

Animal Symbolism in Proto-Elamite Period: Serpent, Turtle and Feline in Tepe Sofalin

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Abstract

The appearance of animal images on the archaeological remains is always considered as an evidence to determine their natural living and their role in human's cultural and ritual life. Animal imagery is found in every medium of art in the Proto Elamite period include stone statuette, pottery, metalwork and finally seal impressions. The glyptic art and pottery through their diversity and the nature of their symbols provide the researchers with the basic information with which to piece together the iconography and the social and economy history of the Proto Elamite period. This paper examines serpent, turtle and feline imageries and related pastiches on two media at Tepe Sofalin, including seal impressions and pottery fragments.

Keywords: Pottery Assemblage; Glyptic Art; Animal Symbolism; Tepe Sofalin; Proto Elamite

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Introduction

The image of the serpent, turtle and feline were tremendously significant in the ancient world. In every culture all across the world, from Mesoamerica with its totemic animals (Pasztor, 1983, 223-34; Miller 1986) to the animal deities in Egypt, Mesopotamia and ancient Iran (Frankfort 1939; Oates 1979, Fig 116; Amiet, 1961; 1971a; 1971b; 1972; 1980; Porada 1993, 479-505), the animals and zoomorphic creatures have been permeated with religious and social powers. Religion and glyptic art were replete with Zoomorphic motifs, presumably having deep metaphorical meanings (Etheridge, 1979, 9-13). Animals' imagery plays a significant role in Proto Elamite culture and its succeeding Elamite period and eventually has served to communicate a message (Pittman 1997). Three of important animals frequently were illustrated in Tepe Sofalin remains in Eastern Ray plain, Pishva district, of north-central Iranian Plateau are feline, serpent and turtle among glyptic art and pottery appliqué decoration elements. In glyptic art, the serpent, turtle and feline were illustrated in the context of scene that accompanied with other species (Pittman,

1994; 1997). Related animal pastiches also exist and, form an important aspect of Proto Elamite symbolism (Pittman, 1997). Examples of such supernatural creatures include serpo-bullman and serpo-feline found on cylinder seal impressions. Such frightening Proto Elamite demon creatures as the composite raptorial were usually illustrated attacking flocks. Pottery assemblages and seal impressions, particularly in Proto Elamite periods at Tepe Sofalin provides us with a wealth of symbolic designs applied decoration (Hessari, 2010a, pls. I, II, III and IV). Accordingly, the animals chosen as important symbols in Proto Elamite period must have had strong associations with religion, politics and social symbolism of the period (Ibid).

Serpent, Turtle, Feline Symbols in Glyptic Art

Serpent: Serpent has a wide range of associations in different cultures presumably resulted from natural fear and it is usually rendered as negative or evil personalities. Serpent like other animals, were rarely depicted by themselves in glyptic art; some good examples of it might

be an amulet was found in a circular stamp sea from Tepe Giyan excavated by Contenau and Ghrishman (1932) and Herzfeld (1933). The seal depicts a big sinuous snake twisted around an ibex. Many other similar examples exist at Tepe Giyan depicting serpent as the main element (Contenau and Ghrishman, 1932. Pl 38 nos. 83, 88; Herzfeld, 1933. Abb, 14 et Tf.I:6661, Abb, 22 et Tf.II:2348, 2503, 2330, 2767). In glyptic art of Lorestan, the serpent played a negative role, symbolizing demon creature devouring a man from his legs (Amiet 1968, 97-110). Serpent imagery was depicted within Lorestan glyptic style on many stamp seals (Barnett 1966, pl. XXII-2 et p.260). Another example was found at Susa, Susa I period, depicts a standing ibex headed figure with a bare chest and big circular pedant hanging on a thick cord around its neck taking two sinuous snakes by their heads (Le Breton, 1956, 135, fig 5). Snakes continue to make their appearance on seals from almost every period of early Iran. They were incorporated into other animals design as identical entity on seal impressions; they formed varies iconography of supernatural creatures. In Late Chalcolithic (Susa II/ Middle Banesh -Late Uruk) period in Susa

and Chogha Mish, combination of serpent image and its disposition is highly variable as supernatural creature, serpo-lion with chthonic vitality (Le Breton, 1957, 106, fig. 20, 4; Delogaz and Kantor, 1996. Pls.142, 156, 158). In Proto Elamite period (Susa III), serpent usually incorporated with other animals especially ibex (De Mecquenem 1927, p.19, n 61).

Feline: These were also extremely important in the glyptic art of ancient Iran in which they appear frequently and have multiple meanings. In Tepe Giyan glyptic art, the feline played a negative role, symbolizing demon creature devouring an ibex from its head (Herzfeld 1933. Abb, 22 et Tf.II:503). A seal from phase 27 of the Acropole 1 at Susa shows a leaping feline above a goat facing in the opposite direction (Amiet, 1971b, plate xxxvii/4, pl. XXII/7). Another similar impression of a stamp seal, contemporary with Susa I, was found at Susa, depicts a feline presumably panther above antelope (De Mecquenem: Memoires XXV, p. 287, fig 19). Another example was found at Susa, Susa I period, depicts a standing ibex headed figure taking two felines by their heads (Le Breton, 1956, p. 135, figs 10, 12). Many other similar

examples exist at Susa, Susa I, depicting feline in hunting and choking scenes with domesticated quadrupeds (Delaporte: CCO I, pl. 28 (2): S.336, 882). In Late Chalcolithic (Susa II- Middle Banesh- Late Uruk) period at Susa and Chogha Mish, the idea of feline was used in multiple variants. The felines were usually illustrated in a standard image of attacking flocks in different poses (Legrain 1921, n 176, 194; De Mecquenem: Memoires XXIX, p.23, fig.18; Delogaz and Kantor 1996. Pls. 136,139,140, 141). The use of feline images in Proto Elamite glyptic are became extremely frequent and felines were depicted in any imaginable ways including as feline acting as human, monstrous felines, feline in different natural poses especially in leaping and attacking poses.

Turtle: The number of turtle designs on seals is few in comparison with the serpent and feline ones. The image of a turtle within glyptic art is very difficult to interpret since turtles are rarely depicted in art and a few examples exist in the neighboring cultures. There is very limited number of turtles in glyptic art of Susa and Chogha Mish during Late Chalcolithic (Susa II- Middle Banesh/ Late Uruk) Period

(Delogaz and Kantor 1996. Pls.142).

Serpent, Turtle, Feline in Tepe Sofalin
Serpent like other animals, were rarely depicted in Proto Elamite glyptic art at Tepe Sofalin. The image of snake (ophidian) usually depicted as pastiches. In one example, serpent occurred as a certain anthropomorphic figure whose nature is difficult to establish. It shows the remarkable image of a standing frontal bullman creature that has two snake heads emerging from his shoulders (Hessari, 2010b, 455). Another example from Sofalin shows a quadruped (presumably lion with a streaked body) having a long entwined snake head moving on a line impressed on the reverse of a PE tablet (Ibid, 457). Another documented theme among the Tepe Sofalin seal impressions is a turtle (Ibid, 460). Two examples of the same stamp seal were found, engraved on a square-shaped seal, remarkable for being rendered alone. Another common subject is the feline. This creature frequently occurs in combination with ibex, goat and gazelle (Ibid, 457).

Serpent, Turtle, Feline in Pottery Decoration at Tepe Sofalin

In Proto Elamite art at Tepe Sofalin the different parts of pottery wares indicate depiction of animals such as serpent, turtle and feline. Table 1 shows the general characteristics of potteries found in the different layers of Tepe Sofalin including decoration descriptions implying animal imagery mentioned in the text.

TSF.09.801.1857

This fragment is a spout vessel of a finer buff ware, characterized by a dense paste and mineral tempering. The pottery assemblage was highly fired. It has a pale yellow (2.5Y 8/2) slip on exterior surface and reddish yellow (5YR 6/6) slip on the interior surface. This pottery fragment is characterized by two bands of appliquéd snakes undulating horizontally to the mouth of the spout measuring 93 mm. The snakes curves stretching along the mouth of the spout and appear to be resting their heads here. The sinuous bodies of the snakes were dotted with two colors of black (5YR 2.5/1), and yellowish red (5YR 4/6) and the head is dominated by large, round pellet eyes, which have been painted in black with a circle for the iris (Plate I).

TSF.09.502.756

This fragment is also a spout of a finer, well fired buffed ware. The exterior surface is badly effaced and the color cannot be determined, but the interior surface is slipped with reddish yellow (5YR 6/6). The vessel is well manufactured.

This pottery fragment bears two undulating snakes in relief on the spout measuring 59 mm. The snake's heads modeled gently and is so naturalistic that it is much close realistic rendering of snake than the other sherds so far. The bodies of the snakes also appear to be plain with no indication of scales (Plate I).

TSF.07.7301.83

This fragment of a long spout vessel is of the finer range of reddish yellow paste, distinguishable by mineral tempering. The pottery assemblage was well fired. It has a pale yellow (2.5Y 8/2) slip on exterior surface and reddish yellow (5YR 6/6) slip on the interior surface.

This fragment consists of a long single cylindrical spout measuring 112.5 and bearing two appliquéd snakes which appear to wriggle up from the broken shoulder of the vessel and move along the length of the spout. The snakes are thick coils of clay

pinched by hand and were dotted in grey (7.5YR 6/1) paint to resemble the creature's scales. The heads of the snakes are broken off (Plate I).

TSF.09. 107.b.132

This fragment of spout vessel has light brown paste with mineral tempering, with very pale brown (10YR 8/3) slip on internal surface with combined appliqué and painted decoration. This fragmentary spout of vessel is flanked by two appliquéd snakes dotted in black (7.5YR 2.5/1) indicating the scales, with one head is missing, which crawl vertically up the spout. The snakes are made of thin coils, with a tapering body and well-defined head, appliquéd circular eyes and incised mouth. They wriggle sinuously up to the rim of the spout (Plate II).

TSF.06. 6219.66

This fragment of pottery vessel is of the finer range of buff ware, distinguishable by a dense paste in pink (7.5YR 7/4) and mineral tempering. It has very pale brown (10YR 8/3) slip on both the interior and exterior surfaces. This fragment from a spout vessel consists of modeled head and neck of a serpent. The illustrated aspect

shows a single straight cylindrical spout with an appliqué snake undulating horizontally to the rim of the spout. It seems that the spout was decorated with another symmetrical snake, but it is broken off and only the impression of the molded snake exists on the spout. The rest of the body which is seemingly stretched on the surface of the vessel is now missing. The triangle head is dominated by large, round pellet eyes, which have been painted in black with a circle for the iris. The tip of the snake snout and it is marked by brown crescent shape. The neck and the body of the snake are marked by polka dots in very dark gray (7.5YR 3/1). The spout is also treated with four very dark gray bands stretched from the rim of the spout to its bottom (Plate II).

TSF.09.00.01

This fragment of pottery vessel is of the finer range of light reddish brown (5YR 6/4) ware, distinguishable by a dense paste and mineral tempering. The pottery assemblage was well fired. It has very pale brown (10YR 8/3) slip on both the interior and exterior surfaces. The vessel is well manufactured. This pottery fragment from the body of the vessel is decorated with the

body of an appliqué snake. The sherd depicts a sinuous appliqué snake undulate diagonally along the upper shoulder of the vessel. Like other relief snakes found at Tepe Sofalin, its body markings consist of painted dots in dark gray (5YR 4/1) across the back of the creature to indicate the snake's markings (Plate II).

TSF.09.9469

This fragment is unique among its kind. This is the only specimen among appliqué decoration of pottery vessels depicted bull and snake together. The pottery manufacturer took advantage of a bull and serpent to decorate the vessel on the handle. This pottery fragment is characterized by an appliqué bull pinched on the handle of a vessel. The bull itself is decorated by two sinuous snakes undulate diagonally along the front legs and resting their heads between the horns of the bull on its forehead. The bull also slipped with pale yellow (2.5Y 8/2) decorated in gray (7.5YR 6/1) on the muzzle, forehead and front legs. The face of the bull is dominated by large, round pellet eyes, which have been incised resembling the iris. The serpents were dotted in gray (7.5YR 6/1) to indicate the scales of the animals. The head of the

serpents were broken off. The appliqué combination of a serpent and bull on the handle was worked out most skillfully (Plate III).

TSF.09.107.b.163

The unusually decorative shape of the feline must have suggested that the feline may have attached the handle of the vessel. The relief feline is carelessly modeled with circular projection of the neck. The exterior color of the feline is pale yellow (2.5Y 8/2), dotted in very dark gray (7.5YR 3/1), resembling the animals skin. The front legs of the feline were smoothly curved fitted with the arch of the pottery handle. The head of the feline is dominated by large, round pellet eyes, which have been painted carelessly in very dark grey (7.5YR 3/1) with a circle for the iris (Plate III).

TSF.07. 7307.72

This fragment is also unique of this kind. The pottery manufacturer took advantage of a turtle to decorate the vessel. This pottery fragment is characterized by an appliqué turtle grasping the straight cylindrical spout with its legs. The carapace of the turtle is decorated in brown paint with a ladder-like design. The parallel hatchings in mid brown

paint on the turtle's carapace are meant to imitate the scales of the animal. The head of the animal was broken off. The appliquéd motif of a turtle on the spout is very difficult to interpret since turtles are rarely depicted in the art of Proto Elamite and fewer examples exist in neighboring cultures. The fragment comes from a vessel with dense orange paste, mineral tempering and pale cream slip on the exterior (Plate III).

Conclusion

In Proto Elamite period one of the most interesting issue is how interpreting the meaning of animal symbolism depicted on pottery assemblages, seal impressions and etc. Serpent, turtle and feline has a unique place in pantheon of animals revered by man in Proto Elamite period.

Serpents are held in global fearfulness and the evidence from Iran even in earlier period's shows that they were honored and their omnipresent image was symbol for variety of concepts (see Pittman, 1997). The corpuses of the appliquéd serpent vessels span a wide range geography and chronology from Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia and Iran (e.g. Porada, 1993). The abundance of serpent in Proto Elamite

art at Tepe Sofalin reflects an abundance of snake species known living in their neighbors. In Tepe Sofalin, the special treatment accorded to serpent in both glyptic art and pottery decoration as figural spouts reflect fear and respect of this venomous creature. In Proto Elamite art at Tepe Sofalin, it seems that serpent and serpent pastiches have a wide variety of associations and meanings. It seems that naturalistic rendering of serpent on spout vessels attributes to rituals. In Tepe Sofalin, the serpents have close association with water and rain. At Tepe Sofalin, serpent on pottery appears alone without other animals or human. Pottery vessels at Tepe Sofalin are the only object on which serpents appear by themselves. More importantly, the shape and iconography reveals figural spout vessels were mostly libation vessel. The decoration of the spout vessels at Tepe Sofalin reflects what is probably for ritual purposes. The use of serpent in medication and healing suggest the possibility that a sort of serpent wine may have been known at Tepe Sofalin.

Integration of the turtle into the profane and blasphemous is proven in the archaeological records. The turtle is similar to the snake in two key respects. Turtles

were known to have been eaten and their meats as well as their shells were used in medicine.

Felines also have had a profound effect on human sensibilities since the beginning of settled cultures in Iran. Throughout the history of civilization in Iran, they have inspired fear, respect and emulation as the embodiment of supernatural power. In prehistoric Iran, the felines were invoked in art, religion and mythology. Depicted in pottery, glyptic art and stone, they were associated with sacrifice, and war, and employed in the subtle symbolism of metaphor as icons of power and prestige. For Proto Elamite people who resided in Tepe Sofalin or near the margin of the central Iranian desert, the Cheetah was well known and became incorporated into the lives of those who lived in these areas. The Cheetah's formidable size, reputation as a predator, and its evolved capacities to survive in the desert made it an animal to be revered. The Proto Elamite people witnessed this advanced animal, adopting the Cheetah as an authoritative and ritual symbol, and incorporated this magnificent beast into their symbolism. The Cheetah stands today, as it did in the past, as an important symbol for the sacred and

profane lives of those who coexist with this majestic feline in this region.

Thus, the Proto Elamite symbolism at Tepe Sofalin points to an early appreciation of Powerful symbolism of the serpent, turtle and feline. What is striking about the appliqué animals at Tepe Sofalin is that they represent sphere of the earth; the snake from the earth and its depth, the turtle from water and feline from surface of the land. Perhaps this is an intentional choice of symbolic representative of the forces of regeneration.

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Plate I



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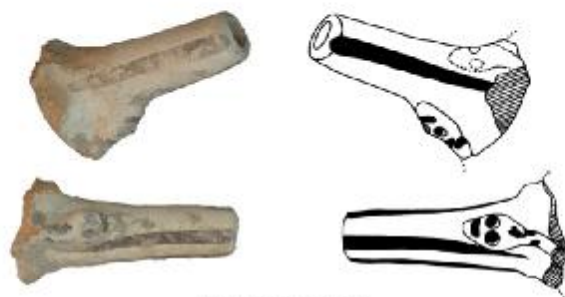


Plate I Fragment of Vessels Spout with Animal Depictions

Plate II



TSE.09.107.b.132



TSE.06.6219.66

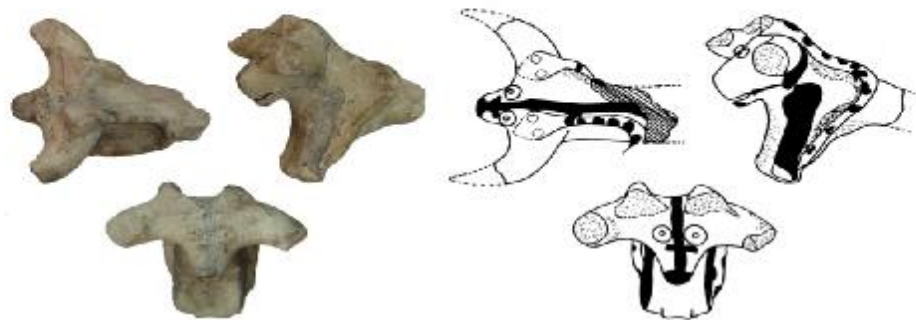


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Plate II Fragment of Vessels Spout with Animal Depictions

Plate III



TSE.09.9469



TSE.09.107.b.133



TSE.07.7307.72



Plate III Fragment of Vesseles Spout with Animal Depictions

Table 1. General Characteristics of Pottery Sherds Found during Tepe Sofalin Excavations

Date & Season	Tr enc No	LN	RN	Objec t No	Length (mm)	Max Width (mm)	Min Width (mm)	Height (mm)	weig ht (gr)	Decoration Type	S e x	X	Y	Z	Ani mal s Typ e
2009	8	801	8053	801.1857	Max:93	45	21.2	-	59 gr	Painted & appliqué	?	E:13cm	S:58cm	-87cm	Sna ke
EX Color		2.5Y 8/2 (pale yellow)		Core color		5YR 6/6 (reddish yellow)		Dec Color		5YR (black), 5YR (yellowish red)		2.5/1 4/6			
Pot sherd description		reddish yellow paste with mineral tempering, pale yellow slip on external surface and combined appliqué & Bichrome painted decoration													
Decoration Description		Two bands of appliqué snakes undulating horizontally to the mouth of the spout, resting their heads there. The sinuous bodies of the snakes were dotted with two colors of black and dark brownish red indicate the scales. The head is dominated by large, round pellet eyes, which have been painted in black with a circle for the iris.													
2009	5	502	5187.b	502.756	Max:59	43	33	-	45 gr	appliqué	?	E:130cm	N:45cm	D:-53cm	Sna ke
EX Color		?		Core color		5YR 6/6 (reddish yellow)		Dec Color		-					
Pot sherd description		reddish yellow paste with mineral tempering													
Decoration Description		This pottery fragment is characterized by two bands of appliqué snakes undulating horizontally to the mouth of the spout. The snakes curves its way up to the mouth of the spout and appear to be resting their heads there.													
2007	3.II	-	7301	7301.83	Max:112.5	59	28.5	-	100 gr	Painted & appliqué	?	-	-	-	Sna ke
EX Color		2.5Y 8/2 (pale yellow)		Core color		5YR 6/6 (reddish yellow)		Dec Color		7.5YR 6/1 (gray)					
Pot sherd description		reddish yellow paste with mineral tempering, pale yellow slip on external surface and combined appliqué & painted decoration													
Decoration Description		This fragment of a pottery vessel consist of a long single cylindrical spout bearing two appliqué snakes which appear to wriggle up from the broken shoulder of the vessel and move along the length of the spout. The snakes are thick coils of clay pinched by hand and were dotted in brown paint to resemble the creature's scales. The heads of the snakes are broken off.													
2009	10	107.b	1325.b	107.b.132	Max:83.5	43	24.5	-	50 gr	Painted & appliqué	?	W:154cm	S:436cm	D:-111.4cm	Sna ke
EX Color		10YR 8/3 (very pale brown)		Core color		7.5YR 6/4 (light brown)		Dec Color		7.5YR 2.5/1 (black)					
Pot sherd description		light brown paste with mineral tempering, pale yellow slip on internal surface and combined appliqué & painted decoration													
Decoration Description		This fragmentary spout of vessel is flanked by two appliqué snakes dotted in brown indicating the scales, with one head is missing, which crawl vertically up the spout. The snakes are made of thin coils, with a tapering body and well-defined head, appliqué circular eyes and incised mouth. They wriggle sinuously up to the rim of the spout.													
2006	Z	-	6219	6219.66	Max:85	34.5	21	-	65 gr	Painted & appliqué	?	-	-	-	Sna ke
EX Color		10YR 8/3 (very pale brown)		Core color		7.5YR 7/4 (pink)		Dec Color		7.5YR 3/1 (very dark gray)					
Pot sherd description		yellowish red paste with mineral tempering, pale yellow slip on interior & exterior surface and combined appliqué & painted decoration													
Decoration Description		Four parallel dark green bands in the same direction with the spout, molded head and neck undulating vertically to rim of the spout the serpent is painted with dark greenish bands the symmetrical snack is broken off													

Date & Season	Trench No	L N	R N	Object No	Length(m)	Max Width(mm)	Min Width(mm)	Height(m)	Weight(g)	Decoration Type	Sex	X	Y	Z	Animals Type	
2009	Surface	-	00	00.01	-	-	-	-	-	Painted & appliqué	-	-	-	-	Snake	
EX Color		10YR 8/3 (very pale brown)			Core color			5YR 6/4 (light reddish brown)			Dec Color		5YR 4/1 (dark gray)			
Pot sherd description		light reddish brown paste with mineral tempering, pale yellow slip on external surface and combined appliqué & painted decoration														
Decoration Description		This fragment from a shoulder of vessel consists of modeled body of a serpent The illustrated aspect shows an appliqué snake undulating horizontally on the shoulder of the vessel. The head of the snake is broken off.														
2009	9	915	9469	9469	Max: 70	70	28.8	76	99 gr	Painted & appliqué	Mal	W:370cm	S:320cm	D:-80.6cm	Snake attached on back of the Bull	
EX Color		2.5YR 8/3 (pale yellow)			Core color			10YR 8/3 (very pale brown)			Dec Color		5YR 2.5/1 (black)			
Pot sherd description		very pale brown paste with mineral tempering, pale yellow slip on external surface and combined appliqué & painted decoration														
Decoration Description		The pottery fragment is characterized by a standing bull with two snakes undulating across its body and resting their heads beside the horn of the bull. This fragment was attached on the handle of a vessel. The Bull is decorated in black paint on the legs, muzzle and front head. The head is dominated by large, round pellet eyes, which have been painted in black with a circle for the iris. Molded head and neck of the snakes undulating vertically to head of the bull. The serpents are painted with dark brownish dots. The heads of the snake are broken off														
2009	10	107.507	1307	107.507	Max: 74	40	20.5	58	69 gr	Painted	?	W:68cm	S:365cm	D:-113.6cm	Feline	
EX Color		2.5Y (pale yellow)			Core color			5YR 6/6 (reddish yellow)			Dec Color		7.5YR 3/2 (dark brown)			
Pot sherd description		reddish yellow paste with mineral tempering, pale yellow slip on external surface and painted decoration														
Decoration Description		The pottery manufacturer took advantage of a feline presumably Cheetah to decorate the vessel. The pottery fragment is characterized by a seated appliqué feline probably on the handle of a vessel. The feline is decorated in brown paint dots imitating the skin of the animal. The head is dominated by large, round pellet eyes, which have been painted in black with a circle for the iris.														
2007	3.II	-	7307	7307.72	Max: 70	40	18.5	-	85 gr	Painted & appliqué	?	-	-	-	Turtle	
EX Color		2.5Y (pale yellow)			Core color			7.5YR 7/4 (pink)			Dec Color		7.5YR 3/1 (very dark gray)			
Pot sherd description		yellowish paste with mineral tempering, pale yellow slip on external surface and combined appliqué & painted decoration														
Decoration Description		This pottery fragment is characterized by an appliqué turtle grasping the straight cylindrical spout with its legs. The carapace of the turtle is decorated in brown paint with a ladder-like design. The parallel hatchings in mid brown paint on the turtle's carapace are meant to imitate the scales of the animal. The head of the animal was broken off.														

نشانه‌های حیوانی دوره آغاز ایلامی: مار، لاک پشت و گربه سانان

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حیوانات به طور معمول ابتدا در بستر طبیعی شان و سپس به عنوان سمبل های قدرت مورد توجه و مطالعه پژوهشگران قرار می گیرند. در مراحل مختلف آغاز ایلامی، سمبل ها در نمونه های مجسمه های سنگی، سفالی، فلزی و اثر مهر بدست آمده اند. در هنر مهر و سفالگری، در کنار تنوع نمونه ها و نیز سمبل های ذاتی شان، بانک اطلاعاتی مناسبی در خصوص مطالعه شمایل شناسی، جامعه و اقتصاد دوره فرهنگی آغاز ایلامی به پژوهشگران ارائه می دهد. در این مقاله حیوانات مار، لاک پشت و گربه سانان و نیز جایگاه ارتباط هنری آنان در این دوره بر پایه مجموعه اثر مهر و سفالی بدست آمده از تپه سفالین مورد مطالعه و تحلیل قرار می گیرند.

واژگان کلیدی: مجموعه سفالی، هنر مهر، سمبل های حیوانی، آغاز ایلامی

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