

ANIMAL DEPICTION ON CERAMICS OF THE TOCHI-GOMAL PHASE, PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

The Gomal and Bannu regions in the southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are archaeologically rich and have undergone multiple explorations and excavations by scholars from Pakistan as well as broad, revealing their importance as favourable locations for human settlement in the past. One of the key factors supporting continuous habitation was the easy availability of water, which is essential for life and was found near nearly all archaeological sites in the area. Animals have always been integral to human life, both in the past and present. In ancient times, communities domesticated certain animals, a tradition that continues to this day. Clay, being readily available, served as the primary raw material for crafting various utilitarian and artistic objects. Among these, pottery was particularly prominent. Pottery production had become a well-established craft, and ceramic vessels were often decorated with painted motifs, especially depictions of animals, both domestic and wild. These designs reflect not only the aesthetic preferences of the time but also the cultural, economic, and symbolic values attributed to animals by the ancient inhabitants (Khan, Knox, & Thomas, 1991; Durrani, 1988) (Dani, 1970-1971; Jan, Ali, Durrani, & Qazi, 2011; Naseem & Jan, 2016; Knox, Ali, & Allchin, 1986, pp. 89-177) (Knox, Ali, & Allchin, 1986, pp. 89-177; Ali & Jan, 2005, pp. 1-54). The animal motifs found on pottery provide valuable insights into the economic, social, and environmental aspects of the region in which they were produced. This paper explores the symbolic significance of animals in the ceramic art of the Tochi-Gomal Phase, highlighting how these representations are deeply intertwined with the religious beliefs and cultural expressions of ancient communities. The study of zoomorphic imagery not only enhances our understanding of the local fauna but also sheds light on the spiritual and artistic dimensions of a civilization long lost to time. These symbolic depictions offer a practical lens through which to interpret the relationship between humans and their environment, as well as their mythologies, belief systems, and worldviews. By examining these motifs, ceramic analysis is elevated beyond its traditional functional scope, revealing the rich diversity of meanings embedded within pottery as a medium of cultural expression

Keywords: Tochi-Gomal, Pottery, Animal Depiction

INTRODUCTION

The Tochi-Gomal cultural phase emerged around the end of the 4th millennium BCE in the Gomal (Tank, Dera Ismail Khan and parts of Dera Ghazi Khan Districts) and adjoining Tochi Valley (Waziristan, Bannu and Lakki Marwat regions). This phase is primarily distinguished by its distinctive ceramic tradition,

characterized by finely levigated clay, uniform firing, and wheel-made production techniques. Despite the already high quality of the pottery, it was further adorned with intricate geometric, floral, and faunal motifs, reflecting both aesthetic sensibility and cultural symbolism. Beyond decorated pottery, the material

assemblage of this phase includes a variety of artifacts such as human and animal figurines, as well as ornaments like beads crafted from terracotta, and both precious and semi-precious stones. These items collectively reflect the artistic sophistication, technological advancement, and cultural richness of the Tochi-Gomal communities (Ali & Jan, 2009, p. 22 & 23) (Jan, 2012, p. 95) (Dani, 1970-1971, pp. 39, 42 & 43) (Durrani, 1988, p. 27 & 28). The material culture associated with this phase has been unearthed in two geographically adjacent regions, Gomal and Tochi, which exhibit striking similarities in their archaeological assemblages. Based on these shared characteristics, the term *Tochi-Gomal Phase* was coined by Farid Khan and his colleagues during the Bannu Archaeological Project in 2000 (Khan, Knox, & Thomas, 2000, pp. 51-56).

Pottery

A unique pottery was introduced in this phase, with different designs including simple and complex geometric along with floral and faunal designs. The pottery found here is thin in fabric, wheel made with polychromic designs on it (Naseem & Jan, 2016, p. 194) (Khan, Knox, & Thomas, 1991, pp. fig: 8,10 & 11 pp: 10-14) (Allchin & Knox, 1986, p. 108) (Lal, 1997, pp. 54-56) (Durrani, 1988) (Khan, Knox, & Thomas, 2002, pp. 105-117). As said, animal designs are also found in a considerable number and variety on the pottery of this phase which is the main highlight of this paper.

Animal Depiction

Animal motifs were commonly painted on pottery during the Tochi-Gomal phase, featuring a variety of species. These designs were exclusively applied to the exterior surfaces of the vessels. Typically, the surface of the pottery was first slipped with a red coating, after which the animal forms were outlined in black and filled in with white pigment. The skill demonstrated by the potters, particularly in the use of brushes and the rendering of clearly recognizable animal forms, is remarkable, especially considering the early chronological context.

Among the various animal representations, the fish motif is one of the most prominent and is found on pottery from both the Gomal and Bannu regions. Notably, fish designs have been

documented on bowls excavated from Rehman Dheri and Gumla in the Gomal Valley, as well as at the site of Lewan in Bannu. The frequent appearance of fish in the ceramic art likely reflects the abundance of fish in nearby rivers and its significance in the daily life and visual culture of the communities. Interestingly, the fish are depicted in two distinct styles: one as solid silhouettes and the other in an "X-ray" style, illustrating internal features. This dual approach to representation highlights the painter's deep familiarity with the subject and their artistic proficiency, offering a rare glimpse into early symbolic and observational practices. In addition to the depiction of fish, a variety of other animal figures appear on the pottery associated with the Tochi-Gomal Phase. One of the most significant sites, Rehman Dheri in the Gomal Plain, provides a rich assemblage of such iconography. The painted motifs from this site include representations of wolves, hounds or dogs, a scorpion, the stylized horns of bull, and multiple depictions of fish. These animal figures not only highlight the artistic range of the potters but also suggest symbolic meanings or practical associations rooted in the everyday life, environment, and possibly the belief systems of the region's ancient inhabitants (Durrani, 1988, pp. fig XXIV no: 9, LI no: 1, 2, 4 & 6, LIV no: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 LVI no: 7, 12, 9). Dogs are also depicted on pottery bowls from the Tochi-Gomal Phase, particularly in the Gomal region, with notable examples recovered from Gumla by Dani. Another striking motif is that of lions, represented as a pair, one positioned behind the other, rendered in a naturalistic style with their tails elegantly curved upward. This depiction reflects not only artistic skill but also a symbolic narrative possibly linked to strength, dominance, or royalty.

Equally significant is the painted image of a mountain goat on a jar from Rehman Dheri. Although the pottery sherd is broken and only the frontal part of the animal is visible, the goat is distinguishable by its beautifully rendered wavy horns. This figure gains added importance when viewed in conjunction with engraved seals from the same site and period. One such seal bears an engraving on both sides, with one side depicting two mountain goats, also characterized by prominent wavy horns. The recurring presence of the mountain goat in both ceramic

and seal imagery strongly suggests its symbolic role, possibly representing power, authority, vitality, and prosperity. Goats, being a key source of food, milk, and raw materials, also fulfilled essential economic and domestic needs of the society.

Conversely, the depictions of dogs or wolves on the pottery of this cultural phase may symbolize protection, loyalty, and companionship. Their presence reflects the enduring human-canine relationship, which spans from antiquity to the present day. Dogs were likely kept for guarding homes and settlements, serving as faithful protectors. The portrayal of these animals underscores their valued role in ancient societies, not only as practical guardians but also as loyal companions.

Among the animal representations on pottery from the Tochi-Gomal Phase, a broken sherd from Gumla features what appears to be a donkey (Dani, 1970-1971, p. fig: 16. 81). In the category of avian imagery, notable examples include depictions of an eagle and a peacock. The peacock motif is particularly interesting as it is artistically combined with a pipal leaf design, suggesting symbolic or decorative fusion (Durrani, 1988, p. fig LI & XXIV).

Another bird, possibly an owl, is depicted on a damaged pottery sherd from Gumla (Dani, 1970-1971, p. fig: 16. 80). The image of a crane has been recorded on a bowl from Jhandi Babar-A (Khan, Knox, & Thomas, 2002, p. pl: 4). Similar avian imagery is also found in the Bannu region at the site of Lak Larga, where a crane is depicted with characteristically long, thin legs and an extended neck. This figure is enclosed within vertical double bands on either side and a horizontal single band at the top and bottom, reflecting a formalized framing technique (Khan, Knox, & Thomas, 1991, p. fig 17 no 6). A figure initially interpreted as a rabbit, found on pottery from Gumla, appears more likely to represent a fish (Dani, 1970-1971, p. fig: 16 no: 83 & 84). This interpretation is supported by the absence of rabbit depictions from other sites of this cultural phase, while fish motifs are consistently found across multiple sites such as Rehman Dheri in the Gomal region and Lewan in the Bannu (Dani, 1970-1971, p. fig: 16 no 83 & 84). Other notable faunal depictions from this phase include crabs and rats, as documented in the same corpus of material (Dani, 1970-

1971, p. fig: 16 no 86 & 87). These diverse representations of animals, both terrestrial and aquatic, underscore the variety and complexity of symbolic and environmental relationships reflected in the pottery art of the Tochi-Gomal Phase.

Conclusion

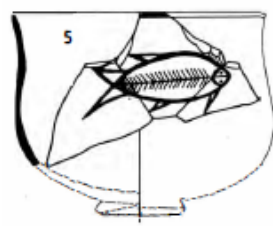
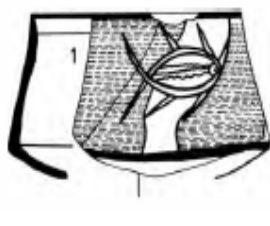
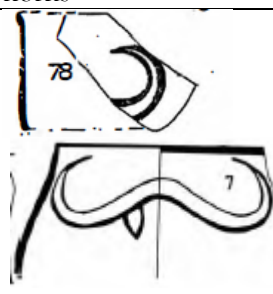
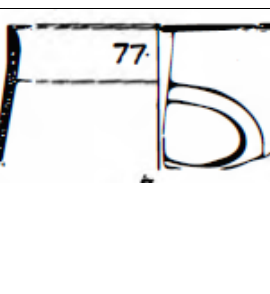
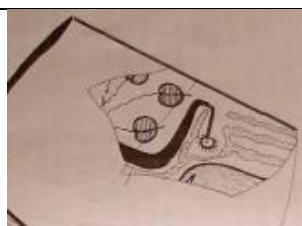
The animal representations on the pottery of the Tochi-Gomal Phase include both domestic and wild species, each carrying symbolic meanings rooted in the cultural and environmental context of the time. In ancient art, animals such as bulls and lions are traditionally associated with strength, authority, and power. Although numerous bull figurines have been unearthed from this phase, interestingly, no complete bull is depicted on pottery. However, bull horns are a recurring motif, frequently painted and symbolically emphasized. The bull, often linked with fertility and agricultural productivity, may have served as a symbol of abundance and strength. In ancient religious belief systems, powerful animals like bulls and lions were sometimes associated with deities. Bulls, for example, are a common motif on seals from the Indus Valley Civilization, often accompanied by other symbolic elements, suggesting their sacred status.

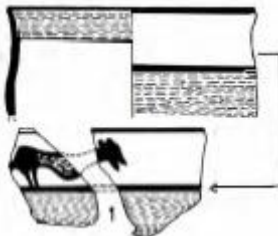
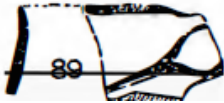
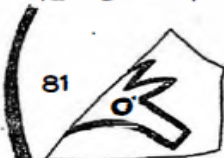
Domesticated animals such as dogs, donkeys, birds and fish also appear in the ceramic art of this phase. Among other animals are wild boar as well. The frequent depiction of dogs may reflect their use as guardians of homes and property, as well as their longstanding companionship with humans. Donkeys, valued for their utility in transporting goods and fulfilling domestic needs, are another important symbol of daily life. The practice of domesticating dogs and donkeys continues to this day, particularly among nomadic and rural populations, where they remain essential for protection and transportation.

Environmental factors played a significant role in determining the availability and variety of animals in the region. While the present-day climate of the Gomal and Bannu regions is predominantly arid and dry, paleoclimatic evidence suggests that in ancient times these areas were lush, with rivers, streams, and abundant vegetation. The proximity of the ancient Indus River to key sites like Rehman

Dheri would have contributed to a fertile environment that supported diverse fauna. Birds such as peacocks, eagles, cranes, and rabbits likely thrived in this ecosystem, reflecting a more hospitable and resource-rich landscape than exists today. Despite the absence of written records, the communities of the Tochi-Gomal Phase demonstrated a sophisticated means of communication through their pottery art. The painted animal motifs carry complex layers of

meaning, conveying narratives, beliefs, and values. As Lakomsha (Lakomsha, 2021) points out, the tradition of depicting animals in art extends back to the Palaeolithic period, highlighting the deep historical roots of symbolic expression. These painted designs not only showcase the artistic complexity of the culture but also offer insight into their cosmology, environmental awareness, and social practices.

Gomal Valley		Bannu Region	
Fish			
			
			
			
horns			
			
Cranes			

		
Dog/hound		
		
		
Mountain Goat	Wild boar	
		
		
Rat	scorpion	
		
Crab		
		
Peacock	Peacock	
		
Eagle	Eagle	
		

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