stretched out in a hole made in the base-moulding surrounding the mother's hut. The corpse was smeared with ash and stabilised with lumps of soil from the baby's sleeping place inside the doorway. The base-moulding of the wall was subsequently repaired, after which pips of the castor oil plant were planted on top, their eventual germination to be taken as an indication that the rain would not be prevented.

Twin births were also unwanted among the Shona. It was believed in some areas that the one born last would naturally survive and the other would die. However, they did not wait for this to happen and the midwife used to kill the one baby ritually by stuffing its mouth with meal. The woman who had given birth to twins was sent out of the hut for

a while and when she returned, only one baby would be left. She was not informed of what had happened, even if she was aware that she had delivered twins. Any deviation from the normal pattern of growth, such as when the first tooth to appear was an upper one, was considered to be a “bad omen for the family” and the child was disposed of (Gelfand 1979: 5, 7–8). Aschwanden’s research among the Karanga (1982: 283–5) confirms that twins, breech births and deformed babies were considered by the Shona to be abnormal and were, with a few exceptions, ritually killed at birth. This also applied to prematurely born babies, five to six months old, which were held to have little chance of surviving. A premature baby born later and whose life they wished to save was put in a beer-brewing jar, known as *gambe*. The jar was placed in the sun or near a fire to replace the warmth of the mother’s womb. Fine grass was put inside it first, and on top of that, the sling in which the baby would later be carried.

In Aschwanden’s view (1982: 33, 190–1), all Karanga jars served as symbols of women, with each different kind of jar carrying its own particular symbolism. For instance, the *rongo*, a medium-sized jar in which a woman prepared warm water for her husband to wash every morning, symbolised her monthly period. The man cleaned himself of *svina*, the waste or dirt of sexual intercourse, just as menstruation cleansed the uterus. The *rongo* jar’s decorations corresponded to the tattoos on a woman’s abdomen. They also included a line running all the way round the jar that represented the cord, made of the bark of a tree, worn by a baby and its mother around the loins to protect their fertility. It is, therefore, noteworthy that the *gambe* jar in which a premature baby was nurtured had no neck. It was regarded as an ‘unfinished’ pot and signalled that the premature baby still had to grow. At the same time, it also reflected the state of the uterus: the premature baby had dilated the womb and had to be placed into an identical ‘open’ pot uterus without a neck. Aschwanden (1982: 285), consequently, argues for a “symbol-identity” between jar and uterus. To ensure that a woman who had not yet given birth could become pregnant again, the uterus somehow had to go through the whole delivery process symbolically. A premature or an aborted baby was therefore always buried in a *gambe* jar in the “sand of a dry river-bed”. When the river started to flow after the first rains, the sand covering the jar was washed away and the baby was flushed out. Through this symbolic ‘birth’, a potential evil had been removed and the real uterus was prepared for the conception and birth of the next child. Murimbika (2004: 182) offers yet another explanation why Shona infants were interred in wet locales: to “protect the womb of the mother from dying out” since dry land symbolised barrenness, whereas wet land was associated with fertility.

Although no specific account of pot burials was noted for the Nguni, the ethnography confirms that among the Zulu, deformed babies and one of a pair of twins were killed as it was believed that otherwise another family member would die. One of the twin babies was suffocated by placing “a lump of earth in its throat”. The grave of a twin was first spread with ashes, after which its body was interred in a sitting posture and then “covered up with earth and with a second layer of ashes” (Krige 1950: 75–6).

While the archaeologically documented pot burials highlighted certain regularities or patterns, variability and cultural significance cannot be explained without recourse to the wealth of ethnographic data on child-death and the accompanying mortuary rites (Huffman & Murimbika 2003: 244). This recursive interplay between archaeological and ethnographic data will become evident in the following discussion of the symbolic

meanings attached to child-death among Southeast Bantu speakers, and the Melora Saddle pot burial in particular.

DISCUSSION

It is evident from this ethnographic overview that in most, if not all, southern African Bantu-speaking societies, child-birth and child-death were fraught with ritual danger that had to be averted to ensure the well-being of the family and the community. Any deviation from the natural order of things during conception and birth generated heat, pollution or dirt that threatened a woman's fertility and a lineage's continuation. Such deviations included miscarriage or abortion, stillbirths, the death of neonates, breech presentations and the birth of malformed babies, twins and albinos. To this could be added any perceived abnormality during the infant's early physical development, such as when upper teeth appeared before lower teeth. The ritual impurity caused by these deviations was held not only to destabilise the social order, but also to disturb the natural order, as a result of which the rains, the ultimate sign of a community's well-being, might stay away. Drought was certainly the greatest threat to southern African agriculturist societies of the Iron Age and the early historic period, for without adequate rainfall their stock would die, crops would fail, and, with limited storage facilities, famine would inevitably follow.

To counter disturbances of the social and natural order required appropriate measures. In the absence of more rational causal explanations for these disasters, a whole web of pollution beliefs emerged which necessitated various cooling rituals to remove the contamination and restore the good life. According to Hammond-Tooke (1981a: 16–17), among the Sotho-Tswana in particular, such pollution was not ascribed to afflictions or misfortune sent by ancestors or witches. Rather such states of ritual impurity were perceived to have happened through no fault of the individual, with beliefs about the pending danger more aptly resembling the concept of 'chance', as found in Western societies.

As the above ethnographic data show, on one level a symbolic link was made between a woman's fertility (procreation) and the land's fertility (adequate rainfall) and, on another level, between potting and procreation (Barley 1994: 85).² The successful making and firing of a pot mirrored the successful conception and delivery of a child and, as a result, a close symbolic link existed between pots and wombs. To restore the woman's fertility and the land's productiveness, foetuses and infants had to be buried in jars.

Though provision has to be made for cultural variation, and clear categories of burial practice cannot be distinguished in the existing ethnographies, it is nevertheless possible to suggest some patterns, based on a preliminary reading of the accounts. First, although differences occur as to where exactly the pot burial should take place, or whether the pot should be buried up-turned or down-turned, the essential symbolic link between uterus and jar remains.

Secondly, it would appear that the choice of a burial place and the performance of the burial rite were influenced by the degree of severity of the pollution (heat), ritual impurity or dirt caused by an unsuccessful pregnancy or divergence from the normal birth process. As we have noted among the Kgaga and the Pedi, miscarriage during the first three months of pregnancy generated the most heat and was believed to hold the greatest threat of pollution and drought; hence the foetus had to be buried in a wet and

cool spot in a river-bank or a river-bed so that the potential danger could be washed away. This ties in with the belief among the Lobedu that a foetus was amorphous and without a human form until the end of the third month, as well as the belief among the Tswana that sexual intercourse during this early stage of pregnancy was especially dangerous.

Such beliefs might also offer an explanation for the recorded burial of a pregnant female and associated foetal remains in an ant-bear hole in a dry riverbed on the farm Houwater 54 JQ, located in the southern region of the Pilanesberg National Park. No artefacts, features or structures were found in association with the skeletal remains, which were dated to 890 ± 50 b.p. (Pta-7331) (L'Abbé et al. 2008: 29). The death of this pregnant woman must have posed a severe threat to the community's health and prosperity, hence the ritual danger and the prospect of drought had to be neutralised by burying her in a wet place. Similar treatment was effected in the case of deformed babies, twins, breech births or babies born with teeth. In most cases, such deviations were held to carry the same danger as a miscarriage during the first three months and burial was earmarked for a cool and wet place near a water source. As noted, for example, among the Thonga, premature babies who had not been buried properly, or adults who had not undergone the tying of the cotton string ceremony, were dug up in times of drought and reburied in wet soil to ensure that the rains would come and starvation would be averted. It is obvious that the archaeological recovery of such burials in river-banks, especially if the settlements were somewhat removed from the water source, would largely depend on chance discoveries.

As we noted from the Iron Age examples, infant pot burials were frequently located in middens, where the ash evidently served as a cooling agent to counter the ritual danger. The consulted ethnographies do not mention middens as burial places, but do stress the cooling properties of ash. We would like to suggest that the archaeologically recorded burials of infants, juveniles or adults in middens, whatever the circumstances of death, reflected protective rites aimed at ensuring the stability and prosperity of the community. Perhaps this custom of midden burial lapsed over time or it was simply overlooked in early twentieth-century ethnographic accounts.

Among the Venda every effort was made to bring back and bury the remains of someone who had died in the bush. When the deceased's body could not be retrieved, a fictitious funeral was enacted in which a sheep's head was interred in lieu of the corpse (Stayt 1968: 163). A similar practice has been recorded among the Lobedu, where a goat was buried and a shrine was made to appease an ancestor who was unhappy about the way he had been buried (Krige & Krige 1943: 232). Burying them in ash-heaps or refuse pits might have been one way of cooling the heat and countering the ritual danger to the social order inherent in these manifestations of abnormality. It is tempting to link this ritual practice with the so-called 'beast burials' from K2, in which bovid and other bones were apparently ceremonially interred, often in association with other grave goods, especially pots (Gardner 1963: 54). However, a recent re-evaluation of the faunal remains and their archaeological context suggests that the contents of the so-called graves "were just part of a high concentration of bones", and therefore did "not represent discrete animal burials" (Hutten 2008: 198).

In this connection, mention must also be made of Loubser's (2007: 21–2) recent suggestion, based on incidental information gathered from local Venda field assistants

in the 1980s, that human skulls recovered from the refuse of abandoned grain pits might hail from ritual murders. Traditionally, during times of drought a successful farmer could be branded as a witch and ritually killed by order of the chief. The remains of the chopped-up victim would then be boiled in a large ceramic vessel to extract the fat, which would be mixed with grain from the granaries of the chief's settlement to ensure a good harvest. The decapitated head of the unfortunate victim would be interred on the side of a grain pit. Likewise, Klapwijk (1989: 68) has speculated that the adult skeletal parts contained in the Magoebaskloof pot burials could be the remains of human sacrifices used in rain-making ceremonies. Ethnographic accounts confirm that human bodily parts customarily formed an essential part of rain-making medicines (Aukema 1989: 71). It was noted among the Lobedu of the rain-queen Modjadji, for example, that the "chief ingredient of the rain-pots [was] the skin of the deceased chief and of important councillors who [were] her closest relatives" (Krige & Krige 1943: 273–4).

Ethnographic accounts have pinpointed three other burial places for foetuses or infants, namely, inside the hut, in the hut wall, or under the eaves of the hut. Though the ethnographies are vague on this point, it is possible that the burial place of newborn babies might have differed from premature and stillborn babies. If we argue that there was a conceptual link between a woman's body and the hut, one would expect deceased newborn babies, especially those that had concluded the potsherd rite, to have been buried not inside the hut but still in close association. Though the death of a live-born baby carried grave danger, it had successfully completed the gestation process and was therefore 'cooked'. It needed, however, to be protected from the heat of the sun, which may explain why they could have been buried in the hut wall or under the eaves of a hut.

The Melora Saddle burial is that of a perinatal individual, aged between 34 weeks gestation and newborn. No clear signs of disease could be found, although the discrepancy between tooth and long-bone development might imply some degree of retarded growth. The gestation of twins is often reflected in a measure of retarded growth, but the ethnography suggests that burials of one of a pair of twins that had died or had been ritually killed usually took place in a riverside location.

The question now arises whether the burial circumstances and associated finds could offer new insights into the age of the infant and the place of the burial. One could argue that the fact that the Melora Saddle infant was buried in a cooking pot might suggest that it was newborn. As we have noted from the use of the *gambe* jar to sustain the premature baby among the Karanga, different jars may hold different symbolic meanings. Among the Thonga, for instance, a premature baby was nurtured in a beer-brewing pot since it still had to grow (Barley 1994: 106). The Thonga also recognised a connection between a pregnant woman and a water pot, which may, on a symbolic level, also be linked to the provision of rain. Burying the Melora Saddle infant in a used cooking pot could therefore suggest that it had undergone the full growth process in its mother's womb, implying that we are dealing with the death and burial of a live-born child. The available ethnographic and archaeological data from southern Africa are not precise enough to enable us to determine whether particular vessels were reserved for the burial of male or female babies. It would seem that in the Cameroon some differentiation was made; for instance, the placenta of a baby girl was buried in an ordinary cooking pot whereas a baby boy's placenta was buried in a three-footed pot in which men cooked meat (Barley 1994: 76).

Another possible pointer to the age at death of the Melora Saddle child might be the broken base of a pottery vessel that was used to cover the human remains inside the pot. This potsherd might be similar to the ones used for the ritual washing or smoking of a newborn child, as described for the Pedi and the Thonga. The minute white bead interred with the burial again suggests that we might be dealing with the death of a newborn child rather than a stillborn baby. Whether the white bead was intended for a similar ceremony as recorded for the Thonga remains unknown, since in the latter case it was only tied to the infant's hair after eruption of two lower and upper incisors.

The exact spatial context of the Melora Saddle burial is unclear due to heavy site erosion, but suggests that it could have been buried in association with a hut. If we are, in fact, dealing with a newborn child, it is more likely that it would have been buried under the eaves or in the wall of the hut. Whatever the exact circumstances of this tragedy, the hole in the base of the burial jar was clearly aimed at ensuring that the mother would become pregnant again, thus restoring her fertility, stabilising the social order, and ensuring that the rains would come.

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NOTES

¹ The first excavations on Melora Hilltop and Melora Saddle were conducted in 1988 as part of a UNISA-funded survey of the Lephala drainage basin initiated by the late Jan Aukema. He was assisted by Wits Archaeology students, who explored the Saddle site under the supervision of Professor T.N. Huffman.

² Its symbolic counterpart in the male domain was exemplified by a conceptual link between iron smelting and procreation.

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