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BRONZE AGE TERRACOTTA ANTHROPOMORPHIC AND ZOOMORPHIC FIGURINES FROM THE MURGHAB REGION (TURKMENISTAN): NEW EVIDENCE AND INTERPRETATIONS*

Luca Forni

Since 1990 the University of Bologna has been involved in several archaeological projects in Turkmenistan concerning the study of the urban phenomenon in the alluvial fan of the Murghab river, between the Bronze and Iron Age, through the creation of the archaeological map of the region, stratigraphic excavations and surface survey. The anthropomorphic and zoomorphic terracotta figurines, found mainly during the survey activities of the Italian-Turkmen Archaeological Expedition, are certainly worthy of note, both for diffusion patterns and the complexity of their interpretation. About fifty-two fragments were identified, forty of these belonging to anthropomorphic statuettes and twelve to zoomorphic figurines, dated to a period between the advanced phase of the Middle Bronze (2400-1950 BC) and the Late Bronze Age (1950-1500 BC). The aim of this research is that of documenting the diffusion of the terracotta figurines in the Murghab region from the early occupation phases, and of examining their style, function and morphology, according to precise criteria used in the study of Central Asian and Near Eastern choroplastic. This analysis suggests that terracotta statuettes can provide useful elements for proposing a better understanding of the historical and archaeological situation of the alluvial fan of the Murghab River. Terracotta figurines can also provide information on everyday life, worship and spiritual life of people who lived in one of the most important regions of protohistoric Central Asia.

The discovery of fifty-two fragments of terracotta anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines in the alluvial fan of the Murghab River represents an important opportunity for the study and the understanding of one of the most common and significant artifacts typology of southern Turkmenistan. These still unpublished findings are only part of the results obtained by the Italian-

Turkmen Archaeological Mission between 1990 and 2015¹, involved in several research projects concerning the study of the urban phenomenon in the alluvial fan of the Murghab River during the Bronze and the Iron Ages, through the archaeological map, stratigraphic excavations and surface surveys (Gubaev, Koshelenko, Tosi 1998; Salvatori, Tosi, Cerasetti 2008) (fig. 1). The survey, which interested about two thousand sites dating from the Bronze Age to the Islamic period, allowed the discovery of almost all the fragments of terracotta figurines. They are characterized by morphology and iconography that are the result of the stylistic research that began in the VI and finished at the beginnings of the II millennium BC (Masson, Sarianidi 1973; Antonova, Sarianidi 1990).

The importance of the terracotta anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines derives from the elaborate combination of stylistic details, technological knowledge and symbolic meanings, as a direct expression of the related culture and society. The complex meaning of these artifacts can be analyzed on four possible levels of interpretation (Lesure 2002: 3-5). The first one is the

* Department of History and Cultures, University of Bologna. This article represents an extended and updated elaboration of my master's degree thesis in Archaeology and Cultures of the Ancient World, *Le Figurine Antropomorfe e Zoomorfe in Terracotta dell'Età del Bronzo dalla Regione del Fiume Murghab (Turkmenistan)*, presented to the Department of History and Cultures of the University of Bologna in 2015. I would like to thank Prof. Maurizio Cattani and Dr. Barbara Cerasetti for giving me the opportunity to dedicate myself to this research, Prof. Gian Luca Bonora for his strong support and important collaboration. I wish to thank Dr. Mukhammed A. Mamedov, chief of the National Department for the Protection, Research and Restoration of Monuments of the Ministry of Culture of Turkmenistan and Dr. Rejepmyrat Jepbarov, director of the Ancient Merv National Historical Park of the Ministry of Culture of Turkmenistan for their kind hospitality and for giving me the possibility to analyze the terracotta figurines. A special thank goes to Dr. Nadezhda A. Dubova and Dr. Liubov B. Kircho for their precious suggestions regarding studies on terracotta figurines found in Southern Turkmenistan.

¹ Since 2009 Italian-American-Turkmen Archaeological Mission.

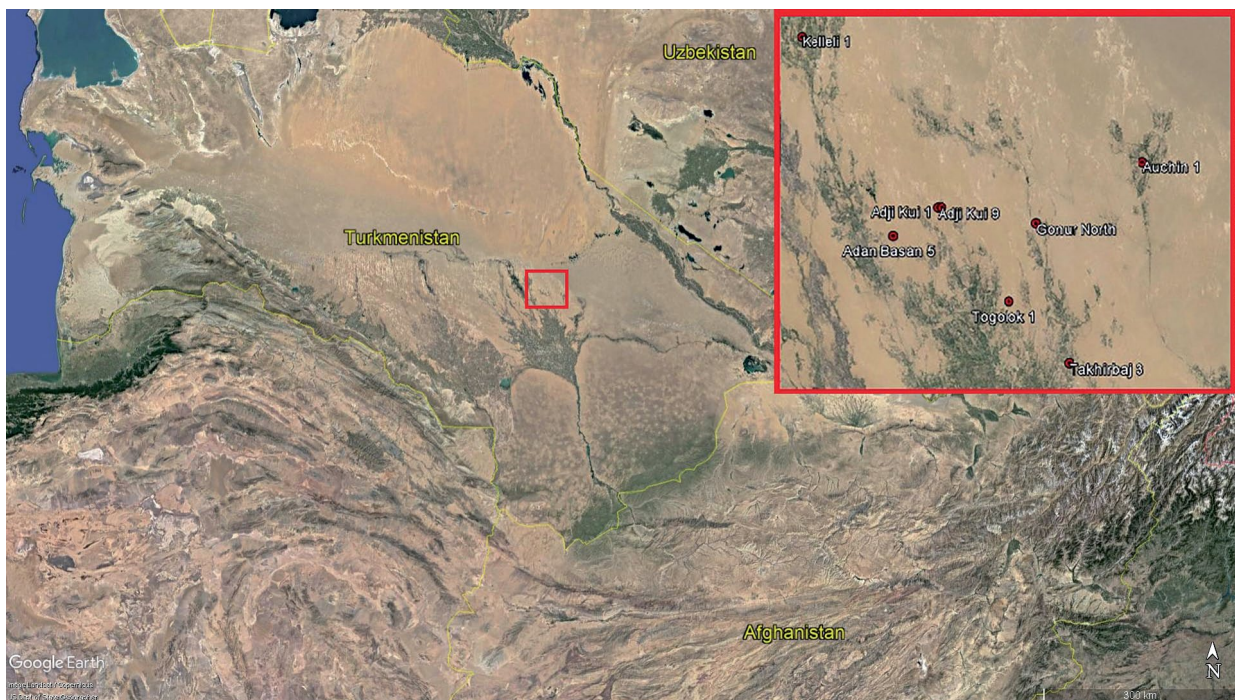


Fig. 1. Map of Central Asia with some of the main archaeological sites of the Murghab alluvial fan (from Google Earth 2015).

iconographic level, in other words what the figurine represents according to the physical characteristics; the second one is the symbolic meaning, or better the significance the statuette has for the individual; the third one concerns the use in the social context; finally, the last level of interpretation relates to the criteria of differentiation within the society, such as age or sex, and how they were represented. The stages of the manufacture themselves represent a powerful and symbolic meaning, through the parallel treatment of the clay and physical body as in the application of decoration (Pizzeghello et al. 2015: 9). In addition to the deep complexity that these figurines represent, the use of a widely available material and the relative ease of manufacture have allowed a high diffusion of this typology of artifacts, not only in all regions between Anatolia and the Indus Valley during the protohistoric period, but also in every stratum of the ancient Near East societies and their everyday life (Langin-Hooper 2014: vii).

Context of Discovery and Chronological Attribution

About forty-nine anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines come from survey activities and three from stratigraphic excavations, carried out

at Togolok 1 (Cerasetti, Arciero, Forni forthcoming), Adji Kui 1 and 9 (Salvatori 2002: 107-179). Although almost all of the fragments comes from surface finds, the terracotta figurines, especially the anthropomorphic ones, represent a highly discriminating pointer in the chronological attribution to the Middle or Late Bronze Age (Masimov, Salvatori, Udeumuradov 1998: 35).

Concerning the anthropomorphic statuettes, the style and iconography attribute these fragments to the material culture documented in the Kopet-Dagh foothills sites during the initial phase of the Middle Bronze Age (Masson 1988). However, the progress in the production technique, the variety of typologies and the contexts of discovery allow to date these artifacts to a later period. In particular, for the anthropomorphic figurines scholars have proposed a date attributable to the advanced phase of the Middle Bronze Age (2400-1950 BC)², while the zoomorphic statuettes, interpreted as decorations of ceremonial vessels char-

² The absolute chronology adopted in this article was proposed in Salvatori, Tosi and Cerasetti (2008). An update of this chronology, based on new stratigraphic investigations and radiocarbon datings, was proposed in Cerasetti (2012).

acteristic of the Late Bronze Age (1950-1500 BC) (Sarianidi 2005: 263-283), can be traced back to the same period. Confirmations come from two fragments documented during the excavations carried out at Adjı Kui 9 and 1 by S. Salvatori in 1997, figuring respectively a female torso belonging to a flat violin-shaped figurine and the body of a quadruped animal (Salvatori 2002: 106-179). Regarding the anthropomorphic statuette, the radiocarbon dating has dated the context of discovery to a period between 2282 and 2190 BC, while the zoomorphic figurine was found in a stratigraphic layer together to pottery sherds attributed to the Late Bronze Age (Salvatori 2002: 107-113). Lastly, the stratigraphic excavation performed at Togolok 1 in 2013 by the Italian-American-Turkmen Archaeological Mission has led to the discovery of an anthropomorphic head (fig. 4.2), detected in a layer which belongs to the second occupation phase of a shelter for nomad shepherds. Although the documented material culture for this stage was attributable to the Late Bronze Age (1950-1500) (Cerasetti, Arciero and Forni forthcoming), stylistic and iconographic analysis led to the identification of this artifact as fragment of one terracotta figurine characteristic of the advanced phase of the Middle Bronze Age. Due to the long time span between the two periods, it was considered as an inclusion or as an object reused by the nomadic shepherds who occupied this shelter.

Anthropomorphic Figurines: Meaning, Stylistic and Iconographic Analysis

Among the fifty-two terracotta statuettes documented by the Italian-Turkmen Archaeological Mission forty present an anthropomorphic figure. Concerning the different typologies³, about the 60% of the fragments was attributed to flat violin-shaped figurines (fig. 2), in line with the findings from Altyn-tepe (Masson and Sarianidi 1973), Adjı Kui 9 (Rossi Osmida 2007a: 68-75), Gonur North and its necropolis (Sarianidi 2007: 68-70; Rossi Osmida 2007a: 158), where this typology was widely attested. The second most common group is composed by seven heads characterized by a prism-shape and a triangular section, which



Fig. 2. Terracotta flat violin-shaped female figurine. H. 15 cm (Sarianidi 2007: 70, fig. 48).

belong either to the lanceolate figurines, either to the standing ones. In this case, a precise attribution was not possible. Furthermore, four findings have been identified with more certainty as parts of standing statuettes, while sitting, pillar and hourglass-shaped figurines are represented by only one fragment. Due to the complete absence of anatomic or stylistic elements, one finding was not attributed to any of the groups mentioned.

As regards the body parts, the findings can be divided into four groups: head (fifteen fragments), torso (seventeen), limb (four) and pelvis-pubic triangle (four). The extreme fragmentation is mainly due to the thinness of the figurines, ranging between 0.5 and 1.5 centimeters, characteristic of the Bronze Age statuettes found in the Murghab region, while only two torsos are 3.5 centimeters thick. This thickness indicates that the origin of these fractures may be related to accidental breakage, depositional or post-depositional events. However, the presence documented in some fragments of sharp break along the horizontal axis at waist level does not exclude an intentional rupture. The conservation does not seem to have been therefore the most important purpose in creating these figurines. Instead, it is possible to attribute these artifacts to a use which could easily lead to breakage and easy replacement. This conclusion supports the hypothesis that the flat violin-shaped and lanceolate figurines were

³ For a description and a more precise analysis of the different typologies of terracotta anthropomorphic figurines mentioned in this article see Antonova and Sarianidi (1990); Sarianidi (2007: 68-75); Rossi Osmida (2007a: 159-74).

used as pendants (Rossi Osmida 2007b: 218), subjected to frequent shocks and falls, as well as to possible intentional breakage during special rituals. This use is also testified by the limited size of the figurines (10-15 centimeters) and the holes drilled in the tiara or in the head, through which could be passed a string or a ring that allowed the suspension (fig. 3.2). An additional element for the interpretation of these artifacts as pendants is represented by the different contexts of discovery in which the figurines were found. At the present state of the research, anthropomorphic statuettes were identified in ritual (Rossi Osmida 2007a: 68-75) and funerary contexts (Sarianidi 2007: 68-70), but also in craft (Sarianidi, Dubova 2014: 106-7) and residential areas (Rossi Osmida 2007a: 68-70), as well as waste deposits. The dispersion of the figurine fragments in these different contexts highlights a function not particularly related to ritual or ceremonial events. These artifacts, on the contrary, seem to be linked to a daily use. The pendant may have been lost; broken after a fall on the ground and thrown into waste deposit; at last, it may have been replaced. These events could justify the dispersion in so many contexts. Finally, after the death of the holder, the statuette, considered as a strictly personal and apotropaic object, was placed with the deceased in the grave.

Stylistic details of particular importance for the interpretation of this typology of artifacts are the incised decorations identified on the flat violin-shaped figurines. In particular, the *chevron* pattern is the most reproduced decoration, detected in twelve fragments on forty along the neck of the figurines (fig. 4.1; 4.2; 4.3). The presence on the neck allows to assume that the *chevron* motif may represent a series of highly stylized necklaces, recalling the laces of the medallions of the standing and lanceolate statuettes. The stylized tree pattern is instead the second most represented symbol, identified in six flat female figurines. In at least four cases it's possible to observe how the plant appears to branch off from the breast, always expanding to the arms but also along the neck and the vertical axis of the torso. This link between the stylized tree motif and the breast confers on the figure an undoubted meaning tied to the concepts of fertility and motherhood (Masson 1988: 84-9), made explicit to a greater extent in one of the torsos in which this decoration is interrupted by the incised pubic triangle (fig. 3.3). This reference to the natural and maternal world, often associated with the so-called cult of the "Mother Goddess" (Gimbutas 1991), represents an important contribution to the identification of the characters depicted in the

female statuettes, a topic still discussed by scholars⁴. An hypothesis, however, can be provided by glyptic. Infact, the nose pinched like a beak and the open arms represented as spread out wings confer to these figurines an ornitomorphic aspect, which distinguishes celestial raptor goddess in Iranian and Bactrian seals between late III and early II millennium (Winkelmann 2008). According to S. Winkelmann (2014: 299), this iconography appertain to a cultural and religious *koinè* during the Bronze Age, which stretches from the Iranian plateau to Indus Valley in the East and Afghanistan, southern Uzbekistan and southern Turkmenistan in the north. In any case, both the mother goddess and the raptor deity perfectly embody the concepts of fertility and motherhood, which is certainly transmitted by the incised decorations of the flat violin-shaped figurines.

The interpretation of male figurines is significantly more uncertain due to the absence of particular decorations or iconographic details, although it is possible to observe more than an analogy with female ones.

A further element for the correct interpretation of terracotta anthropomorphic figurines is represented by the recognition of sex. This analysis was determined by comparison of stylistic and iconographic details of the examined fragments with the intact and well preserved statuettes. In fact, almost all of the specimens preserved in good condition belonging to a particular typology correspond to a specific sex, as in the case of flat violin-shaped figurines, depicting females, and the standing ones, portraying males instead⁵ (fig. 5). Regarding the considered fragments, there has been a significant change compared to previous periods: the percentage of findings attributable to female figurines on the total fragments of which it was possible to determine the sex (73%) is significantly lower than percentage detected in Altyn-tepe during Namazga III (97%) and V (96%) phases. On

⁴ About the numerous and debated hypotheses on the identification of the terracotta anthropomorphic figurines found in the Murghab region see for example Masson and Sarianidi (1973: 112-212); Winkelmann (2007: 196-203).

⁵ One exception is a standing female figurine found in Gonur, of which we know only a picture published by V.I. Sarianidi in 2007 on the business magazine "Turkmenistan". In this picture it's possible to recognize the style and iconography of flat female figurines, to which the characteristic legs of the standing male statuettes were applied. At present, this is a unique example among the terracotta anthropomorphic figurines documented in the Murghab region.



Fig. 3. Terracotta anthropomorphic figurines from the surface of Adji Kui 9 (from the upper left side to the bottom right corner: Masimov, Salvatori, Udeumuradov 1998: 41, fig. 1.7; Salvatori 2002: 151, fig. 38; 153, fig. 41; 153, fig. 42).



Fig. 4. Terracotta anthropomorphic figurines from excavation and survey activities carried out at Togolok 1.

the other hand, the second phenomenon which appears most evident is the exponential growth of the male figurines, identified in almost one of five documented fragments (fig. 4.4). A similar change was identified by S. Winkelmann in the representations of the Bactrian cylinder and compartmented seals between the late third and the early II millennium BC (Winkelmann 2007: 202). In particular, this shift in the hierarchy of the sexes would be started in Mesopotamia since the Early Dynastic period and would spread in the arts during the Akkadian period. It is less likely that this change is due to a gradual shift from a matriarchal to a patriarchal or matrifocal society, as argued by M. Gimbutas to explain this particular phenomenon (Gimbutas 1991). In fact, the Early Bronze Age individual burials found at Altyn-tepe and Namazga-tepe do not reveal any particular difference in status between sexes (Kohl 1984: 110-111) or elements that led to identify a matriarchal society. Concerning the Middle Bronze Age, the burials attributed to male individuals found in the necropolis of Gonur contained specific grave goods represented by evident symbols of high rank, such as ceremonial axes, scepters, knives, metal swords, and, more rarely, terracotta standing or sitting male figurines (Sarianidi 2007: 68-70). The latter,



Fig. 5. Terracotta standing male figurine. H 22 cm (National Museum of History of Ashgabat, © Brian McMorrow 2011).

whose meaning was closely linked to that of female figurines until the Middle Bronze Age, may have changed their function, becoming a symbol of high rank. The female figurines, on the other hand, would remain linked to apotropaic and ritual meanings. In this case, the low number of male statues found in Murghab would highlight their elitist value, but their increase compared to previous periods would show a well-established use and meaning.

Zoomorphic Figurines: Stylistic Analysis and Function

The twelve fragments of zoomorphic figurines found during the survey are heavily damaged. Nevertheless, seven figurines were interpreted as decorative elements that adorned the rim and the body of ceremonial or ritual vessels, documented in Late Bronze Age contexts by V.I. Sarianidi (Sarianidi 2005: 261-83). This typology of statuettes can be recognized thanks to the lower profile, usually curved or flat, due to the pressure exerted on the figurine to place it on the rim and on the body of the vessel when the clay was still unfired (Hiebert 1994: 142-143). The absence of legs is also an implicit confirmation of this function, because the breakages are due to the detachment of the artifact from its original location. The other findings consist of four sheep-goat heads and the body of a quadruped animal marked by few details. The dating of the latter five fragments, not attributable with certainty to the decorative typology, can be generally traced back to the period between the Middle and the Late Bronze Age.

Some interpretative doubts concern the distinction between sheep and goats in the twelve fragments examined. In particular, the latter represents about three-quarters of the animals depicted in the zoomorphic figurines (fig. 6). The common features of these statuettes are long or ellipsoidal muzzle; stocky body and short tail; and finally ears or horns, which constitute the element of recognition of the different species. In one case it was possible to identify a small bow, interpreted as the beginning of the curvature of the horns of the Bezoar goat (*Capra aegagrus aegagrus*). Regarding the ovine species, three analyzed fragments are related to the representation of sheep, while only one can be identified as ram, recognizable by two slightly curled appliques used to depict the horns. In addition to sheep and goats, the only animal that can be recognized with a fair degree of certainty is a steppe tortoise (*Testudo horsfieldii*). This figurine, used as decoration for the body of

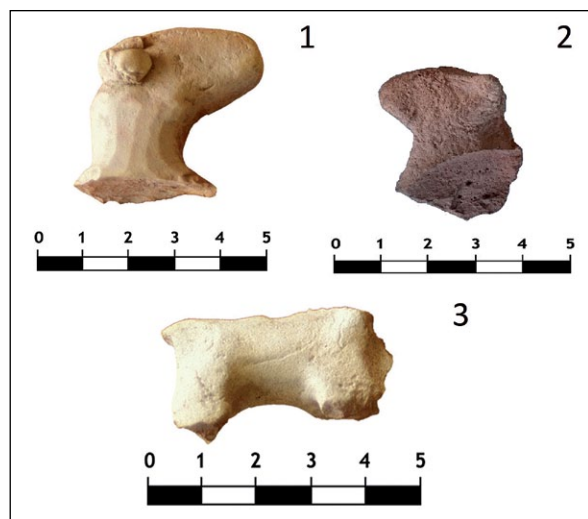


Fig. 6. Terracotta zoomorphic figurines from the surface of (from the upper left side to the bottom) Jakiper-tepe, Takhirbai 14 and Togolok 1.

ceremonial vessel, has a slender body and a muzzle shaped like a beak. Finally, the two remaining figures are difficult to identify for their coarseness, but in one case it is possible to recognize the figure of a frog, characterized by square body and thin thickness. The latter characteristic was probably due to the pressure exerted on the figurine on the body vessel.

Distribution Analysis of the Terracotta Anthropomorphic and Zoomorphic Figurines

The distribution analysis (fig. 7) has showed that terracotta anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines have been collected in twelve new settlements, in addition to the sites of Kelleli 1 and 4 (Masimov 1981: 208), Adjı Kui 1, 8 and 9 (Rossi Osmida 2007a: 68-75), Gonur North and its necropolis (Sarianidi 2007: 68-70; Rossi Osmida 2007a: 158) where these artifacts were already documented. These sites, located especially in the southern and center-western sector of the alluvial fan, attest to a widespread distribution of this class of materials, equal to that found in the settlements along the Kopet-Dagh foothills during the initial phase of the Middle Bronze Age (Masson, Sarianidi 1973).

In particular, the settlement where the largest number of fragments was found is Togolok 1. Regarding the chronology of the site, the first occupation was dated on the basis of findings col-

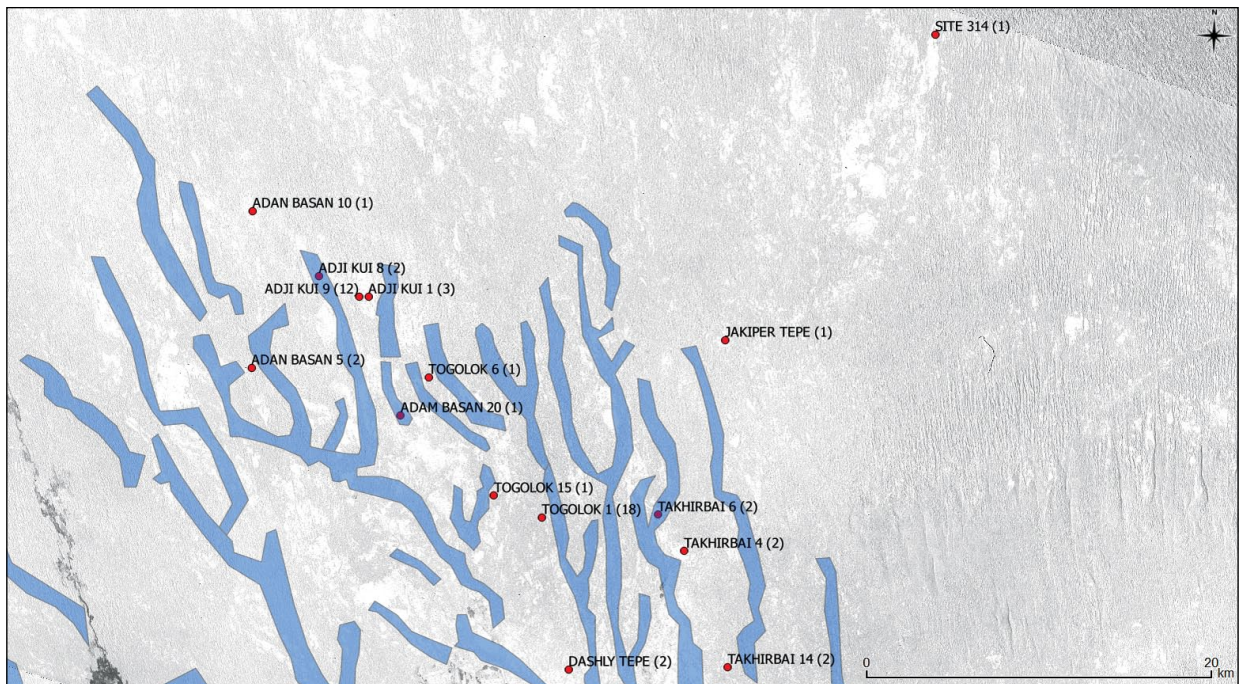


Fig. 7. Distribution of terracotta anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines, found by the Italian-Turkmen Archaeological Mission between 1990 and 2015, with the number of the fragments documented in each site (background Corona 1972).

lected by V.I. Sarianidi during the opening of a test trench in 1987 (Sarianidi 1987: 5-21). The deep levels reached by the excavation at Togolok 1 yielded material datable to the Middle Bronze Age, of which no trace was identified among surface material (Salvatori 2008: 60). In fact, only Late Bronze Age artifacts were detected on the surface of the site during the survey conducted by the Italian-Turkmen Archaeological Mission between 1995 and 2005 (Salvatori, Cattani 2008: 1-14). The systematic survey carried out at a later stage in 2009 (Cerasetti, Codini, Rouse 2014: 32-50) and the excavations done in 2014-2015 (Cerasetti, Arciero, Forni forthcoming) have allowed the discovery of a nomadic occupation phase, datable on Late Bronze Age (1880-1620 BC)⁶. During

these activities, nineteen terracotta figurine fragments were identified, seventeen of them attributed to the anthropomorphic type (fig. 4). The two remaining statuettes, as well as the documented ones on the surface of Togolok 6 and 15, consist of depictions of sheep and goats, characterized by details which do not allow a precise dating to the Middle or Late Bronze Age.

The site of Adji Kui 9 is the second area to have reported the largest number of finds, represented by twelve anthropomorphic figurines (fig. 3). Dated to the Middle Bronze Age, this settlement was investigated in the early 2000s through extensive excavations, which led to the discovery of about one hundred sixty-four terracotta anthropomorphic figurines (Rossi Osmda 2007a: 68-75). Due to this high number of findings, the site has become the most important case study concerning this particular type of artifacts after Gonur North and its necropolis. In addition to the aforesaid, few fragments were documented in the near site of Adji Kui 1. On the surface of the settlement two anthropomorphic statuettes were identified, while the body of quadruped animal was found during the stratigraphic excavation carried out in 1997 (Salvatori 2002: 107-113). Finally, a flat violin-shaped female figurine was detected on the surface of the settlement of Adji Kui 8.

⁶ The dating was made on the basis of the calibration of the radiocarbon age of one seed sample from US 127. The conventional radiocarbon age was converted into calendar years by using the software OxCal Ver. 3.5 based on the last atmospheric dataset (Reimer et al. 2013, 1869-1887). The analysis was made by CEDAD - CEntro di DATazione e Diagnostica, Dipartimento di Ingegneria dell'Innovazione, Università del Salento (Italy) and was funded by the Volkswagen and Mellon Foundations, Fellowship for Research in the Humanities for research in Germany, Grant for 2015-2016, PI Spengler.



Fig. 8. Terracotta anthropomorphic torso from Dashly-tepe (Masimov, Salvatori, Udeumuradov 1998: 41, fig. 1.4).

In the central-western sector of the Murghab alluvial fan, the survey conducted in the area of Adam Basan led to discovery of four fragments of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines, coming from Adam Basan 5, 10 and 20. According to the ceramic ware found on the surface, the occupation phase of these settlements was dated to the Late Bronze Age (Gubaev, Koshelenko, Tosi 1998: 234), but the discovery of anthropomorphic figurines stylistically similar to those belonging to the advanced stage of the Middle Bronze Age cannot exclude a previous occupation.

Fragments of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic statuettes were also found on the surface of the sites of Takhirbai 4, 6 and 14, whose occupation phases can be traced back to a period between the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age (Gubaev, Koshelenko, Tosi 1998: 208-209). Two prism-shaped heads attributed to anthropomorphic figurines come from the site of Takhirbai 6, while four statuettes of sheep, goats and tortoises, were found during the survey activities at Takhirbai 4 and 14.

Still in the eastern sector of the fan, one torso belonging to a flat violin-shaped female figurine was identified on the surface of an area located about nine kilometers to the north of Auchin 1, while a sheep-goat body, interpreted as a decoration for the rim of the ceremonial vessel, was discovered at the Sasanid-Islamic site of Jakiper-tepe.

The last considered two fragments come from a site located about one kilometer north-west from Dashly-tepe, a Sasanid settlement situated to the

south of the Togolok area: a head attributed to a flat violin-shaped female figurine and the left half of a particular anthropomorphic torso, which presents a dense series of horizontal grooves and one straight line perpendicular to the latter (fig. 8). This decoration could refer to a variant of the stylized tree motif, with horizontal lines instead of the diagonal ones. The arms are open and rounded, while thickness, length and height are more than double the standard of the statuettes documented in the Murghab region. This detail shows a production technique not yet perfected, similar to the one employed on the figurines found in the site of Altyn-tepe and also observed in some fragments from Kelleli 1 and 4, which were dated to the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age (Masimov 1981: 208). In particular, some stylistic features identified in the fragments from Kelleli sites (thickness, incised patterns and shape of the arms) are very similar to those analyzed in the torso from Dashly-tepe, allowing to date the latter to the same period.

Conclusions

The study of the terracotta figurine fragments found in the Murghab region represents a fundamental step for the understanding of one of the most complex typology of artifacts documented in southern Turkmenistan between the Middle and the Late Bronze Age. The survey activities confirmed the widespread deployment of models documented previously only in the areas of Kelleli, Gonur North and Adji Kui in further twelve settlements located in the central-western, southern and eastern regions of the Murghab region. The analysis of these fragments, both belonging to anthropomorphic and zoomorphic statuettes, suggests how data concerning style, iconography, typology and depicted subjects are in line with those examined in well preserved figurines coming from different excavation contexts.

Regarding the anthropomorphic statuettes, it was observed a high prevalence of flat violin-shaped female figurines, which reach nearly two thirds of the total findings. The stylistic analysis and the discovery context of these artifacts suggest an apotropaic meaning, closely linked to the fertility and motherhood symbols incised on the female figure. These statuettes, drilled in the head or in the tiara to allow the insertion of a string or a ring, were used as pendants to hold around the neck or in domestic environments, as guarantors of the security and welfare of the individual or people

group. In this case it is possible to assume that the flat violin-shaped female figurines documented in the Murghab region depict demons, in other words beings who live between the human and divine world, responsible for the welfare and protection of the individual in this life and afterlife, as demonstrated by their presence within burials (in front of the deceased's face, held in hand, at the feet) (Sarianidi 2007: 68-70). Documented in the ancient Near East and often associated with fertility, these minor deities were not object of worship, as well as their representations. This interpretation would explain the reason of the discovery of terracotta figurines even within deposits of waste, where they could be thrown as a result of accidental breakage.

The situation looks different for the male statuettes, marked by standing position. Compared to previous periods, there is a considerable increase of this typology of figurines, up to almost a fifth of the specimens which were examined. The origin of this phenomenon can be sought in the marked social differentiation, that seems to characterize southern Turkmenistan during the Middle Bronze Age, testified by the grave goods discovered inside the burials of Altyn-Depe and Gonur necropolis (Kohl 1984: 110-111; Sarianidi 2007: 52). Male statuettes, whose meaning during the Middle Bronze Age was closely linked to that of the female ones, may have changed their function, becoming an evident symbol of high rank, often included among the objects of more rich grave goods.

The remaining typologies of anthropomorphic statuettes (sitting, pillar, hourglass-shaped), although only few specimens have been identified, testify to the spread of models poorly documented even at the site of Kelleli 1 and 4, Adji Kui 1 and 9, Gonur North and its necropolis.

Among the findings, one of the most important is one bust found on the surface of the Sassanid site of Dashly-tepe, which presents stylistic and iconographic features dating to the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age. The uniqueness of this artifact is represented by the possibility that it constitutes a rare evidence of the occupation of the southern sector of the Murghab region during this period. The same hypothesis can be formulated for the anthropomorphic figurine fragments documented in some sites, which have been dated on the basis of surface findings to Late Bronze Age (Adam Basan sites, Auchin area) or to a period between the latter phase and the initial stage of the Iron Age (Takhirbai 6). The presence of statuettes stylistically datable to the advanced phase of the

Middle Bronze Age on the surface of these latter settlement allows us to assume that Adam Basan sites, Auchin area and Takhirbai 6 were already settled at least since this period. The failure to find these typologies of anthropomorphic figurines in other areas of the Murghab alluvial fan is mainly due to the alluvial deposit, which could cover almost all the evidence related to the occupation of this region between Chalcolithic and the Middle Bronze Age (Salvatori, Tosi, Cerasetti 2008, XII). These fragments therefore could confirm the hypothesis that during this period the Murghab region was already permanently occupied. In this case, the Kelleli area, considered by many scholars as the first zone of the alluvial fan to be settled at the beginning of Middle Bronze Age (Francfort 1989; Kohl 1984: 147-50; Masimov 1981: 218; Sarianidi 1981: 167), was only one of the populated Murghab sectors. This could contribute to clarify the peopling dynamics of the alluvial fan between the Late Chalcolithic and the Middle Bronze Age.

Finally, the Murghab anthropomorphic terracotta figurines represent the final result of an iconographic, stylistic and technical evolution which started in the Kopet-Dagh foothills sites during the Neolithic (Antonova, Sarianidi 1990:6); began to intensify between Middle and Late Chalcolithic (Solovyova 2005; Bonora, Vidale 2013); and reached its peak during the Middle Bronze Age in the Murghab alluvial fan. During this process, however, it's possible to identify a radical change between Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age (Forni 2015: 160). The barycenter of the influences and cultural exchanges seems to move from east to west, because the formal repertoire of the Indus Valley and Baluchistan (Jarrige 2008), widely received during the Late Chalcolithic in the Kopet-Dagh foothills, yields to the Early Bronze Age typologies that recall the Iranian and Near Eastern ones. This influence can also be recognized in some neighboring areas such as the Iranian Gorgan plain, as shown by some statuettes and pendants found in the western and central areas of Kopet-dagh during this phase (Kohl 1984: 115-116). Some fragments found in Namazga-tepe, however, betray a particular influence of the models coming from Anatolia (Makowski 2005) and some Iranian sites, such as Tall-i Bakun (Langsdorff, McCown 1942) and Shahr-i Sokhta (Salvatori, Tosi 2005). The anthropomorphic statuettes of these regions are already characterized during the IV millennium BC by the flat violin shape, attesting a circulation of goods, ideas, techniques between

all these areas (Kohl, Lyonnet 2008). Studying this change in the Murghab anthropomorphic figurines can therefore allow an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon underlying the cultural and religious *koinè* that was hypothesized from the Iranian plateau to Central Asia between the end of the III and the early II millennium BC (Winkelmann 2014).

Concerning the zoomorphic figurines, they represent approximately a quarter of the total fragments found during survey and excavation activities. These artifacts are characterized by a highly fragmented state, which sometimes affects their interpretation. Nevertheless, most of these figurines, which represent mainly sheep and goats, is characterized by curved lower profile and damaged legs, allowing to identify them as decoration of the rim or the body of ceremonial vessels, that were discovered in contexts dated to the Late Bronze Age, such as Togolok 1 and 21 (Sarianidi 2005: 261-283). The same use can be attributed to two figurines, whose thickness is extremely flat and thin. In this case, the statuettes have been associated with depictions of turtles and frogs.

In conclusion, it should be stressed how the study regarding terracotta anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines highlights the exceptional contribution of these artifacts for a better understanding of the historical and archaeological scenario of the alluvial fan of the Murghab River. An understanding regarding the everyday life, worship and spiritual life of people who lived in one of the most important regions of protohistoric Central Asia, where these small guardians are still watching over these places.

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