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Middle Asian

Terracottas of the Bronze Age

**СРЕДНЕАЗИАТСКАЯ  
ТЕРРАКОТА  
ЭПОХИ БРОНЗЫ**

Classification and interpretation experience

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The excavations of monuments of ancient farmers culture, which have been conducted for many years in Southern Turkmenistan have produced a vast number of pieces of anthropomorphic plastic art dating to the 6th—2nd millennia B. C. A particular abundance of terracotta figurines, mostly feminine, has been discovered in the Bronze Age layers. However, these finds still await a discussion in a special treatise. Discovered in different years and on different monuments, these remarkable creations of prehistoric coroplastic artists are dispersed in a multitude of museums—a factor which, until recently, interfered with a representation of these artifacts in their entirety in terms of cultural history.

The present work is designed to fill, to some extent, this vexing gap. The authors attempt to bring together within the compass of one survey all small objects of terracotta art survived from the Bronze Age (mid-3rd-2nd millennia B. C.), offering the first complete publication as well as the first interpretation of human-shaped plastic art as it was known up to 1968.

Chapter 1, *Coroplastic Art in Eneolith*, reviews all known baked clay figurines originating from different Eneolithic monuments of Southern Turkmenistan. This opening chapter gives an idea about the principal representational types of small-sized terracotta artifacts of the tribes which peopled that area in the 4th—early 3rd millennia B. C. The authors trace the evolution of the main statuary types and suggest an idea of placing them within the general system of coroplastic art of the ancient Orient.

Chapter 2, *Coroplastic Art in the Early Bronze Age*, exhaustively discusses the three main types of anthropomorphic figurines of the latter half of the 3rd millennium B. C. It contains a thorough analysis of the relevant material and the ensuing conclusion saying that two of these types constituted a continued line of development, distinctly local, which goes back to the anthropomorphic plastic art of the previous Chalcolithic epoch.

The third type, however, was new—possibly, proof of the impact that was exercised by the coroplastic art of the neighbouring southern regions. As a whole, this period reveals the development of a new iconographic statuary image, which became the most widespread and led the way in the coroplastic art of the local tribes throughout the 2nd millennium B. C.



Chapter 3, Coroplastic Art in the developed Bronze Age, contains a detailed stylistic analysis of a large collection of anthropomorphic figurines of the first half of the 2nd millennium B. C.—the central subject of the present work. That epoch evolved a single representational type of the goddess, with its conventionalised planary style and a largely canonic image. It is a flattened figurine representing a sitting woman with her widely outspread arms and a small head with huge stuck-on lozenge-shaped eyes and an extremely prominent large nose. The image of this goddess is completed by small conical breasts and a scratched triangle at the bottom of the belly. Many of these goddesses' little heads are adorned with some tall headgear possibly, a semblance of the diadem. Their broad hips are usually wrapped in many-tiered belts, and they have lines scratched on their necks—apparently, different kinds of decorations, too.

Chapter 4, Central Asian Terracotta and its Near-Eastern Parallels, reviews and offers a preliminary typology of the anthropomorphic plastic art of Mesopotamia, ancient Iran, Baluchistan, Afghanistan, India and Anatolia. The first essay of its kind, it is far from being exhaustively complete but it suggests a general idea concerning the ways of development of ancient coroplastic art in the said regions. At the same time, presented as a system, the data of this applied art make traceable certain similarities to, and distinctions from, Central Asian terracotta art. The authors establish definite Mesopotamian influences in the coroplastic art of Southern Turkmenistan in Ubaid times. One of the types of figurines discovered in the basin of the Diala river has been found to reveal equally indicative analogies. The authors trace affinities of style between the anthropomorphic plastic art of North-Eastern Iran, notably Tyureng-tepe, and Central Asia in the end millennium B. C. On the other hand, the small-sized pieces of anthropomorphic plastic art of Southern Iran dating to the 3rd—2nd millennia B. C., are on the whole vastly different from Central Asian.

The few terracotta artifacts of ancient Afghanistan come mostly from her southern part, Mundigak. Nevertheless, among them too there stands out one group of feminine figurines comparable to their Central Asian counterparts while another group undoubtedly reflects the influence of the coroplastic art of neighbouring Baluchistan.

The most ancient terracotta objects of Baluchistan (Damb Sadaat), in their turn, though they are local in origin, developed under an intense impact of Central Asian coroplastic art. As a whole, Northern Baluchistan exhibited a prevalence of Zhab style figurines while Southern Baluchistan showed an abundance of figurines that pertained to the Kulli culture type.

A particular school of ancient coroplastic art developed in the Indus valley, the seat of the early urban civilisation known as Harappa. But it has also been found to have parallels in Mesopotamian and to a lesser degree Central Asian terracottas. The latter are traced in individual stylistic details and one group of masculine figurines.

Finally, a unique collection could be comprised by the highly distinctive neolithic anthropomorphic plastic art of Anatolia.

As follows from the comparative analysis contained in this monograph, the extreme south-west of Central Asia had her own school of human-shaped plastic art, which was, however, part of the overall artistic system of the ancient Orient.

A special chapter, The Semantics of Terracottas, discusses the designation and offers an interpretation of Central Asian coroplastic art, incorporating an extensive survey of tags designedly scratched on the torsoes of feminine figurines. They are divided into six groups, which, in appearance, closely resemble the symbols of proto-Elamitic writing. That gave the authors reasons to believe that the system of religious symbols of Central Asian terracottas had taken shape under the impact of this writing. Such tags may have had some sense meaning. Most probably, they symbolised the goddesses, whose images are conveyed by these clay figurines. They may have been pictographic symbols of individual goddesses which made up a feminine pantheon. In a word, the comprehensive image of the single Chalcolithic goddess was, during the Bronze Age, replaced by a whole pantheon of goddesses among which, judging by the tags, could be singled out the mother goddess, the goddess of heaven, the goddess of plantation, the goddess of water and possibly the goddess of wisdom.

The use of extensive ethnographic data and partly Sumerian written sources enables the authors to pose the question of a supposedly agrarian character of some Central Asian terracottas. In this respect, figurines representing naked males are indicative. Local tribes must have used them as ritual objects in the exercise of agrarian cults.

Chapter 6, The Art of Exquisite Symbols, discusses questions associated with terracottas as monuments of applied art. While the coroplastic art of the Eneolith as a whole follows an exaggerated realistic pattern, in the Bronze Age this pattern gave way to the conventionalised planary style—the result of the new ideological concepts of the incipient caste of priests.

At the same time, the Central Asian terracottas reveal strictly definite proportions, which, in the final analysis, reflected the contemporary aesthetic views.

The Conclusion sums up the results of the authors' research into the development of religious and aesthetic ideas peculiar to the South Turkmenistan tribes of the 6th — 2nd millennia B. C.

Appended is a Catalogue of 366 Bronze Age Terracotta figurines. They are described with the monuments to which they belong but are numbered consecutively.