

Zoomorphic Patterns on the Pottery Vessels of Shahr-i Sokhta

Seyyed Mansur Seyyed Sajjadi
Iranian Center for Archaeological Research
m_sajjadi@hotmail.com

Abstract

The pottery of Shahr-i Sokhta includes unpainted and painted buff, grey and (more rarely) red and polychrome vessels. The patterns painted on the vessels are divided into two main groups: geometric and natural. The former are composed of a variety of abstract geometric shapes constructed from horizontal, vertical, oblique or broken lines to form complex combinations. The latter group includes natural landscape features, such as mountains, plains, lakes and trees, and animal and bird motifs. Animal motifs can be seen in other ancient sites on the Iranian plateau and neighbouring lands. Inspired by the natural environment, the artists of these regions represented animals on pottery vessels with special purposes in mind, the painters of Shahr-i Sokhta favouring goats, deer and birds.

1. Introduction

The surface of Shahr-i Sokhta is covered in millions of pottery fragments, and every time it rains or strong winds blow, thousands of buried sherds emerge

from under the surface of the loose and crumbly soils of this site. The amazing amount of pottery shows on the one hand the mass production of pottery vessels, and on the other hand the employment of a large number of inhabitants in the pottery industry and related activities, all indicating the existence of a society characterised by high levels of pottery consumption. The size of the city, its large population, its long life, its commercial activities and trade with both the surrounding area and distant lands and the multiplicity of its satellite villages, are some of the reasons for its abundant pottery production (Fig. 1).

Shahr-i Sokhta pottery is very similar to that of the Eastern regions of the Iranian Plateau, the southern shores of the Persian Gulf, Bampur, Oman, the Quetta Plain, Mundigak, Namazga, Qara Tappeh and Geoksior, as well as samples found in Shahdad and Jiroft. From a general point of view however, this pottery is a local product and is not seen in other ancient sites, near or far from this city,



Fig. 1: concentration and distribution of pottery fragments and discards on the surface of Shahr-i Sokhta.

except for a few specimens in one or two sites, such as Bampur and Mundigak (Figs. 2-4).

The pottery of Shahr-i Sokhta consists mainly of painted and unpainted Buff and Grey Ware, a small quantity of Red Ware and some polychrome specimens. These containers range from unpainted and very simple bowls to large jars, cylindrical beakers, cups with stands, tubular teapots and simple buff-coloured trays. The pottery of Shahr-i Sokhta is not considered a fine pottery type, and it seems that its producers paid more attention to mass production than grace and elegance. This can be seen from the large number of pottery workshops located approximately 22 km from Shahr-i Sokhta in the dry delta of the Rud-i Biaban river, which during Periods II-III was the area's main centre of pottery production (Figs. 5-7).

The designs on the pottery of Shahr-i Sokhta are divided into two main groups: geometric patterns and natural motifs. Most of the designs are composed of a

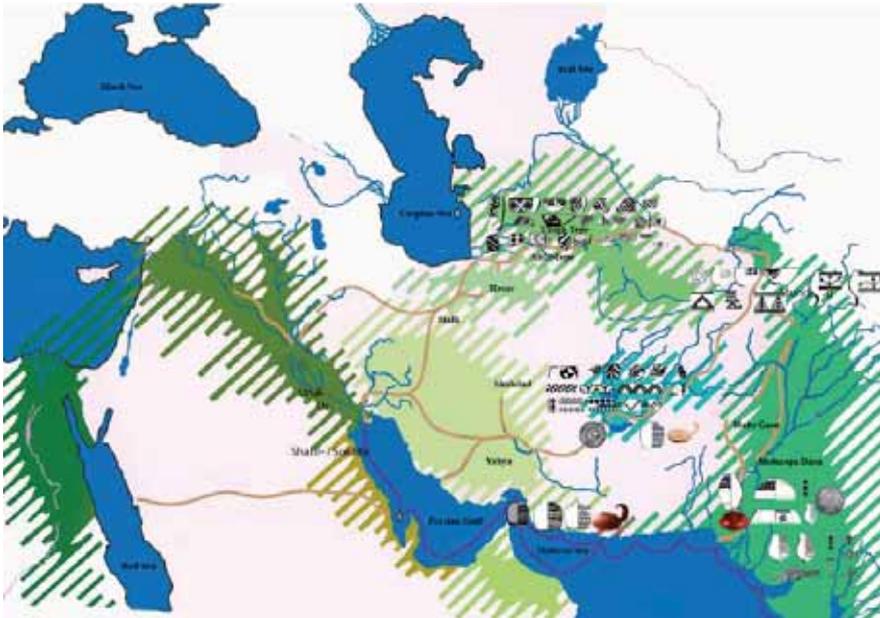


Fig. 2: pottery similarities between Shahr-i Sokhta and other major sites in 'Middle Asia' (Sajjadi 2016).



Fig. 3: G.N.9031. Pottery assemblage.



Fig. 4: unpainted and painted pear-shaped beakers (Sajjadi 2007).



Fig. 5: painted Buff Ware bowls.



Fig. 6: painted globular and cylindrical jars.

variety of abstract geometric designs, ranging from horizontal, vertical, oblique and broken lines to highly complex combinations, which have been studied in detail by scholars (Biscione - Bulgarelli 1983; Moradi 2009) (Figs. 8-9).

The other group includes motifs inspired by the natural landscape, such as mountains, plains, lakes, trees and the like, as well as animal and bird motifs. Each of these phenomena is a reflection of the climate, geography, flora and fauna of the region.

Perhaps the most common patterns, seen on a variety of dishes, involve water currents, typically painted on containers that are directly related to liquids and water. Plant motifs, including shrubs, trees and leaves, can also be seen on a



Fig. 7: polychrome *Khamiru*: 1. Modern production in the Baluchistan area; 2, 3 and 4. Specimens from graveyard.

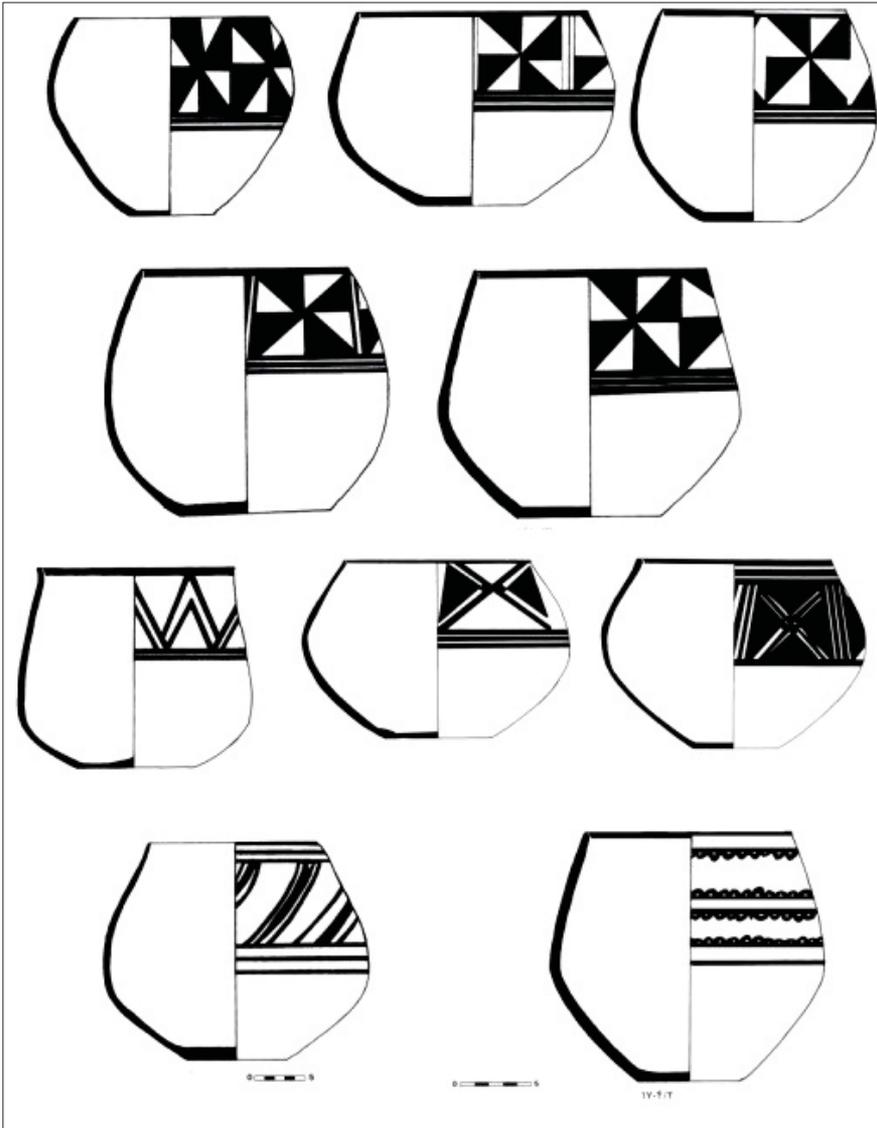


Fig. 8: geometric patterns. Painted Buff Ware (Phases 8-9).

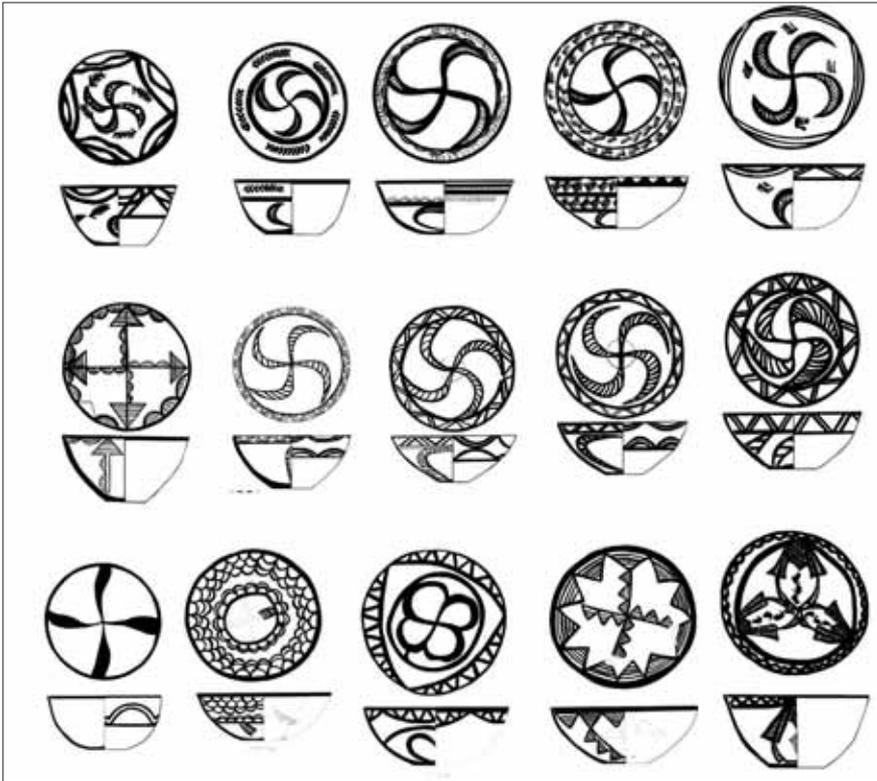


Fig. 9: painted Grey Ware bowls (Phases 6-8).

variety of dishes, pear-shaped beakers and cups with flared stands. In addition, various shrubs, leaves and aquatic plants, as well as combinations of plants, rivers, plains and lakes, are represented on plates (Fig. 10).

2. Animals on pottery

Some of the Shahr-i Sokhta pottery designs closely reflect the nature of the Sistan plain and the wider region. Rivers, lakes, islands (Mount Khajeh), various plants, especially aquatic plants, and fish are well represented in these designs. The movement of water is represented in almost all of them, flowing from the perimeter of the vessel to its centre, although in some cases, it is still water that

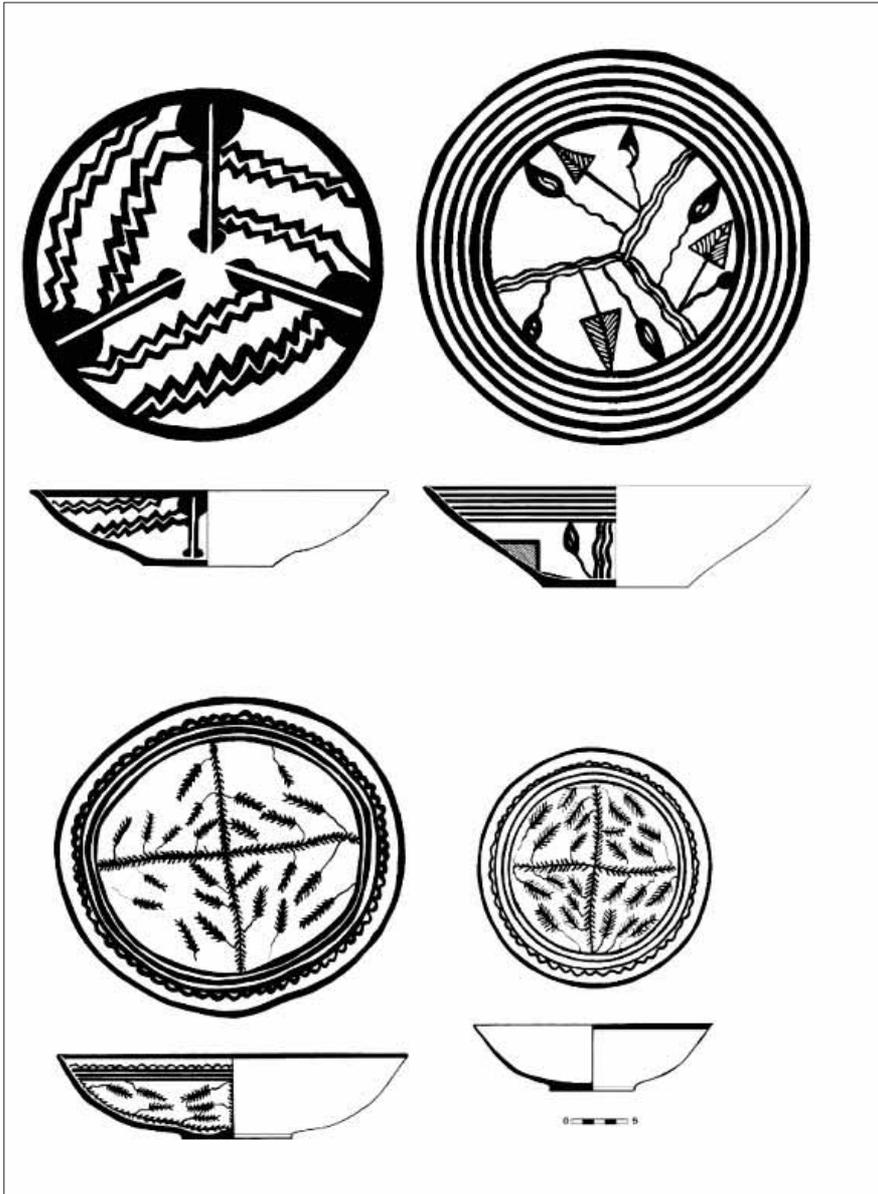


Fig. 10: combinations of water and plants.

can be interpreted as a lake. This can clearly be seen in plate no. 1705/50. The designs inside this plate can be considered a reflection of the geographical ‘map’ of the Sistan plain and Hamun river delta (Sajjadi 2017).

Sistan’s main geographical features include plains, islands, rivers and lakes, and in the designs on this dish, the swampy plains of Sistan and its rivers, islands and fish are clearly shown. During the rainy years, aside from the lakes, the lowlands become large swamps, and the presence of fish in these swamps is not far from the mind. The only high and mountainous feature of this plain is Mount Khajeh, which forms an island in the middle of Hamun Lake and the only way to reach it is to use a *tutan*, a local type of boat. According to historical evidence, there were once several rivers and streams in the plain, the most important of which are mentioned in the *History of Sistan* (15-16). These features can be seen on a number of painted Buff Ware plates (Fig. 11).

Another group of vessels that are decorated with natural and especially animal motifs are Buff Ware cups with stands. These cups with animal motifs, especially birds and goats, can be seen in all areas of Iran, reflecting the surrounding environment of the ancient inhabitants. Almost all of these animal motifs are stationary, and the same is true for the animal motifs of Shahr-i Sokhta. Usually in these motifs, the shape of an animal, goat or bird is repeated uniformly on the body of the vessel: no movement is seen, and only slight differences can be seen between them. But this is not true of the painted patterns seen on the Buff Ware cups with stands recovered from G.N.731/42 (Piperno - Salvatori 2007). This catacomb grave is probably the tomb of one of Shahr-i Sokhta’s more prominent inhabitants, who in any case was socially distinct from other people. In this burial, in addition to the above-mentioned cup, exceptional objects such as a wooden spoon, the complete set of a wooden game and other objects were also found.

As already mentioned, artists and painters sought to show local natural and environmental conditions on countless pottery vessels reflecting prehistoric and proto-historic life in all areas of the Middle East. However, the artist who painted Buff Ware cup with stand No. 42 showed his creativity not only by painting his favourite design, but by seeking to convey the concept of movement in the



Fig. 11: flowing water and herds of animals.

depicted animal. The design on the cup represents a scene with a goat and a plant. In five different movements, it targets the desired bush or shrub, it approaches the shrub, it raises its front legs to jump onto the shrub, it clings to the shrub and finally in the last movement it eats the shrub (Figs. 11-12).

Another specimen, with a possible ritual role, was found in excavations in 2018 from G.N.9410. It is a polychrome jar whose entire outer surface is covered with patterns. The main motifs are three goats, which apparently rise on one side of a stepped structure and descend on the other. At the top of the structure there is another small structure in the shape of a building, and above this structure

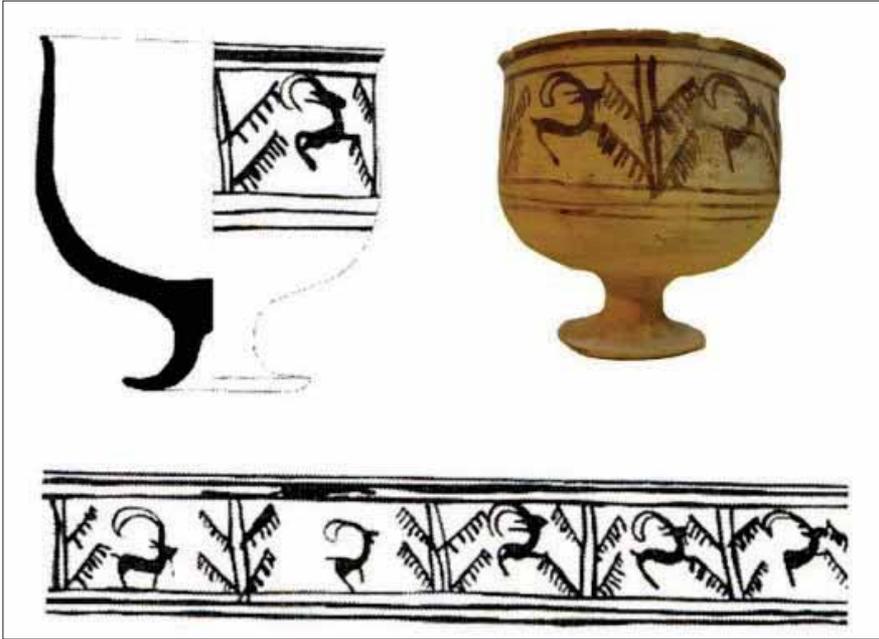


Fig. 12: cup with jumping goat (Sajjadi 2004).

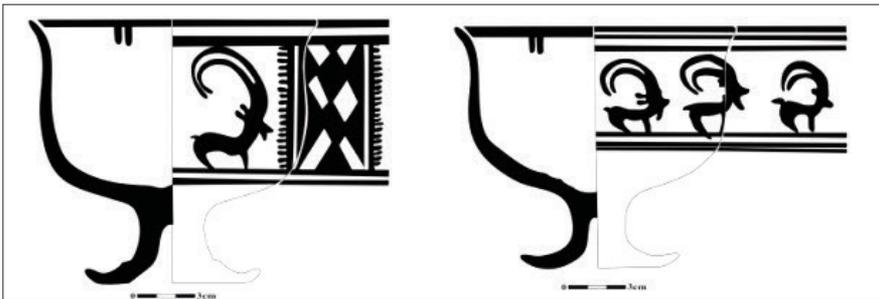


Fig. 13: stationary goat designs.

there are six triangles that combine to form a unique pattern. These designs can probably be interpreted as goats that climb a mountain to be sanctified, complete the circumambulation of the temple (the small structure), are consecrated by the priest for sacrifice and climb down the other side, while the sun shines on them and the whole stepped mountain or structure rests on the shoulders of a very abstract figure of a man (Fig. 14).

The most abundant and diverse animal motifs in the Shahr-i Sokhta pottery assemblage depict goats and deer in various forms with various horn arrangements, including goats with outstretched bodies on jars, combinations of goats and mountains, rows of goats, horned goats, goats and goat-kids, goats drawn upside down on bowls, goats in deep bowls, herds of goats on the bodies of vessels, birds in flight on jars, birds (bustards) in flight and herds of goats on plates and deer of various species (Figs. 15-21).

Birds, which are shown in various painted forms, are the most abundant animal figure after goats. The motifs include: sitting birds on the body of the jar,

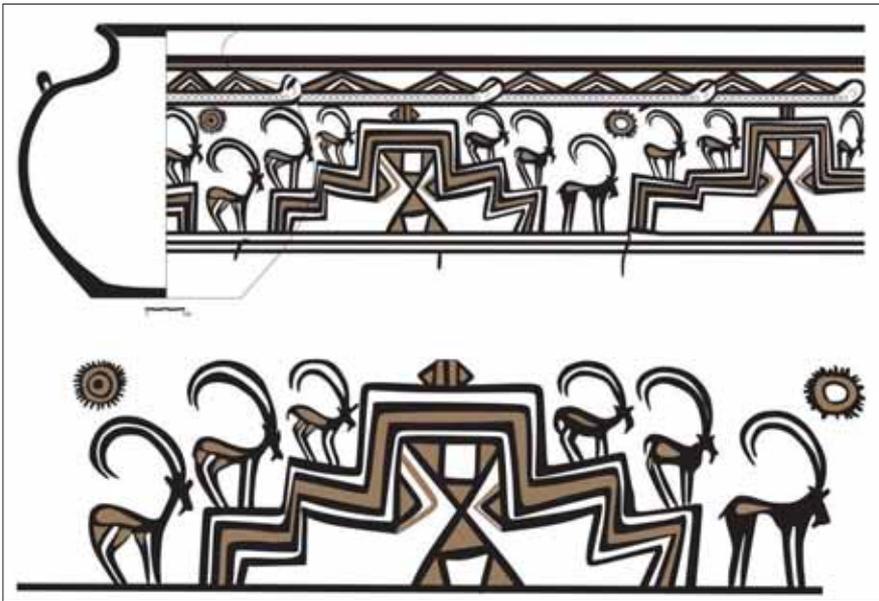


Fig. 14: polychrome jar from G.N.9410.

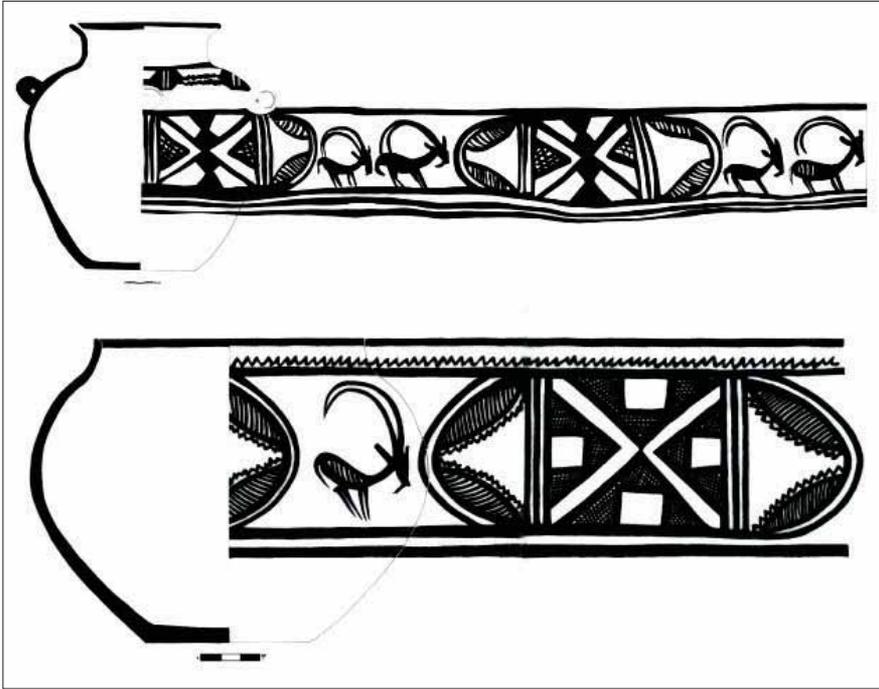


Fig. 15: combinations of multiple goats and a single goat with geometric patterns.

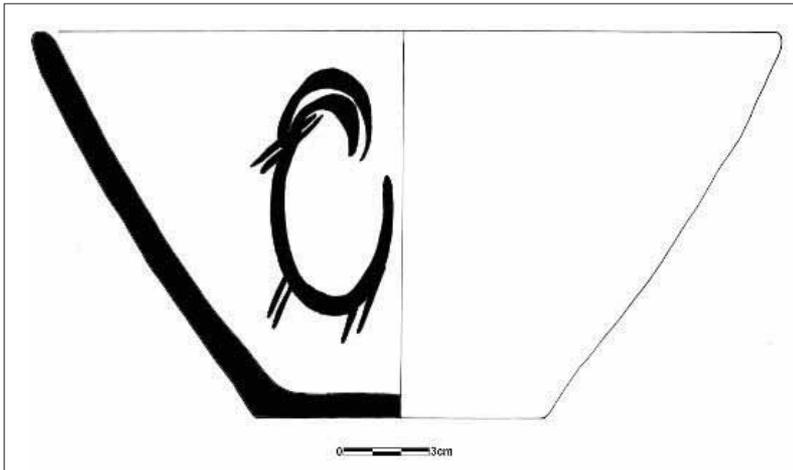


Fig. 16: lone goat on the interior surface of a bowl.



Fig. 17: goats with arched horns facing backwards and plants.

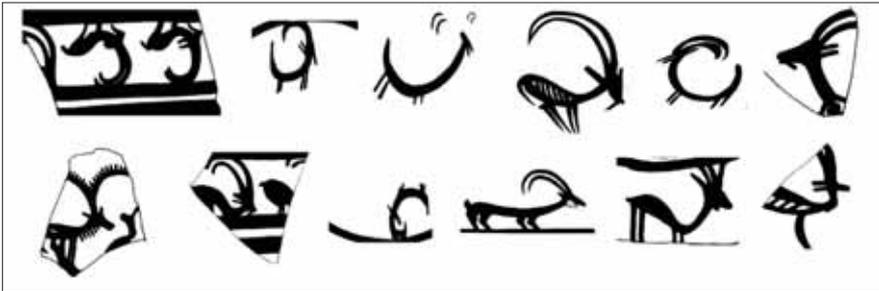


Fig. 18: goats and goat kids with outstretched bodies and turned-back horns.

rows of birds flying around cups, birds on the body of jars, sitting birds on cups with stands, standing birds, birds on the shoulders of jars and birds in flight (Figs. 22-26).

Other animals, such as reptiles, snakes and scorpions, are also depicted by the painters of Shahr-i Sokhta. Snakes in particular can be seen in various forms, singly and in combination. There are motifs of this animal crawling alone on the outer bodies of jars, as well as combinations of three snakes on the internal surfaces of Buff Ware vessels. Other reptile patterns include snakes inside bowls, on the bodies of bowls, on the shoulders of jars and on the external surfaces of bowls (Figs. 27-29).

In addition to the above-mentioned animals, other types painted on pottery include fish on plates or on the external surfaces of dishes, scorpions on the external surfaces of jars and in bowls, monkeys on plates and ram's heads on the shoulders of jars (Figs. 30-31).

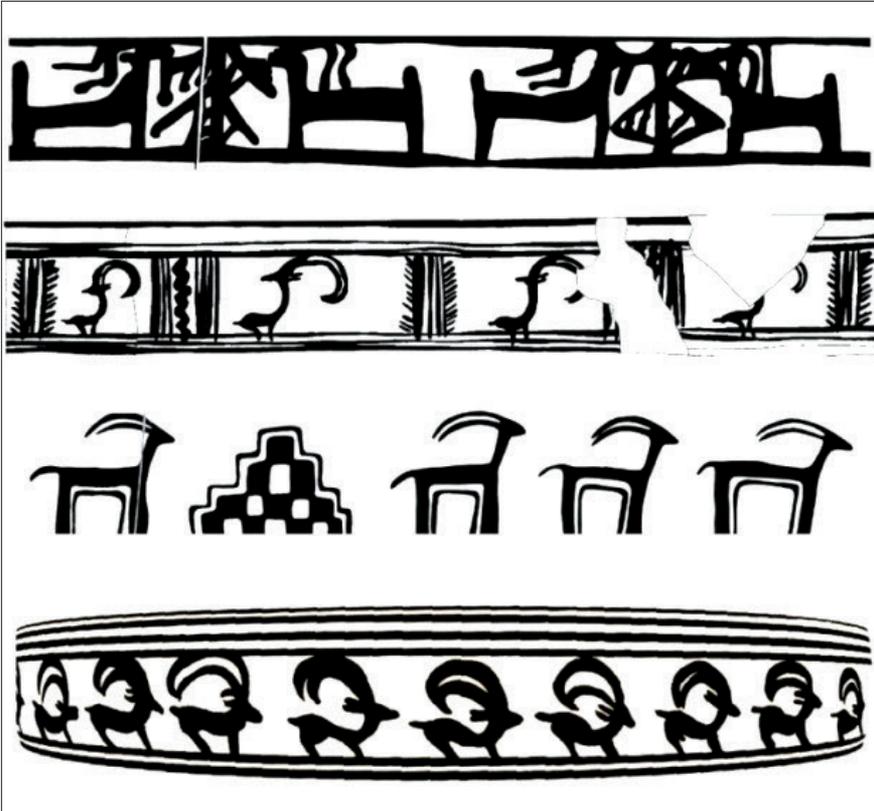


Fig. 19: rows of stationary goats.

No human figures have been found on the pottery of Shahr-i Sokhta. During the excavations of 2019, a pottery fragment with three standing creatures in a row was found. The lower parts of this piece of pottery are missing and therefore it is difficult to identify the creatures. However, considering the triangular bodies, hanging arms and claws, they may represent human figures with bird heads (Fig. 32).

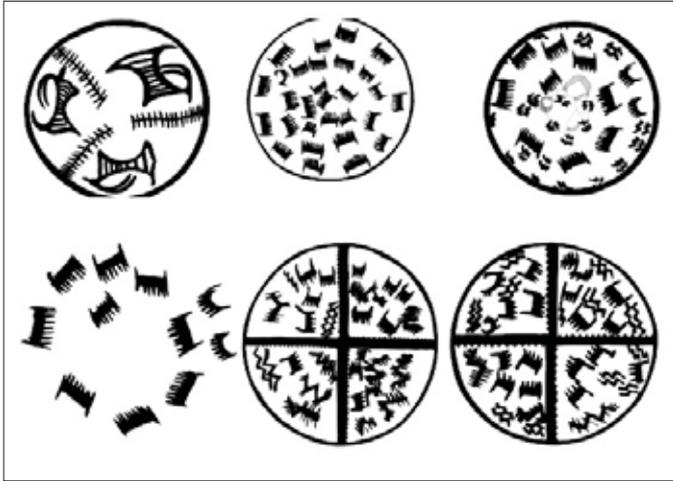


Fig. 20: herds of goats.

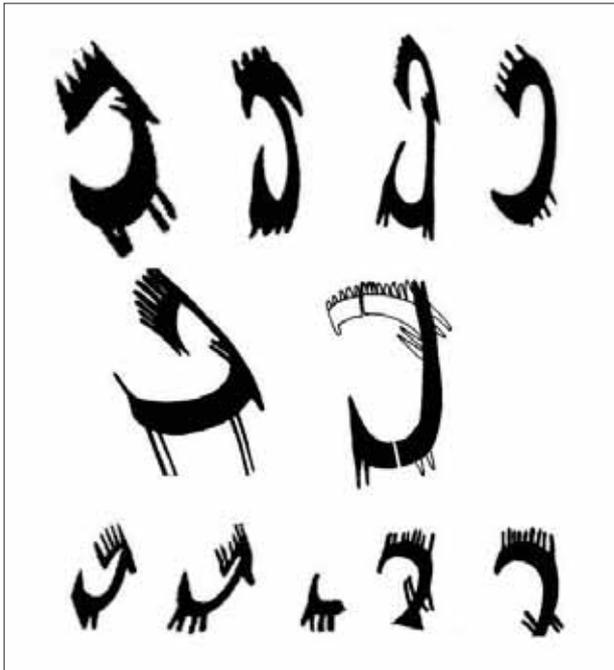


Fig. 21: types of deer (Moradi 2009).

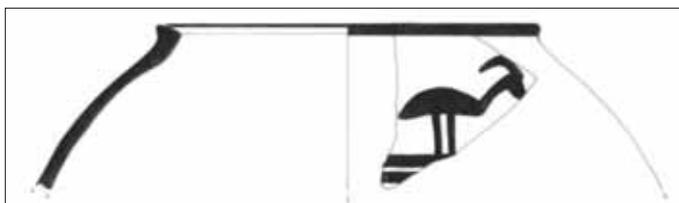


Fig. 22: lone bird.

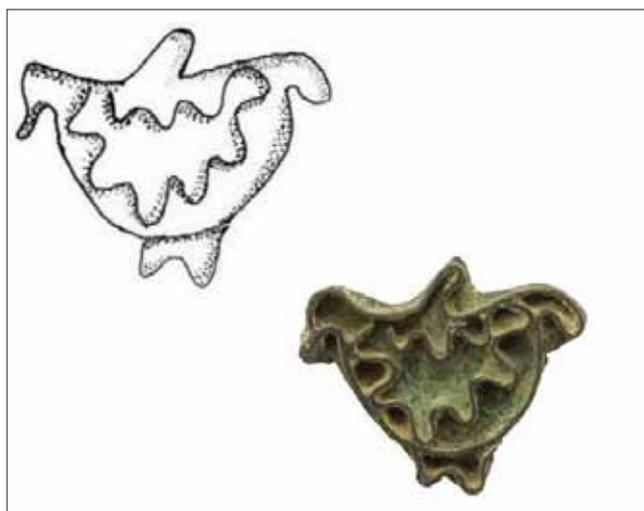


Fig. 23: bustard talisman? (Sajjadi 2016)



Fig. 24: waterfowl.

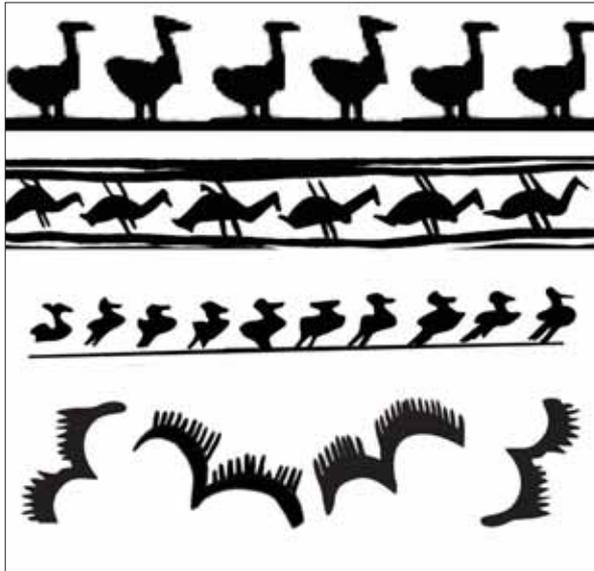


Fig. 25: standing, sitting and flying birds.

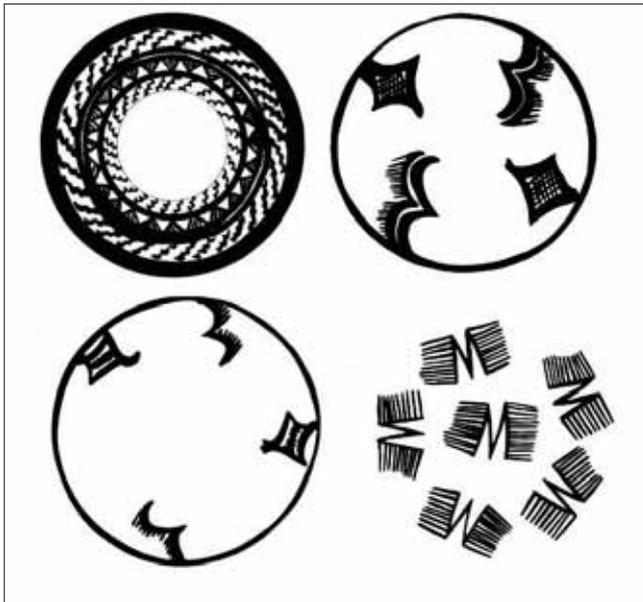


Fig. 26: flocks of birds inside Buff Ware vessels.

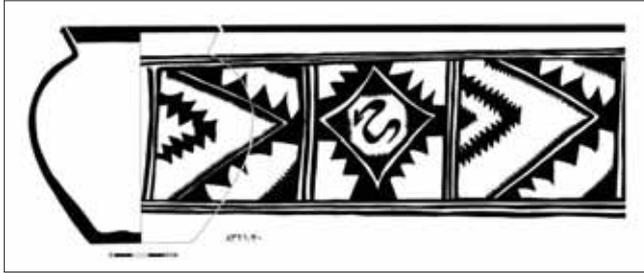


Fig. 27: combined snakes and geometric patterns on Buff Ware jars.



Fig. 28: snake relief on a Buff Ware cup with stand.

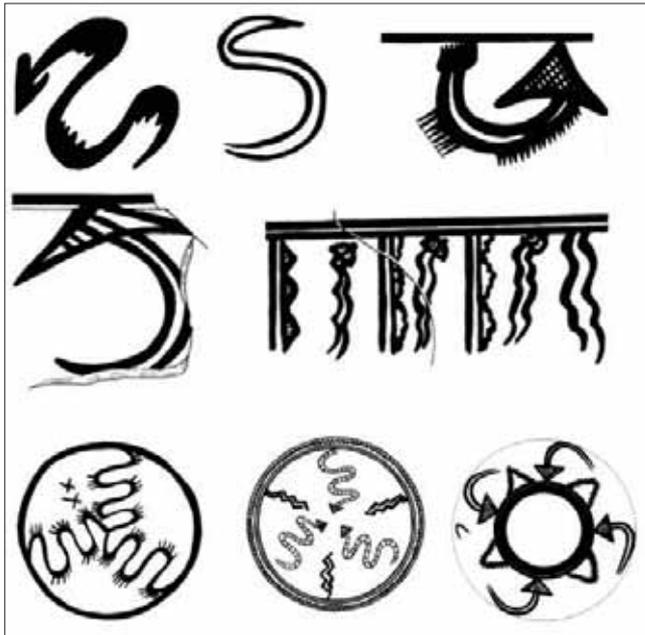


Fig. 29: snake motifs in various forms.



Fig. 30: fish in a bowl (Piperno 1986).



Fig. 31: fish, scorpions, dogs, rams and zebras.

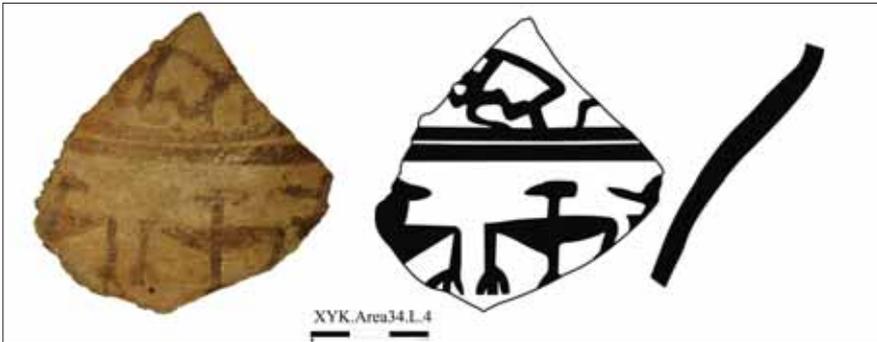


Fig. 32: human image.

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