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Unpublished Terracotta Animal Figurines from the City of Girsu

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Abstract:

The study of terracotta animal dolls in Mesopotamia is one of the important artistic topics that gave us valuable information from a technical point of view, especially the knowledge of animals in the ancient Iraqi environment, as well as being an important reliable guide in determining the period of time that they lived in Mesopotamia. Animal puppets are important artistic relics and a source for studying art and its development through different ages, and that animal puppets were evidence of the living of these animals in the regions of Mesopotamia.

Keywords: Figurines, Girsu, Terracotta, Animal, Mesopotamia.

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دمى حيوانية فخارية غير منشورة من مدينة گرسو

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الملخص:

تعد دراسة الدمى الحيوانية الفخارية في بلاد الرافدين من المواضيع الفنية المهمة التي أعطتنا معلومات قيمة من الناحية الفنية، ولا سيما معرفة الحيوانية في البيئة العراقية القديمة، فضلا عن كونها دليلاً مهماً يعتمد عليها في مجال تحديد للمده الزمنية التي كانت تعيشها في بلاد الرافدين، وتعد الدمى الحيوانية اثاراً فنية مهمة ومصدرا لدراسة الفن وتطوره عبر العصور المختلفة، وأن الدمى حيوانية كانت دليلاً لعيش تلك الحيوانات في مناطق بلاد الرافدين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: دمى، كرسو، فخارية، حيوانية، بلاد الرافدين.

Introduction

A number of terracotta animal figurines were unearthed during archaeological excavation seasons at the city of Girsu (Tello). These included both domesticated and predatory animals known in Mesopotamia since remote antiquity, such as goats, sheep, dogs, horses, and predators like the lion and others. The contexts of these animal figurines, which belong to various cultural periods in the city of Girsu (Tello), vary considerably. Some were discovered inside temples and architectural structures, while others were found as surface finds scattered across the site. Their overall appearance differed in terms of completeness as well as posture: some figurines are depicted standing, while others are seated.

The figurines were executed in solid form using manual techniques, which reflect the simplicity of the intended figure. In contrast, certain other specimens reveal precision in detail and proportional regularity despite being handmade. Archaeologists have debated the purpose behind producing such figurines: some may have been created for performing religious rituals and ceremonies, or for purposes of magic and healing, while a smaller number might have served as playthings for children. Accordingly, the terracotta figurines from the city of Girsu (Tello) will be

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studied here as a unified subject, taking into account their chronological and cultural development.

1- Sheep's

Sheep and goats are among the earliest domesticated animals, following the domestication of dogs (1). Sheep, in particular, represent the first livestock to be raised in organized flocks under primitive herding methods within shelters in northern Iraq (2). Archaeological remains of sheep bones were found in the Shanidar cave at the site of Zawi Chemi (3), representing the earliest stage of sheep domestication. Hunting of wild goats in this period appears unnecessary, as their presence was limited, while the majority of animal remains belonged to young sheep, mostly aged around one year or slightly more (4). Nevertheless, the precise earliest date of domesticated sheep remains unknown and uncertain. Sheep bones recovered from the settlement of Jarmo (5) have been described in excavation reports as wild, since no biological or technical evidence proves them to be domesticated.

In contrast, goat remains from the same site were identified as domesticated, as indicated by the abundance of goat horns compared to the relatively few sheep horns(6).

The earliest indications of domesticated sheep can also be traced through Ubaid-period depictions at the site of Eridu (7), represented on stone seals and seal impressions. Later, in the Uruk period, depictions show sheep seated, with breeds characterized by thicker wool and longer tails (8). Sheep quickly became the principal source of the most important animal product, namely wool. As such, they held a primary place among other domesticated animals. In cuneiform texts, sheep are mentioned under the Sumerian term (UDU), which corresponds to the Akkadian immeru (9). Other texts record sheep as (SILA.NIM) or (UDU.NIM) in Sumerian, corresponding to Akkadian hurabu (10). Still other breeds were distinguished, especially those raised for meat, known in the texts as (UDU.A.LUM) in Sumerian, corresponding to Akkadian pasillu (11), which were regarded as high-quality sheep. These were considered a main breed during the Ur III period (2113–2006 B.C.), raised particularly by Amorite pastoral nomads (12).

The role of sheep in supporting the human economy was significant: they were traded as commodities in buying and selling transactions, while their meat and milk served as food, their wool for textile production, and their dung as fertilizer for agriculture (13). In addition, sheep were highly valued in the religious and ritual sphere, where they were regarded as among the best sacrificial animals to be offered to the gods (14).

Archaeological excavations at Girsu (Tello) uncovered two terracotta sheep figurines. The first, bearing museum number M-241238

and find number T728-E7, was discovered near the Girsu bridge. It represents a small handmade terracotta figurine in the form of a sheep. The body is solid and simply rendered, painted in black, with the forelegs and hindlegs fused together. The elevated tail is broken, as is part of the head, and the figurine was executed in an abstract style. This specimen is dated to the Akkadian period, based on parallels from contemporary Mesopotamian sites (Fig. 1a–b).

The second figurine, bearing museum number IM-241213 and find number T696-B10, was discovered during excavations in the main city temple (E-ninnu)

. It too is a small handmade terracotta sheep figurine, with a solid body, a slightly raised head, and a prominent ear, although part of the ear is missing. The legs were modeled as fused blocks, both now broken, and further damage is visible in the left ear and the abdominal area. The elevated tail is likewise broken. This figurine was also rendered in an abstract style and is dated to the Neo-Sumerian period, again based on parallels from contemporary Mesopotamian sites (Fig. 2a–b).

The formal rendering of these figurines, showing the animals standing firmly on their four legs, suggests they were intended to be placed in specific contexts, possibly within temples or houses. They may have functioned as symbolic representations of fertility and multiplication, or as votive offerings presented to a deity during religious or ritual ceremonies. The aforementioned figurines thus date to the Akkadian (2370–2160 B.C.) and Neo-Sumerian periods [(15)].

Comparable examples of such figurines were also found in the excavations at Uruk and are now housed in the Iraq Museum, Baghdad [(16)]. Similar specimens have also been documented in other Mesopotamian sites, including Girsu (Tello) [(17)], Shuruppak [(18)], Assur [(19)], and Kish [(20)].

2- Goats

Among the variety of animals that inhabited the natural environment of Mesopotamia and were exploited for industries fulfilling many human needs were livestock, particularly goats. Goats are among the domesticated animals that received considerable attention in Mesopotamia, where agriculture and animal husbandry were closely intertwined from an early period [(21)].

Goats were considered secondary to sheep, yet they are well attested in cuneiform sources under the Sumerian term (ZEW), corresponding to the Akkadian uniaqe. The texts also record goats in contracts from the Middle Babylonian period between flock owners and herders, where goats represented about 25% of the total livestock [(22)].

Archaeological remains of goats have been identified among faunal deposits, including finds from Shanidar cave dating to the Paleolithic, ca. 10,000 B.C. [23]. Goat bones were also found in the Neolithic levels of Jarmo. In addition, models of domesticated goats appear in clay figurines from the Halaf period in Mesopotamia. In both Sumerian and Akkadian, the terminology for goats distinguished between the male (buck or tēš), the female (maʿzā), the locally termed sakhla, and the young kid (jidi). Like sheep, goats significantly supported the ancient economy through their meat, milk, hair, and hides, sustaining human societies both in antiquity and in modern times [24].

During archaeological excavations at Tello (ancient Girsu), a terracotta goat figurine was uncovered, bearing museum number IM-236573 and find number T415-tg1781-B8. The figurine, handmade, represents a goat in a highly abstract style. It is a fragmentary piece, with a simplified body lacking clear facial details, no traces of eyes or facial features, a raised head on a long neck, and fused forelegs and hindlegs forming a block. Both leg-blocks are broken at the base, and the tail is missing. Despite its worn and corroded condition, the figurine shows an attempt at proportional balance. It is dated to the Old Babylonian period, based on parallels from contemporary Mesopotamian sites (Fig. 3a–b).

The artist's concern for harmony in bodily proportions is evident, even within the simplicity of its handmade execution. The figurine was shaped in an abstract style, with emphasis on overall form rather than fine detail. Comparable examples of goat figurines have been found at Abu Salabikh [25], Assur [26], Uruk [27], and Kish [28].

3- Birds

The importance of birds lies in their role as a source of food for both humans and animals, as well as their ecological functions. Birds regulate insect populations to a natural balance, contribute to the pollination of plants, and form an integral part of the environmental equilibrium. Birds have inhabited Mesopotamia since the earliest times, and cuneiform writings—particularly lexical and didactic texts—refer to hundreds of species [29]. Birds are designated in the texts by the Sumerian terms (HU) or (MUŠEN), as well as (BURU5), corresponding to the Akkadian word issûru [30], which is closely related to the Arabic ʿuṣfūr ("sparrow"). References to birds appear in texts from the First Dynasty of Lagash, and by the Akkadian period (2370–2160 B.C.) there is evidence for the systematic breeding of domestic fowl in the city-state of Lagash [31].

Birds were also presented as offerings during the reign of King Lugalbanda. Akkadian texts mention the sacrifice of birds after military campaigns, including offerings to the goddess Bau (Baba) upon the completion of the Temple of the Fifty. Assyrian texts likewise record the presentation of birds alongside other animals, reflecting their role in expelling evil spirits, as well as in practices of divination and omen-reading. Some species of birds were also kept as ornamental animals, suitable for domestic households [32].

Excavations at Tello (ancient Girsu) uncovered a terracotta bird figurine, museum number IM-241271 and find number T781-E7, discovered near the Girsu bridge. This fragmentary figurine represents the head of a bird, handmade, with a pinched and broken beak, large oval eyes (one missing), and a head tilted upward. The neck is elongated with incised straight lines, but the features are indistinct. Executed in a realistic style, this figurine is dated to the Old Babylonian period, based on parallels from contemporary Mesopotamian sites (Fig. 4a–b).

Other examples of bird figurines have been found at Tell Muhammad, where a collection of clay models of birds was uncovered [33]. Comparable pieces were also discovered at Tell Halawa in the Hamrin basin [34]. Two figurines in the form of birds, carved in the round, were found beneath the floor of a building west of the palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud [35].

Birds also appear in glyptic art, as shown on a cylinder seal from Tell Agrab (in the Diyala region), which depicts various avian motifs [36].

4- Dogs

The dog is a domesticated animal belonging to the canine family, which includes dogs, wolves, and foxes. It is classified among mammals (carnivores) and is part of the vertebrates. The earliest evidence of dog domestication by humans was discovered in the villages of Hassuna, Yarm Tepe, and Umm Dabaghiya, where archaeological excavations revealed dog skeletal remains dating to the Chalcolithic period (5600–3500 B.C.) [37]. Dogs are mentioned in cuneiform texts among the names of both domesticated and wild animals in economic records, as well as in religious and literary compositions. In Sumerian, the term (UR) was used [38], also expressed as (UR-GI7 / UR-GI7-RA^{mori}) [39], corresponding to the Akkadian kalbu [40].

The “ancient Mesopotamian dog” is considered one of the oldest animal breeds in the world, believed to have lived in Mesopotamia between 7000–6000 years ago. The dog is commonly represented on Ubaid-period seals, and later appears on a seal from

Uruk IV (3500–3000 B.C.), as well as in Akkadian-period artifacts (2370–2160 B.C.). Its depictions continued in Mesopotamian art through the Neo-Assyrian period [41].

Excavations at Girsu (Tello) uncovered a terracotta dog figurine, museum number IM-241239, recorded as a surface find with number T729. Only the central part of the figurine survives, showing the hand of a person holding a dog against his chest. The figurine is handmade and highly eroded. It is thought to represent a man standing frontally, of which only the dog remains, carried as an offering in both hands. Executed in an abstract style, this figurine is dated to the Old Babylonian period, based on parallels from contemporary Mesopotamian sites (Fig. 5a–b).

It appears that such figurines were created as offerings of thanks to the healing goddess Gula, who provided medical aid to humans [42]. In many examples, human figurines place their hands on specific parts of the body, symbolizing the afflicted area of illness, while dedicating the figurine as a votive to Gula. These figurines were consecrated in place of living dogs and offered to the goddess. This interpretation is supported by an inscription on a dog statue discovered in Gula's temple at Isin, dating to the second millennium B.C. (Middle Babylonian/Kassite period), which reads: "To Gula, lady of the E_2-kal-Makh temple, mistress of life, great physician, breath of life. To her, Eli-{…}daya prayed, and she heard his prayer … Atnakh-ili dedicated this dog." [43]

Such figurines were produced in several Mesopotamian cities, including Isin, Nippur, Sippar, and Dur-Kurigalzu. Their manufacture began in the Old Babylonian period (2004–1595 B.C.). They often depict a kneeling figure holding a dog or are mounted on a base, indicating their role as part of temple furnishings. These votive statues were offerings made by devotees, becoming objects of worship and functioning as gifts to the temple. They also served as a contractual vow between the worshipper and the deity: if the prayer was fulfilled, the devotee offered a dog figurine in return [44].

Dog figurines in Mesopotamia carried sacred significance and were associated with ritual practices to protect spaces from evil spirits. For this reason, they were placed beneath the thresholds of palaces, temples, and even private houses [45].

5- The Lion

The lion was one of the wild animals that roamed vast areas of Mesopotamia (46). Its predatory nature across the ages is reflected in cuneiform texts in both Akkadian and Sumerian, where it is recorded under several terms: in Sumerian as (UR-NIM), corresponding to Akkadian girru, and as (UR-MAH), corresponding to Akkadian nêšu (47). Lions were distributed from central and southern Mesopotamia up to the north. The animal appears in Uruk-period cylinder seals, in artistic representations from the Jemdet Nasr period, and later in proto-literate art (ca. 3500–2800 B.C.), where depictions of lions gradually shifted into hunting scenes. Some scholars have argued that multiple types of lions existed in Mesopotamia, such as the "Indian lion," lacking a mane, and the "Persian lion," which dominated royal hunting scenes (48).

Lions held significant symbolic value for Mesopotamian rulers and priests. Although they lacked great economic utility, lions played a central role in religious thought and royal ideology. Hunting campaigns against lions were considered divine mandates, equal in importance to military campaigns (49). The earliest "Lion Hunt Stele" illustrates this practice (50). The royal lion hunt was portrayed as an act of heroism, embodying the king's strength and courage (51). King Shulgi of the Ur III dynasty is also mentioned in texts as a lion hunter (52).

In the Neo-Assyrian period, lion hunts acquired an overtly religious dimension, performed with elaborate ritual acts, as seen in the lion-hunt reliefs from the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 B.C.) (53). Lion hunting became a strictly royal prerogative, with kings emphasizing it in their inscriptions. As Shulgi declared in his royal texts: "Killing the lion with the weapon was my exclusive privilege" (54).

Archaeological excavations at Girsu (Tello) uncovered a terracotta lion figurine, museum number IM-236567 and find number T407-tg1735-B8, found in the main city temple. The figurine is fragmentary, preserving only part of the head, which was mold-made. It depicts the open mouth of a roaring lion, bared teeth emphasizing its ferocity, a triangular projecting nose, and one large eye (the other lost). The left side of the head is damaged, but the rendering is realistic. This figurine is dated to the Neo-Babylonian period, based on parallels from contemporary Mesopotamian sites (Fig. 6a–b).

Comparable lion representations from Tello include a figurine that once decorated the throne or seat of King Ur-Nasha (55), as well as another showing the roaring mouth of a lion as a symbol of strength. Neo-Babylonian Babylon produced several monumental lion sculptures, the most famous being the Lion of Babylon, discovered in the northern palace of Nebuchadnezzar II (56). The lion was also integrated into composite

mythological creatures, such as the Anzu-bird (lion-headed eagle), sacred to the god Ningirsu, symbolizing the expulsion of evil spirits [57].

In Mesopotamian religion, lions appear in omen and divination texts, magical incantations, and literary compositions. The Epic of Erra, for example, presents the lion in association with the plague god Erra—an aspect of Nergal, god of death—whose face was likened to that of a lion. Excavations at Kish also produced a Neo-Babylonian terracotta lion figurine [58].

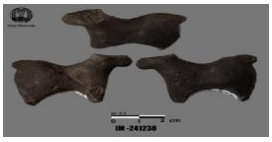
The image of the lion and its natural environment inspired deep reflections on the harshness of the Mesopotamian landscape. Artists captured its defiance and great courage in visual expressions: fierce eyes, bared teeth, and roaring mouth ready to strike at intruders. This mode of representation embodied a distinct expressive style, uniting geometric form, rough texture, and symbolic energy derived from the land itself. Such realism and intensity defined Mesopotamian art from the Old Babylonian period onward, emphasizing the lion's dangerous majesty. A striking example comes from Tell Harmal, where an Old Babylonian lion figurine reflects this powerful aesthetic [59].

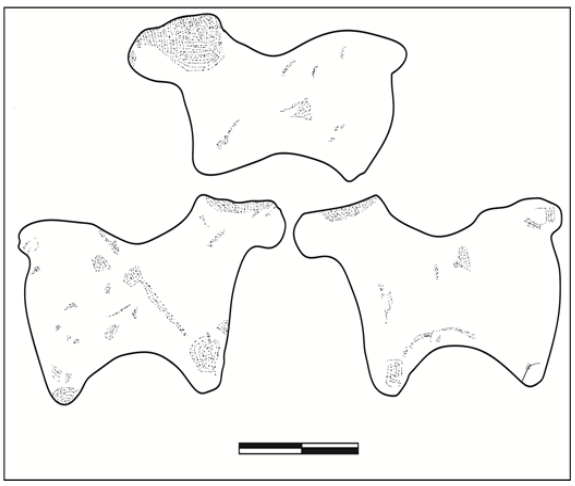
Conclusion

From the present study of unpublished terracotta animal figurines from Girsu (Tello), several key observations and results may be summarized as follows:

1. Most of the animal figurines discovered at Tello were found in the city's main temple, including goats, sheep, and others. This strongly suggests that such figurines were linked to ritual offerings presented to the gods. Beyond their ritual context, animals themselves held a vital role in Mesopotamian thought, becoming frequent subjects of artistic production that mirrored the natural world.
2. The figurines depict a wide range of animals, some of which held special symbolic importance in Mesopotamian culture. This symbolic significance extended into artistic representation, where animals such as the lion, dog, sheep, and goat became iconic emblems of divine powers. These animals functioned as mediators of blessing or punishment from the gods, embodying the deep spiritual relationship between humans and the divine in ancient Mesopotamia.

"Tables presenting information on terracotta animal figurines from the site of Girsu (Tello)."

Picture	Date of the figurine	Type Date of the figurine	Measure-ments	Inventory Number	Museum Number	Season
	Akkadian Period	Sheep’s	H. 6.2 cm W. 3.5 cm Th.1.7 cm	T728-E7	IM-241238	Sixth
	Neo Sumerian Period	Sheep’s	H. 6.5 cm; W. 3.8 cm; Th. 3.4 cm	T696-B10	IM-241213	Sixth
	Old Babylonian Period	Goats	H. 6.9 cm; W. 3.1 cm; Th. 3 cm	T415-tg1781-B8	IM-236573	Fifth
	Old Babylonian Period	Birds	H. 2.1 cm; W. 1.2 cm; Th. 1.3 cm	T781-E7	IM-241271	Sixth
	Old Babylonian Period	Dogs	H. 3 cm; W. 1.6 cm; Th. 5.6 cm	T729	IM-241239	Sixth
	Neo Babylonian Period	Lion	H. 3.5 cm; W. 3.7 cm; Th. 1.8 cm	T407-tg1735-B8	IM-236567	Fifth

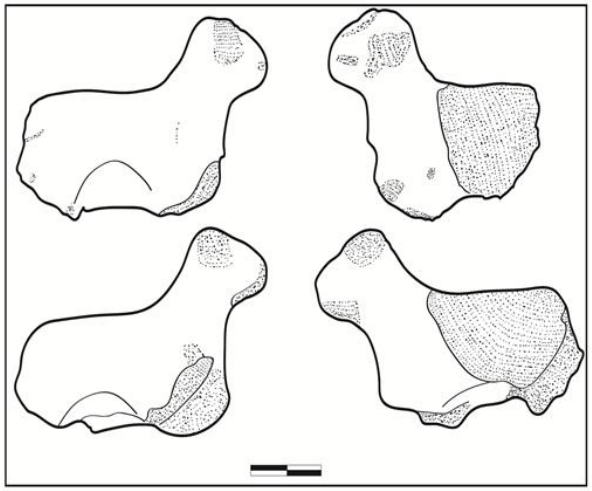


The researcher (A)

Photograph from the Iraq Museum (B)

(Fig. 1-A,B)
Excavation record of the British Mission at the site of Girsu (Tello), sixth season, register number (14/24), preserved in the Records Department, Iraq Museum

(Fig. A) Photograph from the Iraq Museum



(Fig. B) The researcher

(Fig. 2-A, B)
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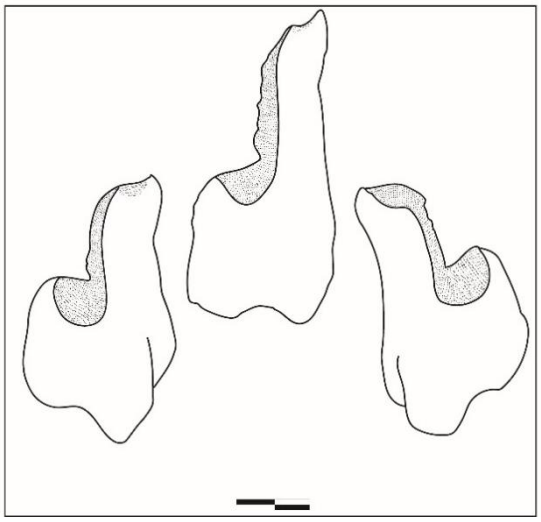
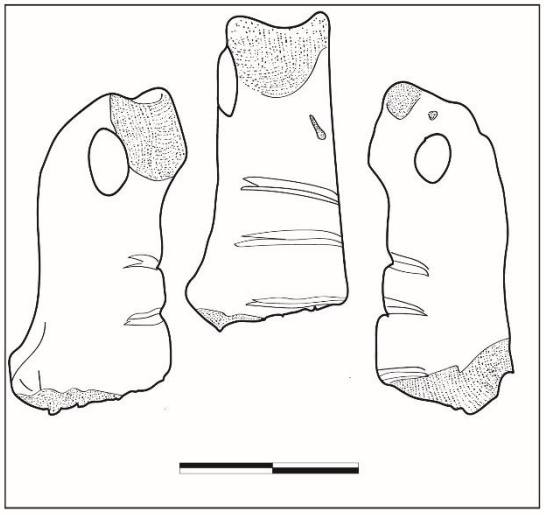


(Fig. A) Photograph from the Iraq Museum

(Fig. B) The researcher

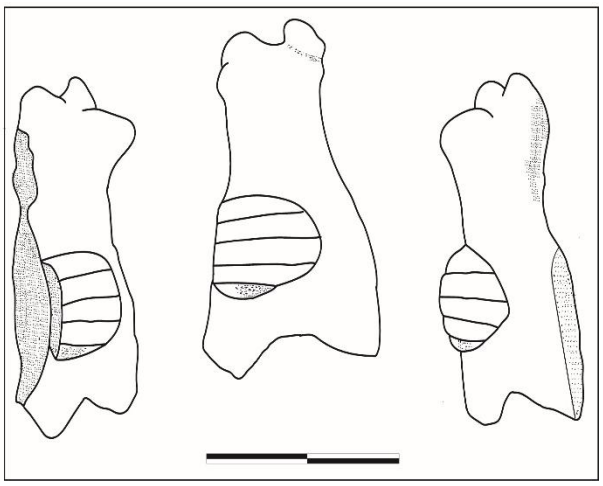
(Fig. 3-A, B)
Excavation record of the British Mission at the site of Girsu (Tello), fifth season, register number (13/24), preserved in the Records Department, Iraq Museum.



(Fig. A) Photograph from the Iraq Museum

(Fig. B) The researcher

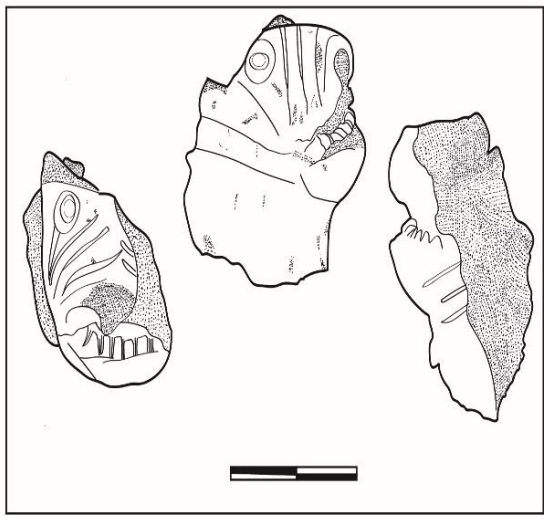
(Fig. 4-A, B)
Excavation record of the British Mission at the site of Girsu (Tello), sixth season, register number (14/24), preserved in the Records Department, Iraq Museum.



(Fig. A) Photograph from the Iraq Museum

(Fig. B) The researche

(Fig. 5-A, B)
Excavation record of the British Mission at the site of Girsu (Tello), sixth season, register number (14/24), preserved in the Records Department, Iraq Museum.



(Fig. A) Photograph from the Iraq Museum

(Fig. B) The researcher

(Fig. 6-A, B)
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