A New Method for Contextual Analysis on Prehistoric Attitudes to Ritual Pottery

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Abstract: This paper provides a new method for the contextual analysis of pottery in an approach to prehistoric sensibilities. Collating the contextual photographic evidence of pottery in a prehistoric ritual setting, with photographs of the pot taken after excavation from every direction, that is, omni-directional photo-taking, allows an archaeologist to demonstrably identify which surface of the pot was oriented to a certain direction in its original context. Owing to the presumably solemn and formal atmosphere of the prehistoric burial, the orientation of funerary goods is helpful for the understanding of the cognition of prehistoric people. A case study comes from the cemetery of the introductory stage of the Japanese Neolithic, and the orientation of the blackened discoloration of pottery that had appeared accidentally during open-firing in production is investigated. Results show that the prehistoric actor was fully aware of the blackened spot, and contributes to the argument for the inclination of past potters to try to prevent such accidental defect.

Keywords: omni-directional photography, prehistoric pottery, pottery deposition, jar burial, single grave, cemetery, fire-cloud, ceramic history, Prehistoric Japan

1 Introduction

Pottery in prehistory was not only used as a utensil but also as a container for ritual activities, for example, dedication and funeral rites. Such prehistoric pottery is highly likely to have been produced through an open-firing technique, as is suggested by “fire-clouding” (Shepard 1954: 92). A fire-cloud represents a patch of blackish discoloration on the surface of pottery, which emerges when smoky flames or burning fuel touch the pottery (Shepard 1954; Gibson and Woods 1997: 156). It occurs almost accidentally in open-firing. Therefore, the part of a pot that might have a fire-cloud could not have been controlled by prehistoric potters. While potters, who sometimes determined the front side of pots by ornamentation, are thought to have tried to prevent a fire-cloud, according to ethnological investigations (Shepard 1954: 92-93 as an example), there seems to have been no discussion so far of how pottery with a fire-cloud was treated by prehistoric people.

As will be seen, prehistoric pottery users employed a fire-cloud, if it was present, as the decisive marker to let the pot facing to a particular direction as either the back or the front of it at deposition in the funeral context. The primary object of this paper is to provide a new method to consider the reaction of them towards the pottery that was used in mortuary practices. Through this method, this contribution also provides a new perspective of ceramic history, which might explain one of the reasons for the tendency to prevent a fire-cloud on prehistoric pots, from the viewpoint of users. The method provided is simple enough that empirical data could easily be accumulated to deepen an understanding of ancient beliefs or sensibilities, if the method becomes popular.

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2 Method: Contextual Analysis and Collation of Photographs

In an attempt to consider the reaction to the frontal view of pottery for prehistoric users, an archaeologist needs contextual information about its three-dimensional provenance and also its orientation; this can be acquired through “single context recording” (Carver 2005: 108). Before the three-dimensional analysis of provenance, especially in the case of open sites or those frequently re-used, one can hardly solve the question whether past material remains have kept their original position. However, burials can be relatively easily dealt with, because the material remains in them would usually be preserved under the soil with which the burial site was filled, in the process of the mortuary practices conducted at the funeral.

In order to acquire the information on orientation — that is, which part of a pot was facing which direction — taking close-up, high resolution photographs of the pottery in its context is effective. As with three-dimensional provenance, orientational information is barely understandable during excavation, since the earth of the fill almost always sticks to the surface of the pot. At most, the earth is washed off a part of the pot surface in order to take photos of it in context. However, an archaeologist can identify the specific fragment of an excavated piece, and when refitted, the image of the reconnected pot fragments can be identified with the image of the same piece in the photograph taken during excavation. By collating the photos, based on the same pot parts, one can recognise which part of the pot was facing a particular direction in the original context, and then can work out which direction the front/back of the pot was facing.

Analysis of pottery deposition has an advantage in four ways in relation to this. The first is the fragility of pottery. Once pottery is broken, the pieces are easily scattered. This means that an archaeologist can easily recognise whether the deposition was disturbed or not, according to an estimation of whether or not the sherds were moved to the position where they were found. Therefore, one can solve the question whether or not the pottery is in its original position, more easily than with ordinary finds. The second advantage is that the context can clearly reveal the actor’s intention in placing a pot during a solemn ritual. This means that an archaeologist may detect whether the community member conducting such rituals had been aware of a fire-cloud or not, after analysing enough examples, if possible. The third is that once almost intact pottery is unearthed, an archaeologist would often take photographs of it in context sometimes from several angles, even though she/he does not regard it as being in situ. This means that collating an identical part of the pot becomes easier. The last advantage is the nature of such one-off events. There must be no possibility for a fire-cloud on funerary pottery to disappear through secondary heating, such as boiling.

Photography of the whole pot after post-excavation cleaning is also essential. Here it is crucial to have all sides of the pot shown in order that the one particular side of the pot could be visible, compared to the other sides. One of the easiest methods is omni-directional photo-taking: 1) placing the pot on a turntable; 2) taking the first photograph from a certain angle; 3) first rotation of the turntable by 45 degrees; 4) second photograph of the pot; 5) second rotation by 45 degrees; and repeating this to achieve a 360 degree rotation, in total eight times.

The angle of rotation does not have to be one eighth of a complete circle. However, a quarter will be too large to investigate every part of the pot surface, because if the size of the same part of the pot is rather small, the shape of the part is often too distorted for identification in the photo. In addition, in order to fully reduce the distortion in the four corners of the picture, one should situate a camera several meters away from the pot and a telephoto lens used.

3 Material

In Japanese prehistory, pottery was often used as an interment vessel for the secondary burial of the dead, and possibly as an offering vessel in cult and funeral, as suggested by contextual studies (Habu 2004: 159-182 as an example). Although the soils of the Japanese archipelago are mostly acidic enough to dissolve prehistoric bones, there are some exceptional cases where bone is preserved (Habu 2004 to see such cases as examples).

In this investigation, I have dealt with prehistoric pottery, used as grave goods offered to the dead
and as a burial-jar for secondary burial or child burial, excavated from the Mochida-Cho San-Chome site, Ehime, Japan (Ehime Prefectural Archaeology Center 1985). The Mochida-Cho San-Chome site, located in the Matsuyama plain in the north-west of Shikoku Island in western Japan (Figure 1), represents one of the best examples of a prehistoric cemetery dated to the Early Yayoi period (EY: 2800-2300 BP), the introductory stage of food production in the Japanese Archipelago. This cemetery was used over a short period, during the Early Yayoi, and not in any adjacent period. Thus, one can easily grasp the general attitude to funeral pottery in this small community.

![Figure 1. Map showing the location of the Mochida-Cho San-Chome site. This Early Yayoi cemetery is located on the Matsuyama plain in the north-western part of Shikoku Island in the Japanese Archipelago.](image)

As many scholars of Japanese archaeology have pointed out (Hudson 1992: 156-168 as an example), a wide variety of burial types appeared in the Yayoi period. In the case of the Mochida-Cho San-Chome site, there were two types of burial, though no human bones examined due to the nature of the acidic soil condition (Figures 2 and 3): one was a rectangular pit, and the other was a jar burial. This kind of combination was not an uncommon case in the western part of Japan in the Early Yayoi period (Mizoguchi 2013: Figure 5.3 as an example), while a cluster of sub-rectangular ditch-enclosed burial compounds of the same period was also excavated in the vicinity of the Ehime within Shikoku Island, such as Sakogawa-Kubota site (Kagawa Prefectural Archaeology Center 2006).

As for a single grave (Figure 2-A), it measured about two meters in length and one meter in width, having a rather flat floor. In total, 24 rectangular pit graves were excavated, having their axes parallel, and avoiding overlap with each other except in one case (Figure 3). Thirteen rectangular pit graves contained nineteen offering vessels in total, each of them measuring around 12 cm in height. However, one grave with a single pot had no information on context (SK35). Therefore, I have examined eighteen pots from twelve graves.

Nine jar burials (Figure 2-B), including heavily-disturbed examples, were found in groups in the cemetery, with no overlap between them (Figure 3). Except for one burial (JB6), the orientation of the jar rim was, if well enough preserved for identification, pointing to the north-east. Burial-jars, if well-preserved, measured more than 60 cm in height. Four of the nine were heavily disturbed by modern activities, so here I have considered only five jars.

None of the eighteen offering vessels or five well-preserved burial-jars seemed to present a particular front side from their internal attributes, though plain decoration of simple geometric motifs or paralleled incision/cordon was present on some pots. I analysed each of the total of 23 pots by collating the photograph of its context and omni-directional photographs, in order to identify the orientation of the pot at the time of deposition (Table 1).
Figure 2. Two types of burial in the Early Yayoi cemetery of the Mochida-Cho San-Chome site. A: Rectangular pit for a single grave. This is SK02 viewed from the south-west. Most pit graves measure 2m by 1m, about half of them having offering vessel(s) whose height is around 12cm. Some pit graves have a stone arrangement inside, along with walls. B: A jar burial. This is JB2 viewed from the north-west. Jar burials are placed in a prepared pit lying down, some of them with a covering pot. The height of the burial-jar is more than 60cm. (after Ehime Prefecture Archaeology Center (1985)).

Figure 3. Distribution map of the two types of burial in the Mochida-Cho San-Chome site. The burial area is clearly carefully chosen, and the axis is parallel. The long axis of every pit grave is uniformly lined in a NE-SW direction, and almost no overlap is evident in grave pits and jar burials. Shaded burials are those which have pottery analysed in this paper. (after Ehime Prefecture Archaeology Center (1985)).
Table 1. Offering vessels and burial jars excavated at the Mochida-Cho San-Chome site which formed the subject of the colla-
tion analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Location of pottery</th>
<th>Position of pottery</th>
<th>Direction of fire-cloud</th>
<th>Direction of hole</th>
<th>No. in report</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>SK01</td>
<td>NE short side</td>
<td>standing</td>
<td>NE short side</td>
<td>no hole</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>SK01</td>
<td>N corner</td>
<td>oblique</td>
<td>NW long side</td>
<td>no hole</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>SK02</td>
<td>NE short side</td>
<td>standing</td>
<td>NE short side</td>
<td>no hole</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>SK02</td>
<td>NE area on axis</td>
<td>oblique</td>
<td>dead body</td>
<td>no hole</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>SK03</td>
<td>E corner</td>
<td>lying</td>
<td>dead body*</td>
<td>ground**</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>SK03</td>
<td>E corner</td>
<td>standing</td>
<td>NE short side*</td>
<td>no hole</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>SK08</td>
<td>N corner</td>
<td>oblique</td>
<td>dead body</td>
<td>no hole</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>SK08</td>
<td>N corner</td>
<td>oblique</td>
<td>NE short side</td>
<td>no hole</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>SK09</td>
<td>N corner</td>
<td>standing</td>
<td>NE short side</td>
<td>no hole</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>SK09</td>
<td>NE area</td>
<td>lying</td>
<td>dead body</td>
<td>no hole</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>SK11</td>
<td>E corner</td>
<td>standing</td>
<td>NE short side</td>
<td>no hole</td>
<td>258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>SK18</td>
<td>N corner</td>
<td>standing</td>
<td>NE short side</td>
<td>no hole</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>SK23</td>
<td>NE area on axis</td>
<td>oblique</td>
<td>dead body</td>
<td>no hole</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>SK24</td>
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<td>dead body***</td>
<td>no hole</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
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<td>n/a</td>
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<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>SK36</td>
<td>E corner</td>
<td>standing</td>
<td>SE long side*</td>
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<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>SK39</td>
<td>NW long side</td>
<td>lying</td>
<td>NW long side</td>
<td>no hole</td>
<td>286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>SK39</td>
<td>NW long side</td>
<td>lying</td>
<td>NW long side</td>
<td>no hole</td>
<td>287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>JB1</td>
<td>pit</td>
<td>lying****</td>
<td>upward</td>
<td>ground</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>JB2</td>
<td>pit</td>
<td>lying</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>ground</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>JB3</td>
<td>pit</td>
<td>lying****</td>
<td>upward</td>
<td>upward</td>
<td>294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>JB4</td>
<td>pit</td>
<td>lying</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>ground</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>JB6</td>
<td>pit</td>
<td>lying</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>ground</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*: This vessel has two fire-clouds, thus more marked one is considered here.

**: This hole probably resulted from the post-depositional effect.

***: This vessel has no fire-cloud proper, but a faintly dark part facing the dead body.

****: This burial has a covering pot.

4 Results

18 offering vessels: 17 vessels had a fire-cloud, though the remaining one (no. 14) showed only faint
discoloration in one part. Thirteen of the vessels were found very close to one wall of the rectangular grave
(nos. 1-3, 5-9, 11, 12, 17-19); eleven of them were near the short north-east side, including either the northern
or eastern corner (Figure 4 as an example), and the other two were almost in the middle of the long north-
west side (nos. 18 and 19).

Regarding position in the grave, eight vessels were found standing upright (nos. 1, 3, 6, 9, 11, 12, 14, 17). Among them, seven were found near the wall with their fire-cloud facing the wall (Figure 4 as an example), and the last (no. 14) was found in an axial position in the north-eastern area, the discoloured part facing the
dead body. Six vessels were found in an oblique position (nos. 2, 4, 7, 8, 13, 15), though no. 4 was possibly
obliquely pushed from its standing position by the stone of 30 cm in length – probably one of the grave
markers - which was found immediately above the pot. Among them, three were located in an axial position

1 Supplementary material attached online (DOI: 10.1515/opar-2015-0015).
in the north-eastern area (nos. 4, 13, 15); the fire-cloud of no. 4 facing upwards and that of nos. 13 and 15 facing the dead body. The other four were found in a lying position (nos. 5, 10, 18, 19). None of the four had the fire-cloud facing the ground. Two of them were found almost on the middle of the north-west side in the same grave (nos. 18 and 19). With the remaining two pots (nos. 5 and 10), no. 5 was laid with its hole in the middle of the body facing the ground. This hole is certain to have been made after firing, but is probably due to the post-depositional effect suggested by unworn surface of the facets of broken edges. The fire-cloud was facing the centre of the grave; the dead body. No. 10 was laid with its rim facing the middle of the pit and with its fire-cloud almost facing the dead body.

Five burial-jars: All were deposited in a prepared pit, with the axis of the main body being parallel to the floor of the pit. They often had several fire-clouds, possibly because of their large size. All five jars had been perforated after firing, at the lower part of their body, close to the bottom. While only one jar was deposited with its hole facing upwards (no. 22), the rest four had their hole facing the ground (nos. 20, 21, 23, 24), and in none of the four cases did the perforation cover the same area as the fire-cloud. Two jars (nos. 20 and 22), whose body was well-preserved, had one marked fire-cloud that was facing upwards (Figure 5).
5 Discussion

At first, it is necessary to reconstruct the pots to their original position within their own context. This is the case of noting the position of the dedicated vessels in a pit grave; essentially, where they were found in an oblique or lying position. Obliquely standing pottery in six cases must originally have been either standing upright or leaning towards something, since pottery of this shape cannot stand obliquely by itself. Therefore, we can reasonably consider that the ones which were found close to the very corner (nos. 2 and 8) had been originally standing upright along the wall, with their fire-cloud oriented towards the wall, and that they had then leaned inwards during the filling up of the grave. No. 7 was also found around the corner, but was located next to the no. 8 that had originally been standing in the very corner, and was possibly turned slightly around at the time of later disturbance according to the direction of the damaged body (Figure 6).
Figure 6. The offering vessel no. 7 in pit-grave SK08 was found around the eastern corner in an oblique position. Given that the direction of the damaged part of its body does not correspond with the axis of the later disturbing trench, it must have been rotated counterclockwise slightly by the force of that disturbance from the eastern direction, which suggests that a fire-cloud had originally been faced to the dead body.

Thus, the fire-cloud of no. 7 was oriented towards the dead body. On the other hand, of those which were found on or around the axis of the grave-pit (nos. 4, 13 and 15), we should consider that nos. 13 and 15 had been leaning towards the deceased because their rim orientation was in that direction, suggesting that the fire-cloud had faced the body. As has been pointed out in the previous section, no. 4 was possibly pushed by the later depression of a stone and its fire-cloud turned upwards. Therefore, the fire-cloud had originally faced the body.

We should also consider that lying pottery had fallen from a standing position, because it must have been dedicated like the ones in a standing or oblique position. It is reasonable to think that at the very time when it was to be laid by the filling soil, the soil had already started to cover the floor surface of the grave to a certain degree. This means that the vessel had very little chance of rolling over after lying. Then, among the four pots found in a lying position, the two found in the same single grave (nos. 18 and 19) were located on the line of the stone wall of the long side. If the two are restored to their possible original position, the
fire-cloud of each faces the wall, opposite the dead body. As for the other two pots (nos. 5 and 10), each of them was found relatively close to the centre of the grave pit compared with its accompanying vessel (nos. 6 and 9), respectively. No. 5 lay on its hole side, with its fire-cloud facing the centre, i.e. towards the body, while no.10 lay with its rim oriented towards the centre of the grave-pit, and with its fire-cloud almost facing the body.

Then, as is seen in figure 7, the contextual characteristics in the pit graves clearly show that there is a strong correlation between the position of the offering vessel and the direction of the fire-clouds. The actor, within the burial practice who had responsibility for pottery deposition deliberately made a fire-cloud facing the wall, on the one hand, when she/he deposited the vessel at the corner or on the line of the wall. On the other, she/he intentionally made a fire cloud facing the body when depositing the vessel close to the deceased. The contrast between these two types of deposition is well represented in the case of the single graves SK02, 03, 08, and 09. Thus, fire-clouds are highly likely to have represented the particular side of pottery that was decisive for its positioning as the back. The blackish part of the offering vessel probably containing fresh food or drink was not open to the attendees at the funeral. This might well be because the blackness had been related to the indication of the death in the scene of interment, the dead body having turned its colour to black.

Figure 7. Schematic depiction of dedicated vessels in rectangular pit-graves in the Early Yayoi cemetery of the Mochida-Cho San-Chome site. The circle with shade means vessel with a fire-cloud or a discoloration; shade suggesting the direction of a fire-cloud. The number of each vessel corresponds to that of table 1. The vessel in an oblique position is indicated by an inclined number, and that in a lying position is indicated by a laid number. In most vessels that were deposited closely to the centre of the pit, a fire-cloud faced the dead body, while in the vessels deposited either alongside the wall or at the corner, a fire-cloud faced the wall.

The attitude to particular sides of pots was different for jar burials. The front side of a jar burial was dependent on its perforated part, since it is clear, from four cases of the five, that the actor intentionally placed this perforated part facing downwards, thus being the reverse side. However, since perforations were basically not created in the area of fire-clouds, and fire-clouds tended to be oriented upwards, we should regard them as relevant to the decision-making at the time of perforation. Prehistoric people of the Mochida-Cho San-Chome area had possibly already decided the front side of the burial jar according to the location of the marked fire-cloud prior to perforation, and that the perforated part was then carefully
located with the intention of avoiding areas where other fire-clouds were present. They might well have considered the marked fire cloud of the jar coffin as an easily recognisable symbol of the invisible dead body, or pile of its bones, inside the jar.

From both types of burial it is evident that prehistoric people of the Mochida-Cho San-Chome area must have been fully aware of the fire-clouds. In general, graves are rooted in the spirit of the ancestor, and they are apt to be increasingly and persistently constructed in a particular location, which leads to the formation of a cemetery. In late hunter-gatherer and early farmer communities, a cemetery can be interpreted as “an indication of the ideology of group formation and identity” (Chapman 2000: 575). Thus, when we compare every grave within a single cemetery of the prehistoric period, we may have an opportunity to recognise psychologically shared tendencies of the human group in question. This is especially the case with multiple burials of short duration in a single cemetery, since we might be able to distinguish between the tendencies among the group in a particular type of grave and those in funeral as a whole. In the case of the cemetery of the Mochida-Cho San-Chome with multiple burials, the way in which the people treated with a fire-cloud can provide us with an opportunity to offer a reasonable interpretation of ancient attitudes to funeral pottery. Their subtle treatment of a fire-cloud, or discoloration, is likely to have been derived from their sensibilities about the harmony of colour on the surface of pottery and/or about the probable symbolisation of the blacked coloration.

Although there is no evidence of production source for the pottery in the Mochida-Cho San-Chome site, many scholars have considered domestic production and consumption of pottery in Early Yayoi period (Tsude 1982, Suto 1986), based on the local diversity in operational chain of pottery making and in pottery fabrics, as well as on the lack of the clear evidence of the specialised production site that should have firing features and stored clay. Thus, pottery makers/users in the Mochida-Cho San-Chome site are highly likely to have decided how to cope with pottery with a fire-cloud for funeral use, even if they unintentionally produced such pottery.

In the history of Japanese prehistoric ceramics, a fire-cloud was steadily decreasing in its size at latest from Late Yayoi onwards (Morioka and Fujiwara 1977), before the introduction of kiln-firing in the 5th century AD of the proto-historic period. Even in the case of the open-fired tableware for a particular use in the ancient time around 8th-9th centuries, it is demonstrated that such tableware with a fire-cloud was more frequently found, and was larger in size, in a normal settlement than in palace (Akiyama 1994). The specialisation of the manufacture of pottery, it is thought to have started with around Late Yayoi, approximately dated to 2000-1700 BP, in general in western Japan (Tsugiyama 2014). Thus, it is clear that potters have long tried to prevent a fire-cloud. In the light of the rather gradual development of pottery without interruption from Early Yayoi to Late Yayoi, it is thus highly likely that Yayoi pottery users also preferred pottery with the least fire-cloud, from the beginning of the Yayoi culture.

6 Conclusion

Through the collation of contextual photos of pottery, using omni-directional photography, it becomes clear that actors in the funerary ritual at the Mochida-Cho San-Chome site were fully aware of the frontal or dorsal side of the pottery intended for ritual use, the position being dependent on the fire-cloud. In single graves, offering pottery placed at the end was deposited with its fire-cloud facing to the wall, while that placed next to the dead was deposited with its fire-cloud facing towards the dead. In both cases of pottery deposition, a fire-cloud of the pot as grave goods was faced away from the attendee. For jar burials, the perforation which had been created before deposition, with the intention not to cover the same area as a fire-cloud, faced the ground in most cases. Such a subtle treatment of a fire-cloud at the final moment of usage of pottery in its life-history must have partly reflected the inclination to prevent the one at the stage of production.

These analyses will be widely applicable to cultures of any area and any period where pottery was used as grave-goods. In addition, the method is easy even for beginners to carry out, without much preliminary knowledge of the culture to be studied. Accumulating data through this simple contextual analysis might well lead to a general understanding of the attitude of past human beings to pottery used in funerary ritual;
it is an embodied part of religious sensibilities or beliefs. This understanding, in turn, can explore the potential for understanding of the local advances in the early stage of ceramic history.

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