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Zoomorphic terracotta figurines from Chanhu-daro : Mediums of the inventiveness of a culture dedicated to animals



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Context and objectives of the study

The results presented below come from a Master 2 research thesis. It was carried out at the University Paris 1 - Panthéon-Sorbonne (2021-2022).

This thesis had multiple objectives :

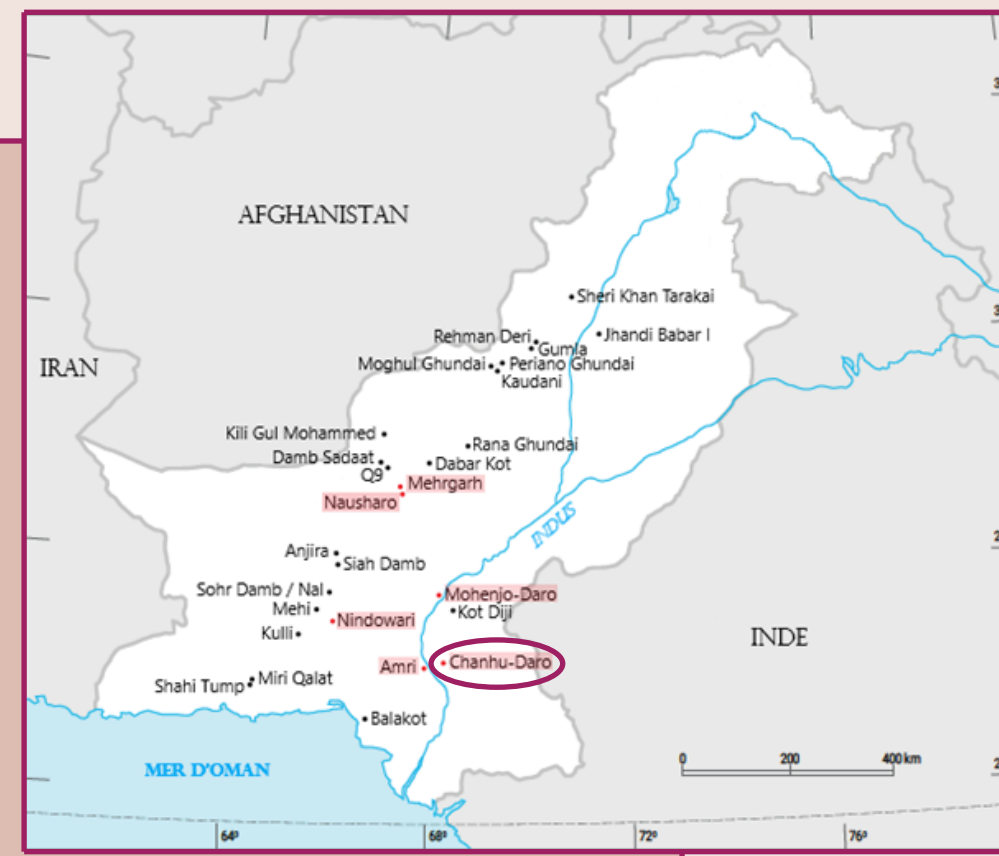
- Establishing a list of Chanhu-daro's zoomorphic terracotta figurines in order to establish typologies specific to the site;
- Detecting any link between zoomorphic figurines and their characteristics, on the one hand, and their distribution on the site and their context of discovery on the other;
- Studying the traces present on the zoomorphic figurines as well as their decorations and morphology to understand the modalities of their manufacture.

The corpus includes 401 figurines from the Indus Civilisation site of Chanhu-daro (Sindh, Pakistan).

They were found during the excavations and surveys of:

- MAFBI since 2015;
- N. G. Majumdar, in 1931;
- E. J. H. Mackay, from 1935 to 1936.

They were dated in majority from the first Indus period (2600/2500-2300 BCE), but also from the second Indus period (2300-2100 BCE) and the third Indus period (2100-1900 BCE).



Map of the Indus Civilisation sites from Balochistan and Lower Indus Valley. M. Laurent-Godard 2021. Map base: Encyclopaedia universalis

Year	Harappa	Mohenjo-daro	Chanhu-daro	Rohtak	Surkotda	Lothal	Skara	Wang
3000	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI
2600	Indus 3	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI
2500	Indus 2	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI
2400	Indus 1	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI
2300	Indus 1	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI
2200	Indus 1	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI
2100	Indus 1	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI
2000	Indus 1	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI
1900	Indus 1	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI
1800	Indus 1	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI
1700	Indus 1	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI
1600	Indus 1	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI
1500	Indus 1	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI
1400	Indus 1	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI
1300	Indus 1	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI
1200	Indus 1	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI
1100	Indus 1	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI
1000	Indus 1	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI
900	Indus 1	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI
800	Indus 1	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI
700	Indus 1	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI
600	Indus 1	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI
500	Indus 1	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI
400	Indus 1	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI
300	Indus 1	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI
200	Indus 1	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI
100	Indus 1	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI	VI

Comparative chronology. M. Laurent-Godard 2022. From: Didier et al., 2017, C. Jarrige et al., 1995, J.-F. Jarrige et al., 2011, Kenoyer, 1998

Types of terracotta zoomorphic figurines



28 types were identified. These figurines were made in each site without any representation unity or serial production. The specificity of Chanhu-daro lie in its birds' variety and in the realization of unicorn figurines.

119 figurines have perforations. They were probably used to:

- Attach them to a stick (1);
- Mount them on wheels (2) or tie them to a cart;
- Articulate them (3).

Whistle birds (4) are a type shared with other sites as Mohenjo-daro or Mehrgarh. All Chanhu-daro's whistle birds come from contexts attributed to the first Indus period.

Two terracotta bird statuettes (5-6) were found in 2022 in first Indus period contexts. They must have measured about 30 cm long. One is painted with a grid pattern. They represent a bird with outstretched wings, fan-shaped tail and legs. These unique objects are very similar to figurines representing birds in the same position (7).

Terracotta zoomorphic figurines from Chanhu-daro. 1, 2, 4-7 : © MAFBI. 3: Mackay 1943.

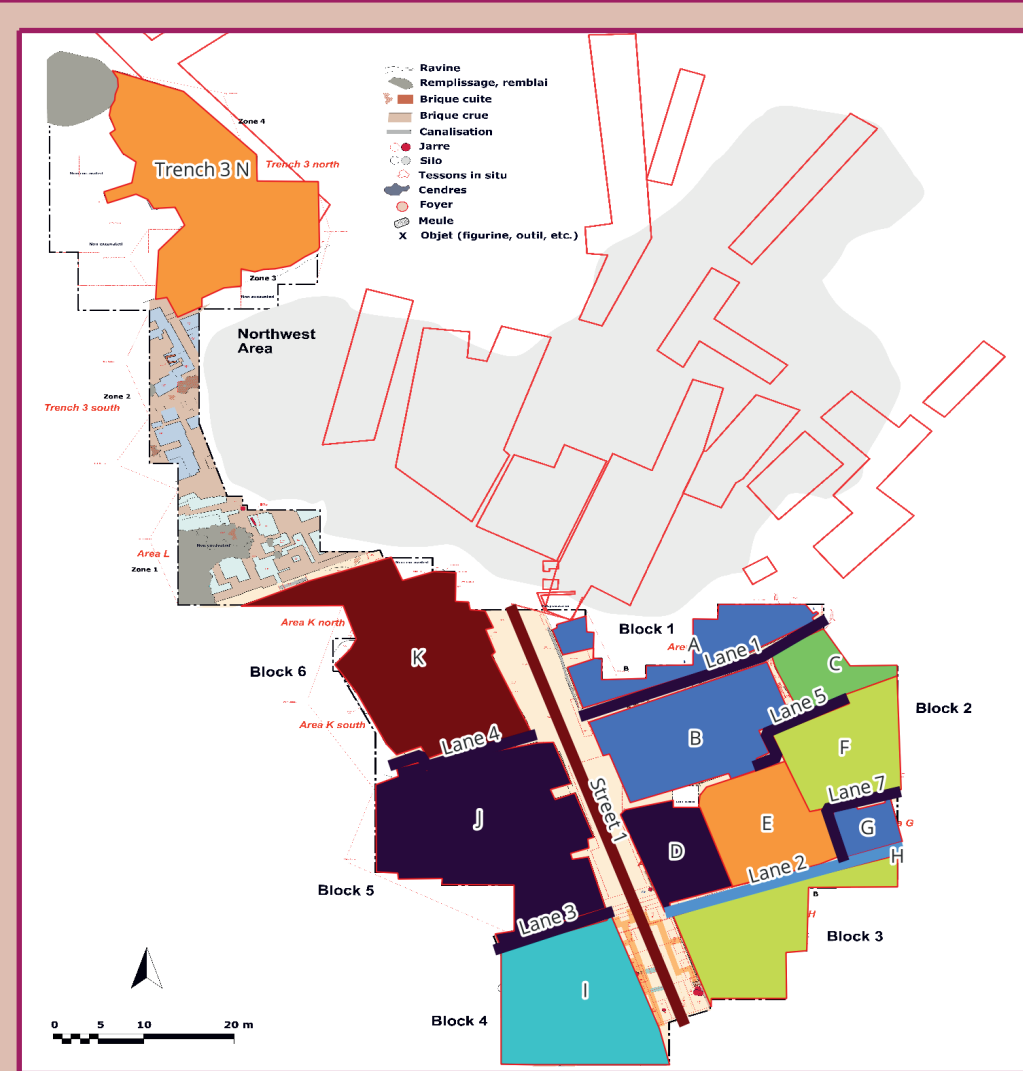


The Helmholtz resonator principle: blow on the edge of the beveled perforation to resonate the hollow interior and produce a whistling sound.

Methodology

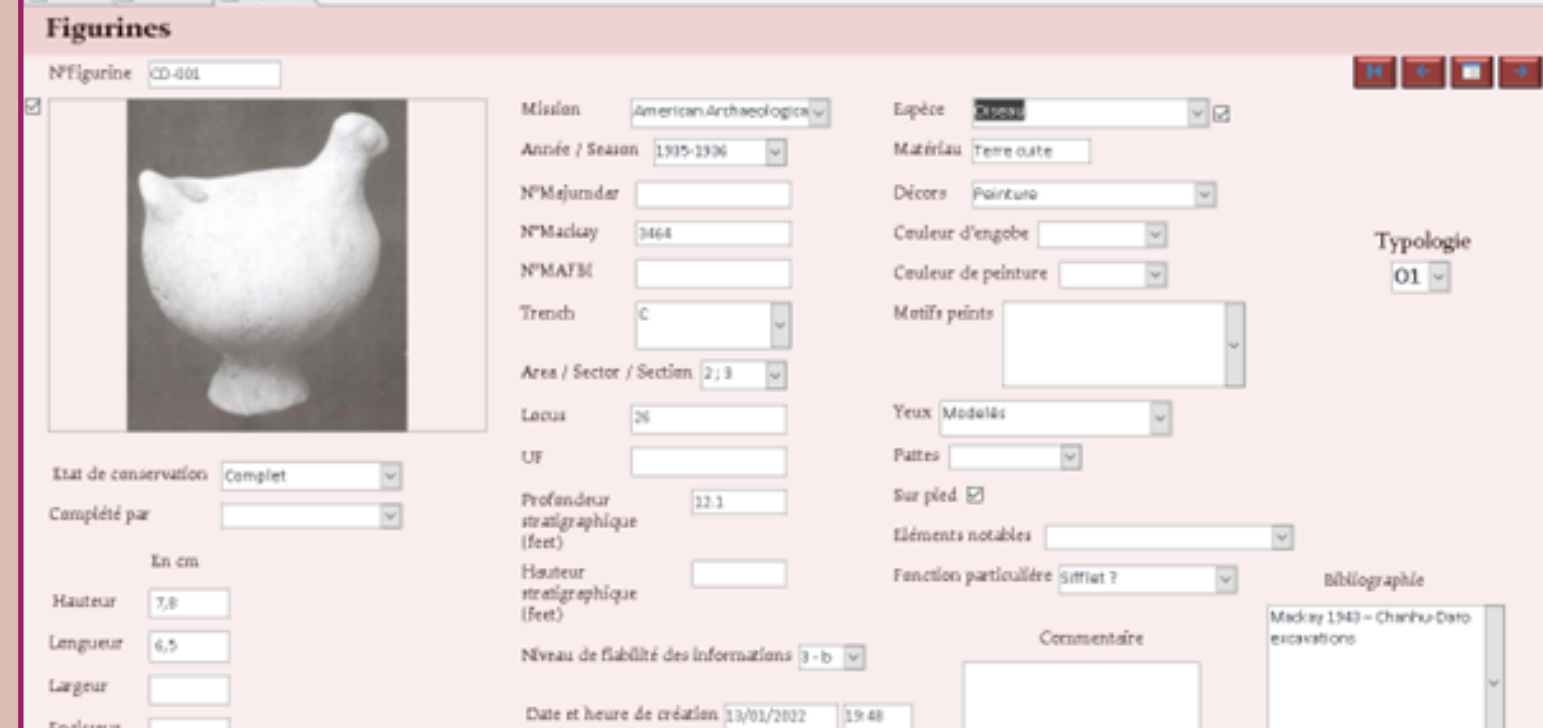
In order to meet these objectives, a four-step methodology has been implemented:

1. Sorting and identification of each figurine.
2. Recording of each figurine, its characteristics and its contextual informations in a database created for this purpose.
3. Study of the figurines' characteristics thanks to the database (typologies, decorations).
4. First mapping of the distribution of zoomorphic figurines discovered by the MAFBI in Chanhu-daro.



Work in progress:

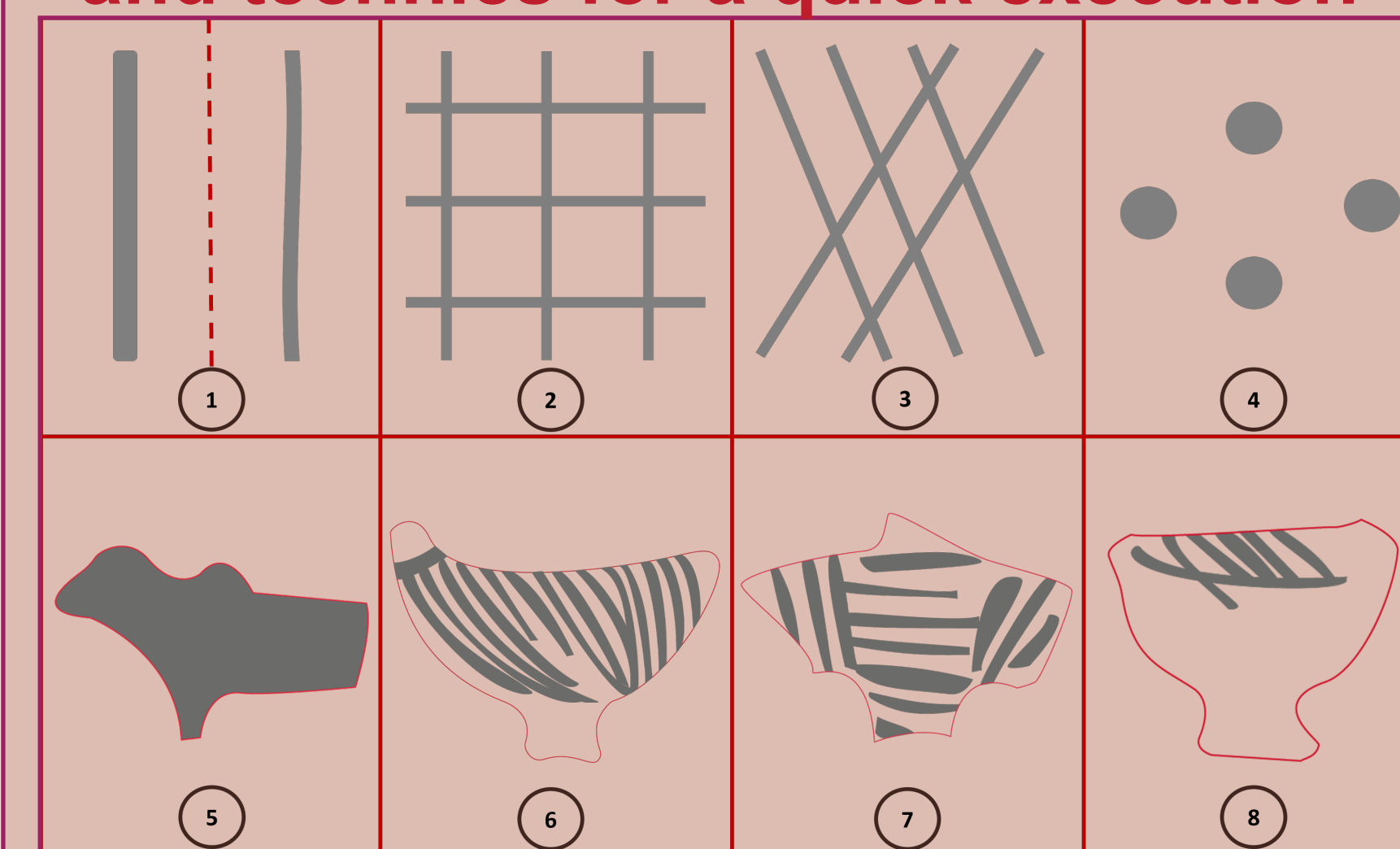
Density maps of zoomorphic figurines and their species by area, locus or excavation unit.



Top: Density map of figurines by excavation zone. M. Laurent-Godard 2022. Chanhu-daro plan: © MAFBI

Bottom: Chanhu-daro's terracotta zoomorphic figurines database (extract). M. Laurent-Godard 2022.

The Decorations : restricted patterns and technics for a quick execution



Main painted patterns of Chanhu-daro's zoomorphic terracotta figurines. M. Laurent-Godard 2022

-> These figurines are made quickly with a minimum of manufacturing steps.

The types of decorations and motifs do not seem to be associated with particular typologies.

81 figurines of the corpus have decorations. There are three kinds of decoration techniques:

- Incisions: for anatomy details.
- Slip: buff, brown/red and pink color.
- Painting: red and applied after firing. There are eight main painted patterns:
 - Bands: single, double, triple or group of bands (1);
 - Lattices and Grids (2-3);
 - Dots (4);
 - Painting covering the entire figurine (5);
 - Covering strips on the full body or on a single zone (6-7).

Interpretation bias ! Time erased many decoration, so it is difficult to estimate the original proportion of painted figurines.

Shaping the animal: between domesticated and wild species



Terracotta zoomorphic figurines from Chanhu-daro. 1, 3-10 : © MAFBI. 2: Mackay 1943.

The most represented species are :

- Zebus: 99 figurines (1);
- Birds: 47 figurines (4-5);
- Unicorns: 12 figurines (6);
- Rams: 10 figurines (3).

Domestic animals are the most represented.

-> Inhabitants of Chanhu-daro could see many domestic animals on a daily basis and much more rarely wild animals such as tigers (8) or monkeys (9). Surprisingly, there is few goats (6) and dogs (2).

The chosen animals are species with particularly recognizable characteristics: for example the zebu and its hump or the ram and its coiled horns.

The only aquatic animal is the tortoise (7) and the only "fantastic" species represented is the unicorn (10).

Was the unicorn real to the Indusian populations?

Every figurines represent real animals. Even "hybrid" figurines are not real chimeras. For it to be considered real, it does not matter that only stories confirm its existence. For example, in Europe, some fantastic animals were still seen as real until the 20th century.

The Mode of production of zoomorphic terracotta figurines: hypotheses proposal

Since the vast majority of zoomorphic figurines were properly fired, this means that those who fired them were experimented. There are therefore several possibilities regarding the manufacture of zoomorphic figurines:

- They were made and fired by specialized craftsmen.
- They were modeled by specialized craftsmen and then fired by potters with ceramics.
- They were made by potters with ceramics.
- They were modeled by one or more members of each family and then fired by the potters.

Chanhu-daro's zoomorphic figurines all exhibit a form of individuality or originality. They were therefore probably made by several people. Each had its own "style" despite a common model. This implies that it is mainly the figurine's use that was standardized, but not their form.



Zebu



Ram



Terracotta zoomorphic figurines from Chanhu-daro. © MAFBI

Tortoise (back)

Conclusion:

The study of Chanhu-daro's terracotta zoomorphic figurines showed that :

- Each zoomorphic terracotta figurines production has its own peculiarities;
- The Indus Civilisation is not a monolithic, homogeneous and evolutionless block;
- Each region has kept its own specificities and individuality within the Indus Civilisation.

Perspectives:

- Study the meaning, the symbolism and the value given to the animal and its representation to better understand animal figurines purposes and uses;
- Keep on the work on mapping the figurines density in Chanhu-daro and elsewhere.