Animal Symbols at 'Ain Ghazal

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Fig. 1. Bulls are the most frequent type among the 'Ain Ghazal clay animal figurines. Twenty-four clay bull figurines were recovered together with a lump of coarse yellow clay (see Fig. 13) as a hoard in the fill. Twenty-three were elegant little animals made in the same coarse yellow clay, but the remaining bull was more awkwardly formed of a different, finer white clay (see Fig. 14).

Fig. 2. The foreparts of the animals, such as this bull, are strongly emphasized whereas the rumps are reduced. The figurines are invariably represented standing still. This bovine is 4.5 cm long.

Fig. 3. Goats and rams endowed with oversized sweeping horns are also frequently represented. The left example (just under 4 cm long) still preserves intact the burl typical of the female goat.

Fig. 4. The fragmentary figurine (facing left, just over 4 cm long) captures the snout and bristles of the wild boar. The legs are treated in a unique fashion, having been made by adding a flat clay disk under the animal's belly.

Fig. 5. Two animals endowed with pointed heads, short legs, and long tails are enigmatic. They are tentatively identified here as lizards. The left-hand specimen is 3 cm long.

Animal figurines are a familiar find on Near Eastern sites from the 9th to the 3rd millennium BC and from the Levant to Iran. Their function, however, is still enigmatic. Excavations at the Neolithic site of 'Ain Ghazal (ca. 8300–6000 BC, calibrated dates), located near Amman, Jordan, have produced an impressive assemblage of clay artifacts among which are a large number of animal figures (Fig. 1). (See box on The Neolithic Village of 'Ain Ghazal.) I present here the first results of a study of these figurines—their species they represented, their style, manufacture, and the contexts in which they were recovered—then place them in their iconographic context, and discuss the role that animal symbolism may have played in ancient Near Eastern thought.

THE 'AIN GHAZAL ZOOMORPHIC ASSEMBLAGE

There are 126 zoomorphic figurines in the 'Ain Ghazal assemblage. The most remarkable feature of the collection is its homogeneity. During the 2000 years of occupation at the site, the same animals were made again and again in the same style, using the same coarse material. Bulls with prominent withers are most frequent (Fig. 2). Other species include goats, rams, and gazelles, which are easy to distinguish by their horns (Fig. 3). One long-muzzled boar (Fig. 4) and two large-tailed creatures, possibly lizards (Fig. 5), are unusual finds.

The style is remarkably uniform. The quadrupeds are invariably represented standing still, the legs parallel. Activities such as grazing, resting, sleeping, walking, running, or rearing are not portrayed. The figurines usually measure about 7 centimeters but are occasionally as large as 15 or as small as 3 centimeters (Fig. 6). The stylistic treatment is consistent. Particular sets of features are either emphasized, reduced, or altogether ignored. For example, eyes, nostrils, and mouths are systematically excluded, and the skin or coat is not depicted. The sex organs are always omitted. On the other hand, the animal's foreparts are exaggerated. The heads, large sweeping horns, powerful necks, withers, and shoulders bulge in front, contrasting with the small, tapering rear ends. The dorsal spine pinched along the back sometimes extends into a curious crest.

The horns reflect a great concern for verisimilitude. They are faithfully portrayed with the characteristic cross-section, length, and curvature of a specific species. Bovine horns are represented as stocky and
curving forward; those of wild goats are accurately indicated by a marked anterior spine and sharp curvature. Ram horns are semicircular, while those of gazelles elegantly sweep backwards (Fig. 7). In contrast, the tails of bovines are portrayed with a short appendage when, in fact, they are endowed with a long one; goats have a hanging tail which should be upturned (Fig. 3). The most stylized feature, however, are the legs. Reduced to minute pointed stumps, they lack any indication of thigh, knee, ankle, forelock, or hoof (Fig. 8).

Moreover, the limbs barely project below the belly and are grossly disproportionate to the rest of the body. Finally, it is noteworthy that, although the little creatures are often totally asymmetrical, one side being far thicker than the other, they stand firm on their tiny legs. This suggests that, whatever the function of the figurines might be, they were meant to stand up.

The figurines were mostly modeled in a coarse, unprepared yellow-brown clay with large gravel and pebble inclusions, which is locally available (Fig. 9).

They were manufactured by curvily modeling a clay coil into a neck and a head, pressing the other end against a hard surface to shape a flat ramp, pinching legs and tail, and finally attaching the horns which were made separately. Some figurines exhibit puzzling features. The most enigmatic are two animals, each stabbéd with three flint blades in the throat, abdomen, chest, or eye (Fig. 10a). Others display pieces of flint or pebbles, in some cases oddly placed under the tail. A single figurine bore a set of four parallel incised lines along the side (Fig. 9). Lastly, two animals were intentionally truncated when the clay was still moist. Despite their modification, the animals were still able to stand; in one case, the neck of an animal severed behind the forelegs was extended to form a peculiar but steady tripod (Fig. 11).

The figurines do not exhibit gray cores or any other evidence of intentional baking. However, black or red marks and bits of charcoal on the surface indicate that the animals were exposed to fire, possibly in an
open hearth or brazier, which would generate a partly oxidizing and partly reducing atmosphere. The fact that the figurines are often mixed with ashes in trash deposits suggests that they may have been disposed of in fireplaces. This would also explain why the surface of the figurines often shows cracks and the animals are usually badly damaged. None of the figurines is complete. Head, legs, tail, rump, and especially horns are mostly broken off, with many examples reduced to the fore- or back parts.

Two sets of figurines were recovered in situ. The two stabled animals mentioned above lay side by side in a tiny pit covered by a limestone slab, beneath a floor in the corner of a room (Fig. 10; Rolleston and Simmonds 1986:150, 152-53). Although the building appears to have had a domestic function, in previous phases it had also held unusual burials: five funerary pits arranged around a hearth; an infant under a doorway; a cache of three adult skulls (ibid., 155) and a child's skull treated with black pigment. In the second case, a clay bull was recovered in a house, in a storage bin where it was associated with three Bar bones (Fig. 12), one of them bearing an incised pattern (ibid., 152-53).

Twenty-four clay animals recovered as a hoard in the fill (see Fig. 1), together with a lump of coarse yellow clay bearing five curved incised markings (made by finger nails; Fig. 13), also deserve special attention (Rolleston and Simmonds 1986:21). Twenty-three of the figurines were made by someone who had a knack for pinching the coarse yellow clay into elegant little bulls, whereas the twenty-fourth, of a nondescript species, was awkwardly made of a different, finer and whiter clay or perhaps plaster (Fig. 14). The cache therefore suggests that 23 figurines were modeled more or less at one time

**The style of modeling consistently emphasized the foreparts, conveying force, vitality, and dynamism.**

**FIG. 13.** A lump of coarse yellow clay (9.5 cm in length) found with the hoard of figurines shown in Figure 1 suggests that 23 of the small bulls were modeled by the same individual in a single even, and were discarded shortly thereafter with the remaining unused clay.

**FIG. 14.** Virtually all of the figurines in the hoard (Fig. 1) were made by someone who had a knack for pinching clay into well-formed figures, as seen here on the left. The one exception, on the far right (4.5 cm long), was made from a fine white clay or plaster. It is awkwardly shaped into a quadruped of nondescript species, suggesting that a less experienced hand was at work.
Neolithic clay figurines were not the first art form glorifying bovines and long-horned animals. From the first attempts at image making in the Near East, bulls, ovicapines, and cervids dominated the repertory of art motifs. The entrance of the Baladi Cave featured an engraved aurochs and a deer, showing that these animals already played a special role in the Paleolithic hunters’ world of 15,000 BC. Aurochs or gazelles decorated the Epipaleolithic tools of Kfarra, El Wad, and Umm ez-Zairlitina, ca. 10,000 BC. Bulls and deer were the subjects of mural paintings and reliefs at Catal Hoyuk, 6500 to 5500 BC.

Theriomorphic art (depictions of animals) did not vanish with the advent of writing, but rather multiplied. Domesticated bulls and rams appeared in various media, no doubt fulfilling some symbolic needs. They were represented in monumental sculptures in the temple of Inanna at Uruk, ca. 3100 BC, depicted in clay, metal, and fine stones. They became two of the most persistent glyptic motifs from the 4th to the 1st millennium BC. Bulls and stags, rams, goats, or gazelles were interchangeably associated with the sacred tree, the master of animals, or the lion. The same is true in sculpture; at Uruk, for instance, the temple of Ninurta (ca. 2500 BC) was decorated with monumental metal bulls and two stag mastered by the lion-headed eagle, Inshushinak. The predilection for bulls and long-horned animals continued through the Assyro-Babylonian as well as the Persian period. The bull still adorned the processional way of Babylon in 600 BC.

In this perspective, the ‘Ain Ghazal bull and horned animal figurines are not an isolated phenomenon. Instead, they are part of an age-old Near Eastern tradition of theriomorphic art. From the Paleolithic to the Assyro-Babylonian period, bulls and long-horned animals pervaded all forms of art, including wall engravings, glyptic art, monumental relief, and sculptures of terracotta, metal, and fine stones. The frequency and endurance of these motifs speak to a symbolic tradition in which these animals encapsulate some of the most profound ancient Near Eastern thoughts (Caviness 1994:97). The meaning of the Beldibi, Catal Hoyuk, and ‘Ain Ghazal animal symbols is, of course, forever lost. Nor can archaeology recover the significance of the Ubaid stone hound figurines that have no definitive connection to the text. Therefore, we will never know whether the symbol enjoyed continuity or suffered disruption over time. All we know is that in the 3rd millennium BC the prominent location of monumental bulls and horned animals at the entrance of the Ubaid temple makes it clear that they had a religious connotation.

**Animal Symbolism in the Ancient Near East: The Textual Evidence**

The possible functions of human clay figurines have been cogently discussed by several scholars, including Agnes Fixler, Mary M. Voigt, and Peter J. Ucko, but the animal specimens have not enjoyed the same attention. Edward Ochamchverogl (1978) is among the few who put in writing the view, held by many, that the objects were children’s toys. More recently, Postgate (1994) has convincingly argued that the key to the prehistoric clay animal figures may ultimately be provided by examples of the later periods, when religious compulsion affected the archaeological evidence. He advocated the legitimacy of using, with due caution, historical cuneiform texts to gain insights into timeless Near Eastern traditions. The need for investigation is being challenged. Bulls, rams, and stags are frequently cited in the cuneiform literature of the 3rd to 1st millennium BC as symbols of various concepts and personifications:

1. **Zabuluna constellation.** The animals were identified with Taurus and Aries, or the sun (Wiggerman 1992:74–75).
2. **God.** The bull was An, the sky deity, highest in the pantheon. It was also the attribute of Adad, the storm god, as well as of Nanna, the moon god. The goat was Enki, god of water (Black and Green 1992:93).
3. **Virility.** The bull and the stag were invoked in the S. l. modifications to restore sexual potency (Biggs 1967:22–24).

The cuneiform texts also stress the great importance of live animals for cultic sacrifice (Lechity 1993). I will not dwell on the Bronze Age significance of the animals, since archaeology cannot establish the origin or antiquity of these symbols. It suffices to underline that, as soon as written evidence becomes available, the texts disclose the ritual and cosmic significance of bulls and horned animals. Abundant archaeological data confirm the allusions in the cuneiform texts to the hallowed use of clay ani- mal figurines: (1) as ex-votos, (2) as apotropaic foundation deposits, (3) in magic rituals. For instance, clay dogs excavated in shrines of Gula, bearing dedicatory inscriptions such as “I made a clay dog and presented it to her,” demonstrate that the goddess of healing received as ex-votos figurines of her...
sacred animal (Postgate 1994:176–77). Also, instruction texts prescribing the ritual burying of animal figurines to protect buildings against evil are corroborated at several sites, in particular at Ninurta and in earlier levels of Ur, where snakes, dogs, and composite creatures were recovered along house and palace walls.

Incantation texts also attest to the fact that figurines were created in the course of magic rites. One such text, from the 7th century BC Assyrian Nambury series (Caplice 1974:23–24), requests a ox figurine fashioned in a ritual intended to bring brick trade to an innkeeper.

The ceremony involved building an altar to Ishtar, offering bread, and creating an ox figurine according to a specific ordered procedure. First, the participant collected dirt at various places, including a quay, a crossing, a bridge, the intersection of four roads, the city gate, and at the doors of the Ishtar temple, a prostitute's, and a busy tavern; next he mixed the dirt of these various locations with water. He then spread some of the mixture at the threshold of the inn; next, he modeled an ox with the remainder of the paste.

Then he uttered a spell seven times, prostrated himself, and finally buried the figurine under a vat. A second text of the Nambury series prescribes making clay figurines to construct the head of a lion (Caplice 1974:19). This ritual involved first sweeping the house roof, sprinkling water, building an altar, and preparing (animal?) offerings. Next, a lizard was modeled in clay and placed on the altar on a specified design drawn in a bowl. Then the altar was covered with a number of spells, while standing on tamarisk wood, and holding the hand of the priest.

These incantation texts are invaluable in giving specific information on the making of the clay animals used in the rites, their manipulation, and disposal. It is evident that, in the ritual contexts described, the quality of the clay was of no concern in the location where the dirt was collected. It's important that the value of the objects derived from the simple act of creating them rather than from careful craftsmanship. These texts likewise present a scenario in which the manufacture involved as many as three actors: the patient, a priest, and sometimes his attendant. The figurines were made in prescribed numbers, varying from a single object to large groups in the ramparted area of the objects was limited to a brief presentation on an altar; and their disposal was immediate and consisted of burying them at a given location, throwing them in the river, or burning them.

POSSIBLE FUNCTIONS OF THE 'AIN GHAZAL FIGURINES

To turn back through the millennia to the 'AIN GHAZAL material, what might have been the function of those animal figurines? Simple logic suggests that the pair of animals, each stabbed three times in vital parts and buried in a specially prepared cavity in a corner of a room, cannot easily be explained as toys. The figurines are also unlikely to represent surrogates for offerings, since we know that in later periods the main purpose of sacrificing animals was deriving omens from the behavior of the live beast as it was led to the altar, connecting its entrails for divination, or collecting its blood for purification (Leitch 1993:239–42). Could the Neolithic zoomorphic figurines be related to magic as described in the cuneiform texts? The evidence at hand certainly warrants the question (Postgate 1994:176–79).

Late texts unquestionably reveal that, in the 1st and 2nd millennia BC, magic pervaded everyday life and religion and that animals, endowed with a cosmic significance, played a role in the rites. Why, as proposed by Postgate, is it legitimate to apply knowledge derived from the late historical period to the Neolithic period? Because it is attested by the Fara incantation texts that magic was already practiced in the same way in the early 3rd millennium BC (Kühner 1959). And it is certainly within the bounds of possibility that the situation was similar in prehistoric times. In fact, it is commonly assumed that the Fara rite was transferred from a long-lived oral tradition that had its roots in prehistory (van Dijk et al. 1985:1). The assumption is plausible, first, because magic is universal, and second, because rituals are formal and repetitive. To the extent that the effectiveness of spells is thought to depend on the precision of their execution, practical magic practices have little potential for modification and reinterpretation and thus tend to be slower to change than most other aspects of culture.

The idea that the Neolithic zoomorphic figurines could be related to magic is supported by the 'AIN GHAZAL assemblage, and in particular by different characteristics of the assemblage:

1. the selection of bulls and long-horned animals, traditionally associated with cosmic significance;
2. the use of unprepared clay;
3. the cursory modeling, suggesting that the objects had no intrinsic value, but that their importance derived from the simple act of manufacturing them;
4. the force and vitality communicated by systematically exaggerating the features;
5. the stabbing, slashing, or cutting of particular figurines;
6. their ability to stand up on a designated place, such as the clusters of 1, 2, and 24 figurines;
7. the likelihood that in some cases they were manufactured by an experienced individual, maybe a "priest" or "shaman," with the participation of a less able hand, perhaps an attendant or the patient for whom the ritual was performed;
8. the association with other "art" objects, such as incised bone; and especially
9. the conscious disposal of the clay animals by burying them under a house floor or in the vicinity of annually treated human remains, by placement in a food storage area, or in the fire.

Could the Neolithic zoomorphic figurines be related to magic as described in the cuneiform texts?

The Neolithic Village of 'AIN GHAZAL

A bulldozer digging in construction for a modern highway exposed prehistoric remains near the spring of 'AIN GHAZAL in 1982. Subsequent excavations over four seasons revealed remains of one of the largest Neolithic communities in the Near East. Three stratified periods of cultural development—Pre-Pottery Neolithic B, PPNC, and the Yamnaya phase of the early Pottery Neolithic—were exposed in the excavations. A village of farmers, hunters, and herders, 'AIN GHAZAL as its peak extended over 9 hectares (about 22 acres) on both banks of the ancient Wadi Zarqa. Archaeologists have uncovered rectangular multi-roomed structures with walls of undressed limestone slabs and cobbles and timber roof beams. Walls, floors, and courtyards were plastered and decorated with finger-painted designs in red pigment.

About 500,000 bone fragments, most representing refuse from human consumption, constitute one of the largest faunal assemblages from the Neaheast. They provide information about the diet and subsistence economy of the Neolithic villagers. The assemblage is dominated by goats (Capra sp.), followed by gazelles, then cattle (Bos sp.). Fox, hare, and a large variety of small carnivores are also represented, together with birds and reptiles. Fish remains are surprisingly well preserved, considering the site's position on the Jordan River.

Chipped stone artifacts, grinding stones, and stone bowls were among the utilitarian objects made for daily use. Bone tools might have been used for weaving, sewing, and possibly leather work. Clay tokens, interpreted as counters to keep track of goods, were probably used to implement an incipient redistribution system. As well as the animal figurines discussed in this article, the site also has produced 36 small figurines made of clay.

 Bodies were usually buried under floors, in a flexed or semi-flexed position, and, in the early period, decapitated. Caches of skulls had in some cases been treated with plaster, asphalt, and red ochre. The meaning of three remarkable caches of plaster human statues is unknown; they may have been objects of worship—images of gods or goddesses or representations of ancestors. ‘AIN GHAZAL is currently being excavated by an American-Jordanian team directed by Gary O. Rollefson of the ‘AIN GHAZAL Research Institute and Zeidah Kafati of Yarmouk University in Irbid.

If, indeed, some of the Neolithic figurines of ‘AIN GHAZAL played a ritual role, the objects can no longer be dismissed as trivial. The clay animals were metaphors of the forces of nature that fostered conscious-