

**TERRACOTTA ANIMAL FIGURINES FROM VEH ARDASHIR (COCHE)
IN THE COLLECTION OF THE MUSEO CIVICO D'ARTE ANTICA
E PALAZZO MADAMA (TORINO)**

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The direction of the excavation at Veh Ardashir (Coche) was the first assignment of Roberta Venco Ricciardi. The round city founded by Ardashir I during his reign (AD 224–241)¹ is one of the sites investigated in the Al-Madā'in area by the Italian expedition in Iraq of the Centro Ricerche Archeologiche e Scavi di Torino per il Medio Oriente e l'Asia.² It was the main Sasanian administrative town in central Mesopotamia, a region considered of pivotal importance for its trade routes and political role, where also stood Seleucia on the Tigris, the eastern capital of Seleucid Asia. Fieldwork was conducted between 1964 and 1970 under the direction of Mariangiola Cavallero, Mariamaddalena Negro Ponzi and Roberta Venco Ricciardi.³ The results of those excavations are of high interest, for an incredible amount of data were produced and precious pieces of information acquired on the urban layout, architecture, and handicrafts of a great Mesopotamian capital of the Sasanian period, stimulating a series of studies on the buildings, artefacts and daily use objects progressively unearthed.

The present writers wish to offer this brief study of largely unpublished terracotta animal figurines from the Italian excavation at Veh Ardashir⁴ to Roberta Venco Ricciardi, whose enthusiasm for the work in the field and professorship at the University of Torino inspired many of us. We start with a short description of the city and the Artisans Quarter in which most of the terracottas were found. Subsequently, we shall introduce the terracotta animal figurines and offer a catalogue of fifteen artefacts. A description of their manufacture technique is followed by more general remarks, in which an attempt is made to explain the high rate of animal figurines in the Artisans Quarter of Veh Ardashir.

Veh Ardashir and the Artisans Quarter

The city, approximately extending to 700 hectares, partially overlapped an ancient cemetery of the late Parthian period and was encircled by massive defensive walls, up to 10 m thick in several points, and framed by powerful semicircular towers. Both the curtain walls, having a circular layout, and the buildings of the inner city were built-up in mudbrick, following the traditional local technique. The site was investigated by the German expedition of the Deutsche Orientgesellschaft in 1928–1929⁵ and the joint expedition of the Islamische Kunstabteilung der Staatlichen Museen Berlin and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1931–1932⁶ before the Italian fieldwork started in 1964. The Italian excavation focused on a segment of the curtain walls, at their southern bound, and on the city quarter laying northward, conventionally named Artisans Quarter.⁷ In this area (FIG. 16), two big dwelling blocks, separated by a road outwardly following the same circular layout of the city-walls, were unearthed down to the foundation level. The blocks revealed an irregular layout, characterized by allotments of different size and perimeter, with alleys running between the buildings and leading to the main road. Shops and commercial areas alternated with houses and workshops, being, as a rule, open onto the main road. This layout seems to have been substantially unchanged from the half of the 3rd to the half of the 5th century AD, even if this peripheral area of the city appears scarcely settled during the most ancient phases of occupation, when it was probably devoted to facilities such as small ovens, wells and drainage-systems. At the end of the 3rd century the buildings partially reached underneath the most recent structures seem characterized by a more regular layout, but were progressively overbuilt during the 4th century: as far as one can see, these are for the most courtyard-iwan houses with symmetrical rooms (even if also the traditional Mesopotamian layout with rooms opened onto a central courtyard is attested), and workshops progressively encroaching on the alleys and road. In the second half of the 5th century empty lots appear to regain space and the surface of open areas increase in comparison with the previous period. The quarter was abandoned at the end of the 5th century,

¹ The epoch of Ardashir I for the foundation of Veh Ardashir – “the fine town of Ardashir” – is defined by the coins widely found on the site: as far as we know, it is the oldest among the many Sasanian towns founded in the area.

² For the Italian excavation at Veh Ardashir (Coche) see Cavallero (1966) (1967); Negro Ponzi (1966) (1967); Venco Ricciardi (1968–69) (1970–71) (1973–74) (1977); Venco Ricciardi & Negro Ponzi (1985).

³ Scientific director was Giorgio Gullini. From 1964 to 1968 excavations were directed by M. Cavallero, M. Negro Ponzi and R. Venco Ricciardi, in 1970 by R. Venco Ricciardi solely. No work was done during the 1969 season.

⁴ This study was authorized by the Centro Ricerche archeologiche e Scavi di Torino per il Medio Oriente e l'Asia and the Museo Civico d'Arte Antica e Palazzo Madama. All figures and plates reproduced in this paper are courtesy of the Centro Ricerche Archeologiche e Scavi di Torino per il Medio Oriente e l'Asia, with the exception of FIGS 1, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 13, courtesy of the Fondazione Torino Musei.

⁵ Reuther (1930).

⁶ Schmidt (1934); Upton (1932); Künel & Wachsmuth (1933).

⁷ Excavation was also conducted in the central part of the town, in the area of the so-called Tell Baruda, where handicrafts and structures of the late Sasanian period (6th–7th century AD) and, especially, Islamic layers were unearthed.

probably because of the frequent floods of the river Tigris, as also the ruins of the nearby Seleucia clearly show.⁸

The findings represent objects of daily use, consisting of glazed and common pottery, by far the largest class of materials recovered on the site,⁹ fragments of glass vessels, metal objects and terracotta figurines. However, the commercial designation of the Artisans Quarter seems suggested by the finding of row-glass chunks, iron scraps and gypsum moulds for metal vessels decorations or furniture. The finding spots of these raw materials and moulds allow to postulate that the block extending north to the main road was particularly involved in the standardised production of pottery, glass vessels and metal objects, while the block extending to south was involved in the production of much more elaborated objects, decorations and furniture.

The animal figurines from Veh Ardashir

The terracotta figurines from Veh Ardashir can be dated to the 3rd–5th century AD and comprise a number of subjects; human figures as well as animals, often perpetuating, in iconography and style, the local Mesopotamian tradition. As a rule the figurines representing animals are handmade and roughly modelled, to the extent that it is very difficult to identify the represented subject when the piece is broken or fragmentary. Details – as well as anatomical parts – are often lacking or schematically described and, for this reason, comparisons with similar materials are in principle generic. Only peculiar features, that survived the deterioration of the pieces (for instance, the humpback of a camel or the beak of a bird), allow to identify a specific animal, and even the determination of a more defined chronology is hindered by the fact that several figurines were not well stratified and very commonly found loose on surface, discharged into ditches or scattered onto roads and open-air areas.

Almost all the animal figurines from the Italian excavation were brought to light in the context of the Artisans Quarter, particularly into houses. Generally speaking, they represent domestic animals and, conforming to a trend already attested from the Hellenistic to the Sasanian period, figurines of horses largely prevail, for they were used, for the most, to support riders: this was indeed one of the most popular subjects for terracotta figurines.

According to the former Iraqi law on the antiquities, in force until 1967, all the objects found during regular excavation were parted between the Iraqi Authorities and those who were authorized by the former to conduct fieldwork. For this reason, a number of terracotta figurines found at Veh Ardashir before that date were im-

ported to Torino and delivered to the Museo Civico d'Arte Antica e Palazzo Madama. The present paper focuses precisely on the figurines from Veh Ardashir, now in Torino, that represent animals, with the exception of the horses,¹⁰ with the purpose of analysing them through their iconography, style and manufacture technique. Part of the animal figurines have been delivered to the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage of Iraq and stored in the Iraq Museum of Baghdad.¹¹

Catalogue

The catalogue includes 15 records, grouped into classes corresponding to the animal species that was possible to identify (birds, camels, foxes). The fourth group includes unspecified quadrupeds and the last animal-shaped spouts. Each record, progressively numbered, includes: in the first line, the finding spot (within the topographic grid defined by the Italian expedition), layer and year of recovery; in the second line, the dimensions of the piece or fragment (measures are in centimetres); in the third line, manufacture technique and state of preservation; in the fourth line, the clay and temper type; in the fifth line, only in specific cases, bibliographical references if the relevant piece was previously published. A concise description follows of the characteristics and details of each figurine.

Birds

In Mesopotamia figurines of birds were produced in all periods, so that they can hardly be dated if not found in a clear stratigraphic context. It is difficult to distinguish particular bird types as well, because the details of the figurines are often undefined.¹² The birds found during the Italian excavation at Veh Ardashir conform to this trend, with the exception of a rapacious bird, no. 1 (C1210), which can be easily identified by its hooked beak. A bird found in the context of the Gareus Temple at Uruk¹³ can be compared to our no. 3 (C3225) for it stands on a ring base. A mould-made dove standing on a disc base has also been discovered in Parthian Babylon,¹⁴ while a handmade bird on a disc base, possibly Parthian, was found loose on surface at Uruk¹⁵ and a rattle representing a bird on a base of uncertain date has been found

¹⁰ The study of the terracotta horses from Veh Ardashir is undertaken by Antonio Invernizzi.

¹¹ The latter, as listed subsequently, are not recorded in this paper: C1301 (IM71090) glazed forepart of a deer (?); C1308 (IM71091) glazed head of a deer (?); C1316 (IM71092) fragmentary figurine representing an elephant; C2035 figurine of undetermined animal; C2038, figurine representing a dog (?); C2044 glazed figurine of undetermined animal; C2354 figurine representing a ram (?); C2358 figurine of undetermined animal; C2360 figurine of a camel; C2362 figurine of a quadruped; C2498 figurine of a bird; C3230 figurine of an elephant; C3372 figurine of a bird; C6449 figurine of a quadruped; C6503 head of a bull or ox; C7-7151 head of a camel.

¹² Wrede (1990), p.280–281.

¹³ Ziegler (1962), p.139–140, no. 963, Fig. 44:556.

¹⁴ Karvonen-Kannas (1985), p.199, no. 703, Fig. 85.

¹⁵ Wrede (1990), p.280, no. 109, Fig. 31.

⁸ Messina (2010), p.11–19.

⁹ The relevance of potsherds from Veh Ardashir concerns its abundance as well as chronology. Both glazed and common ware were locally produced for utilitarian reason and often represent an evolution of traditional Parthian types. For the pottery from Veh Ardashir see Venco Ricciardi (1967) (1984).

in Nippur.¹⁶ Moulded birds also occur in Parthian Dura-Europos.¹⁷

1. C1210. Coche/Veh Ardashir: LXXXVIII 75c, layer IV (1965).

ht 3.9, lg. 4.9, W 2.5.

Handmade; fragmentary (broken at the neck).

Yellow-greenish clay.

Published: Invernizzi (1966), p.61, n. 221.

Head of a rapacious bird with hooked beak and long neck. Superimposed applied double-disc eyes. Hollow interior. Roughly modelled with irregular surface and traces of what seems an impressed fingernail. It could be the remaining part of a bird-shaped vase, but it is not the spout for the beak is not holed.

(FIG. 1).

2. C134. Coche/Veh Ardashir: CIV 1a, layer II (1964).

ht 11.2, lg. 7.8, W 4.3.

Handmade; fragmentary (broken at the neck).

Buff clay.

Head of a bird with small beak. Round stamped eyes. Simple and parallel incisions on the neck may indicate the plumage. Roughly modelled with irregular surface. It could be the spout of a vase or bird-shaped vase, for the beak is holed as well as the interior and a layer of bitumen remains that proofed the inner surface.

(FIG. 2).

3. C3225. Coche/Veh Ardashir: LXXXVIII 87ae, layer IIIb (1967).

ht 5.3, lg. 8.0, W 4.1.

Handmade; fragmentary (the head and tail are missing).

Red clay and cream buff surface.

Bird with wide body and closed wings, simply indicated with two applied ribs. Roughly made. The details and plumage are not indicated. Ring base.

(FIG. 3).

Camels

Figurines representing camels occurred in Mesopotamia from the 1st millennium BC onward, even if their number seems especially increased starting from the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian periods.¹⁸ Camels were indeed considered as useful load-animals or animals to be mounted, as well as hair, milk and meat suppliers,¹⁹ even if the question of the place and time of their domestication has not been completely clarified. For instance, at Dura-Europos, there are several figurines of horses or camels that have equipment and thus probably represent pack animals,²⁰ while figurines of camels from Uruk are rather considered as votive objects even if found in domestic contexts.²¹ The camels from Veh Ardashir find comparison with a handmade figurine from Nippur of un-

certain date, but probably of the Parthian period.²² Prototypes are rather older as few handmade samples with one or two humps of the first half of the 1st millennium BC from Uruk seem to show:²³ one figure in particular (no. 593, Fig. 21:310) is very similar to our no. 5 (C2034) for the shape of the hump and the short tail. The latter's oblong body finds comparison with a Parthian figurine from Dura-Europos.²⁴ A figurine of uncertain date, but probably Parthian, representing a camel from Assur is similar to our no. 4 (C1324) for the stumpy body.²⁵ Figurines representing camels are often very hard to be identified, when parts of the body, such the head and neck, are missing. Indeed humped animals can be alternatively interpreted as humped bulls when the humpback is small – such as our no. 6 (C2041) –, as can be seen by an almost complete figurine discovered in the Parthian layers of Seleucia on the Tigris.²⁶ Camels can be handmade or produced by double moulds,²⁷ as some samples from Assur clearly show.²⁸ Camel with two humps of unknown provenance and the fragmentary head of a camel from Nippur are dated to the beginning of the 3rd century BC,²⁹ but are still produced in the Parthian period.³⁰

4. C1324. Coche/Veh Ardashir: LXXXVIII 75c, layer IIb (1965).

ht 8.7, lg. 8.5, W 4.2.

Handmade; fragmentary (part of the body and the left foreleg remain).

Reddish clay and glazed surface (greenish-white).

Body of a roughly modelled camel. The remaining foreleg is cone-shaped and reveals traces of glaze with the exception of the edges. The rest of the stumpy body is made of buff clay. The hump is broken, but traces of a load seem to remain on the left side of the body. The animal seems standing. The short and thick tail adheres to the right back thigh.

(FIG. 4).

5. C2034. Coche/Veh Ardashir: LXXXVIII 76q, layer II (1966).

ht 5.1, lg. 7, W 2.5.

Handmade; fragmentary (the head and part of the legs are missing).

Reddish clay and buff surface.

Body of a standing camel with small hump and tail. The lower part of the four cone-shaped legs is broken. The oblong body is roughly modelled. In the making, the hump has been applied and pinched for allowing the positioning of a saddle or rider, which are now missing. The surface is scratched in some points. On the pinched hump are traces of fingerprints.

(FIG. 5).

¹⁶ Legrain (1930), p.35, no. 342.

¹⁷ Downey (2003), p.205–206.

¹⁸ Ziegler (1962), p.150. However, Klengel-Brandt (1978), p.104, no. 691, quotes one example from Assur that could be dated to the Akkadian or UrIII periods.

¹⁹ Clutton-Brock (1981), p.121–129.

²⁰ Downey (2003), p.16.

²¹ Ziegler (1962), p.173–174.

²² Legrain (1930), p.35, no. 324.

²³ Ziegler (1962), p.89–90, nos 593 and 600, Figs. 21:310 and 311.

²⁴ Downey (2003), p.193, no. 136, Fig. 130.

²⁵ Klengel-Brandt (1978), p.104, no. 692.

²⁶ Van Ingen (1939), p.324, no. 1484, Fig. LXXVII:567.

²⁷ Van Ingen (1939), p.320–321.

²⁸ Klengel-Brandt (1978), p.104, nos 693–694, Fig. 22.

²⁹ Van Buren (1930), p.167, nos 808–809, pls XLV:218–219.

³⁰ Van Ingen (1939), p.320, no. 1464, Fig. LXXVI:556.

6. C2041. Coche/Veh Ardashir: LXXXVIII 96c, layer IV (1966).

ht 4.3, lg. 8.0, W 3.4.

Handmade; fragmentary (the head and legs are missing).

Buff clay and glazed surface.

Standing camel – or, alternatively, humpback bull – with oblong body and lowered tail adhering to the right back thigh. The legs seem outstretched. A small conic humpback is applied after the modelling of the body. The neck, legs and tail seem also applied. Whitish traces of glaze on the legs.

(FIG. 6).

Foxes

The figurine from Veh Ardashir finds a close comparison with a fox discovered in the Seleucid or Parthian layers at Uruk,³¹ but a quite similar figurine also occurs in Parthian Babylon.³²

7. C1749. Coche/Veh Ardashir: LXXXVIII 86a, layer III (1966).

ht 3, lg. 8, W 2.6.

Handmade; almost complete (only the upper part of the head is missing).

Buff clay.

Standing fox with bushy tail and small pointed muzzle. The ears and the upper part of the head are concave. The cone-shaped legs are short and thick. The oblong body is roughly made. Traces of bitumen on the surface.

(FIG. 7).

Other quadrupeds

Handmade figurines of quadrupeds with roughly modelled body of the Sasanian period have been found in Qasr-i Abu Nasr,³³ but they are quite common since the Hellenistic and Parthian age, as some samples from Dura-Europos attest.³⁴

8. C2039. Coche/Veh Ardashir: LXXXVIII 74o/84ab (1966).

ht 5.7, lg. 9.3, W 4.3.

Handmade; fragmentary (only the forepart remains).

Yellow-greenish clay.

Standing quadruped (a bovid or equid?) with oblong body and cone-shaped legs. Hollow interior.

(FIG. 8).

9. C2353. Coche/Veh Ardashir: LXXXVIII 75m, layer Ia (1966).

ht 4.6, lg. 6.1, W 3.1.

Handmade; fragmentary (the head and legs are missing).

Buff clay and cream surface.

Standing quadruped (a bovid or equid?) with oblong body and heavy neck, pinched for obtaining a kind of mane. Roughly made: the body is a parallelepiped and the tail

extremely short. Vertical forelegs and short tail. Traces of bitumen on the surface.

(FIG. 9).

10. C2355. Coche/Veh Ardashir: LXXXVIII 77a, layer I (1966).

ht 4.3, lg. 6.8, W 3.1.

Handmade; fragmentary (the head and legs are partially missing).

Reddish clay and buff surface.

Standing quadruped (a bovid ?) with heavy body and neck, not well applied. Roughly made with small pointed tail. Small and short paws. The applied lumps of clay at the top of the head seem what remains of a pair of horns and ears.

(FIG. 10).

11. C2364. Coche/Veh Ardashir: LXXXIX e/i, layer II–III (1966).

ht 4.6, lg. 3.9, W 11.5.

Handmade; fragmentary (the head and legs are missing).

Buff clay with cream surface.

Standing quadruped (a dog?) with long body, heavy neck and tail. Roughly made. Applied legs and tail.

(FIG. 11).

12. C2496. Coche/Veh Ardashir: LXXXIX 80g, surface (1967).

ht 3.4, lg. 7.3, W 3.2.

Handmade; fragmentary (the head and legs are missing).

Yellow-greenish clay.

Standing quadruped with long body and short tail. Roughly made.

(FIG. 12).

13. C2497. Coche/Veh Ardashir: LXXXVIII 86gmf, layer VII (1967).

ht 3.0, lg. 3.3, W 6.5.

Handmade; fragmentary (the head and part of the legs are missing).

Buff clay.

Standing quadruped with short body and tail. Roughly made, with traces of bitumen on the right thigh.

(FIG. 13).

14. C2530. Coche/Veh Ardashir: LXXXVIII 98m (1967).

ht 7.3, lg. 4.1, W 6.8.

Handmade; fragmentary (the forepart remains).

Buff clay and cream slip.

Standing quadruped (a deer or cow?) with wide cylindrical body. On the back there are traces of what seems the remaining part of a saddle. Short neck. On the head, the base of the antlers or a pair of horns remains. Here traces of bitumen remain that probably indicate an ancient restoration. The muzzle and ears are long, the nostrils and mouth are incised. The small eyes are hollowed and then filled with a small globular lump of clay. The slipped surface, with the exception of the right side, is decorated with bitumen dots that probably recall the animal's hair.

(FIG. 14).

³¹ Ziegler (1962), p.136, no. 936, Fig. 43:542.

³² Karvonen-Kannas (1995), p.98, no. 690, Fig. 84.

³³ Whitcomb (1985), p.190–191, fig. 72:g–i.

³⁴ Downey (2003), p.188, 203, nos 134 and 153, figs 128 and 144.