A Figurine in the Hand
is Worth Two behind Glass

Thinking through the materiality of Luristani imagery

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Abstract

Four brown-black hand-sized clay figurines from Kazabad, Iran call for attention because of their imagery, colour and surface and because they do not seem to have any close morphological parallels. As they were obtained from locals during an archaeological expedition in 1963-64, they are not associated with a stratigraphic context. However, by using the "New Materialist" approach "agential realism" of Karen Barad, alternative opportunities of interpretation come out. By following small details using all relevant senses, significant similarities and differences are revealed. Instead of letting a basic theory direct the analysis, Karen Barad advises to think through different connections and scales. This leads to narratives and possible relations, which can be tested as hypotheses. The analyses suggest that the design and handling of the figurines followed certain practices, and that they may connect to a Mesopotamian as well as an Indo-Iranian past. Agential realism gives justice to concrete findings rather than subsuming them under categories, and it allows the marvel of engaging with the past through tangible things.

Introduction

An archaeological expedition by the Danish National Museum to the Huleilan and Tarkhan regions of Luristan, Iran in 1963-64 produced new insights about the prehistory of Luristan, and brought back a sizeable number of broken ceramics and small findings of clay, stone and metal fig 1. Many of the artefacts including the figurines, all stored at the National Museum of Denmark (Larsen 2022). A number of shorter reports and summarising articles (e.g. Thrane 1964, 1999, 2015) about the excavation have been published, while two larger publications document the excavations at the site of Tepe Guran (Mortensen 2014; Thrane 2001).

Figure 1: The location of Kazabad in the Zagros Mountains, map made with data from OpenStreetMap.

In this article, I focus on a sub-assemblage of four clay figurines of comparable length (73-123 mm) which distinguish themselves by their figurations and their dark/black patina, Fig 2. Even though, they have not been found in a stratigraphic context and do not have close parallels elsewhere, my contention is that it is possible to arrive at meaningful understandings of them, by being attentive to their small details. In the archaeological literature, figurines and imagery are typically understood in terms of what they are "standing *for*", which may have two meanings – either 'what they imitate' - or 'what they mediate' (Meskell 2017, 17-20) emphasising typologies and context. The first ques-

Figure 2: The four figurines, not to scale a. Figure 1 with folded hands (ID 46981), b. Figure 2 with a face in the stomach (ID 46983), c. Figurine 3, dog (ID 46978). d. figurine 4, seal (ID 46979). Photo © Kristian Alex Larsen

tion may be logical and necessary, as the mind almost automatically wants to recognise patterns and because images usually are intended to look like something for a reason, whereas the second meaning is about symbolic qualities. Both questions presume a Cartesian subject/object dualism in the sense that the image is interpreted by matching it with preconceived ideas about classes of objects and symbols. By putting the image into a theoretical box, valuable information is lost because an image is always concrete-ly situated (Langin-Hooper 2014, vii). Moreover, understanding may become biased when selected elements are posited as most important. Therefore, instead of a percep-tion of images as representatives of something, I suggest adopting a "standing *in*" per-spective, which opens for interpretations in which images are considered entities in their own right, that make a difference in their complex interrelationships with humans and non-humans.

Looking for differences and similarities through the multiple scaled connections of the figurines

Agential realism is a "New Materialist" approach which advocates that things are doing an active difference to the humans, animals and other things with which they are con-nected (Barad 2007, 176-178). They are not considered independent but "intra-acting" phenomena (Barad 2007, 139) as they are constituted in their relations. When focusing on a certain phenomenon, the researcher together with the methods and instruments employed also becomes intra-connected with the phenomenon. This means that the results of research are inevitably influenced by the research intervention itself. In terms of agential realism, any research intervention thus forms an "agential cut" (Juelskjaer 2012, 20), which co-creates the research topic by including some elements and leaving others out. This action does not only have an epistemological and ontological character

but is also an ethical act, because this cut may exploit the phenomenon in order to support some kind of interest, or it may intend to do justice to the phenomenon and the connections it forms part of (Barad 2007, 154-155). Therefore, agential realism asks for a high level of attention to as many details as possible and at the same time acknowledges the unavoidable influence of the researcher (Barad 2007, 135). Understandings are suggested by identifying differences and similarities through the multiple scaled connections of the phenomenon. Barad calls this approach "diffractive" and contrasts it with a more conventional "reflective" approach in which phenomena are understood in the reflective mirror of a theory. Her critique of "reflection" is that it tends to reproduce what is assumed, whereas "diffraction" intends to think through different observations and insights. This approach asks the researcher to engage with things to explore them and constantly question reflective assumptions, very much in line with other phenomenologists like Tilley, Thomas and Ingold (Harris and Cipolla 2017, 87-107).

To conceive how an image is doing an active difference, one can ask what the image "wants" (Mitchell 2005, 49). Sometimes, this may be obvious like idols craving worship (Porada 1995, 74), or more subtle as when imperfect symmetries create a feeling of uneasiness (Mitchell 2005, 11-16). Symmetries and other patterns often indicate an intention of associating an image with conservative order (Alvarez-Mon 2010, 97). An image of a person can be understood as a symmetrical double, and in Mesopotamia statues of kings were treated as living doubles. Sustaining the image with food, clothes and songs would have direct effect on the king himself as would also destructive acts (Bahrani 2003, 170-172). Anthropologists like Descola point out that the world of many peoples has been alive with beings that combine features of things, animals and humans (Jones and Diaz-Guardamino 2018). To open up the information connected with any kind of engagement, it is necessary to employ all the senses. Vision must take into account the three-dimensional depth of the item, the nature of the surface, features almost erased by time and wear and slight differences in colour (Papadopoulos 2019, 625-626). Touch gives information about the texture and the relative weight and temperature (Jones and Diaz-Guardamino, 2018), as well as how the item may have been held (Bailey 2014, 33-34). Sound may reveal information about the material, its density, if it is hollow etc. (Ingold 2002, 268). Even smell may reveal information (Hamilakis 2017, 177). Combining different senses (Hamilakis 2017, 177-180) may evoke how an artefact, may have been shimmering in the sunlight while dangling and tinkling on a warm trotting horse.

Summarising these considerations, I quote Tim Ingold who advises to "*think from materials not about them*" (Ingold 2012, 437-438). To do this in my research, I operationalised the sensory approach into practical steps, as open questions to be posed to each item. This ensures that the engagement with the items is open and systematic, and that my understandings have a firm standing, as description is in itself a sort of interpretation (Papadopoulos 2019, 627). The aim is not to establish final theories about Luristani figurines but to see how a certain artefact may effect something like for instance emo-

tions and memories.

The figurines

According to a label in the box where the four figurines, were stored, they are associated with the site of Kazabad, figure 2, but there is no mention about provenience in the unpublished excavation reports. The find is attributed to the director of the expedition Jørgen Meldgaard (1927-2007) who chose to put them aside as he considered them "curiosities" and was more focused on bronzes (Henrik Thrane in private communication 14. January 2023). Since the team did not excavate in Kazabad, the figurines must have been obtained from local people. Illicit excavations were extensive at the time because of the "Luristan Bronzes" which were in high demand on the international antiquity markets (e.g. Thrane 1970, 28). The figurines have probably been unearthed during such an illicit excavation. Kazabad is a large site of three mounds in Huleilan, excavated recently by Mazaheri (Mazaheri 2016, 108-123). It was first excavated by Stein in 1936 (Stein 1940, 328) and later surveyed by Mortensen in 1973 (Mortensen, 1975, 43-44). Stein found a tiny human bronze and a broken animal clay figurine (Stein 1940, Plate X) and I have found no other mentioning of figurines from Kazabad.

The four figurines presented in this study are all eye-catching and distinguished by their dark surface and fine details, and so homogeneous that they look like a set. They "want" to be held because they all fit well in a hand and because of their welcoming temperature, rounded surfaces, expressive faces and lacking stands. The richness of detail makes the figurines seem to have an individual identity and indicate that some effort has gone into their manufacture. When compared with another sub-assemblage of four light-coloured figurines, figure 3, they stand out as more naturalistic, detailed, and expressive and more marked by human handling. Besides their different figurations, they are differentiated by the violence done to the surface of figurines 1, fig. 4, and 4, fig. 9 I suggest, their dark colour is due to long-term repetitive handling, which deposited sebum from hands on the figurine, affecting the material and giving it a patina that at certain spots has even become glossy (Talma 2018; Manfredda et.al. 2021). The colour can of course be due to intended colouration, but I consider sebum a more likely source because the glossy areas have developed where skin contact would be expected, and especially because of the glossy area on the genitals of figurine 3, where contact must have been intended. Moreover, the dark colour is unevenly distributed revealing lighter brown in depressions. No scientific dating has been applied to the figurines, but based on my analyses of the figurines, I suggest they belong to the Late Bronze Age/Iron Age. The period from 1500–500 BCE in Luristan was characterised by two main dynamics: firstly, the competition between the three empires of Elam, Babylonia and Assyria and their exploitation of the resources in Zagros and beyond via the high-ways through the Zagros mountains, and secondly the influx of Indo-Iranian people from Central Asia into the Iranian plateau and the Zagros mountains eventually becoming dominant in numbers and power. In the following, I describe the figurines, provide possible parallels and suggest understandings by thinking through the imagery,

**Figure 3:** The sub-assemblage of four light-coloured figurines.

Photo @ Kristian Alex Larsen.

material traits and historical context. These understandings are not intended to be final theories about their meaning, but rather hypotheses on how the figurines intra-acted with humans and non-humans.

Figurine 1 (ID 46981)

The figurine, fig. 4 measures 73 mm from top to bottom, 43 mm from shoulder to shoulder, maximum 17 mm in profile and weighs 53 grams. The colour has alternating nuances of light and darker brown and some black glossy areas. The original light colour appears in depressions, whereas the glossy areas are found on some protruding areas which are more exposed to touch. The figurine depicts a human body without legs with many fine details. Hands are folded in front of the chest, and deeply incised vertical lines under the forearms seem to indicate cords or chains hanging over the shoulders continuing below the belt line on the front, as well as on the back where the lines cross and stop at the belt. Many rough parallel scratches suggest textile fabrics. Arm rings are indicated by three shallow grooves and a neck ring is indicated by an incised line. Edges under and especially above where the arms meet the body, appear as lighter in colour and seem to have been rescratched, perhaps in modern times? The sex is probably male because of the broad shoulders, the flat chest, and the bald head. Thin lines may indicate the rim of a beard, but hair straws are not visible. Violence against the figurine is evidenced by the damaged mouth, the marked gouges on the front and back, and the head which has been reattached. The figurine is flattened in profile, leaning slightly backwards and is generally symmetrical.

Comparanda from other expeditions in Luristan do not reveal close parallels. Closest is perhaps an Iron Age bronze clothing-pin finial from *Surkh-Dum* (Schmidt 1989, CS 665) showing a bearded man with folded hands, arm ring and belt. In *Chigha Sabz* an early 2nd Mill. terracotta plaque is showing a woman with folded hands (Schmidt 1989, CS
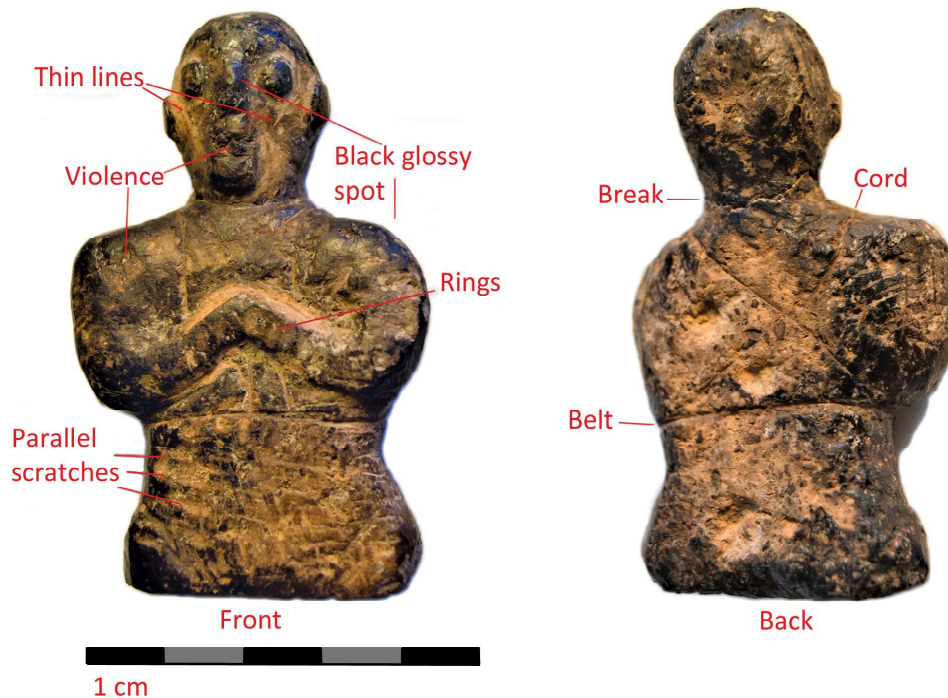
Figure 4: Figurine 1, Human figurine with folded hands, front and back.
Photo © Kristian Alex Larsen

Comparanda from other expeditions in Luristan do not reveal close parallels. Closest is perhaps an Iron Age bronze clothing-pin finial from *Surkh-Dum* (Schmidt 1989, CS 665) showing a bearded man with folded hands, arm ring and belt. In *Chigha Sabz* an early 2nd Mill. terracotta plaque is showing a woman with folded hands (Schmidt 1989, CS 239), and two light-colored clay figurines from Late Iron Age show bearded smiling men with hat, necklace and folded hands (Schmidt et.al 1989, plate 147). In *Nush-i Jan*, a terracotta plaque showing a woman holding breasts is the closest parallel (Curtis 1984, no. 313). In *Sangtarashan* two 3-4 cm metal figurines, which seem to be dark and glossy, from the Late Iron Age reveal many details but with a different design the heads being relatively large, the hands not folded and the trunk cylindric (Malekzadeh 2018, nos 547, 558). Found outside Luristan, an *Elamite* bronze figurine (8-7th cent.) showing a man and his dog, reveals the same kind of clothing as figurine 1 (Álvarez-Mon 2020, 433-434). A group of large figurines including bearded men with folded hands were found in *Shahdad* in Eastern Iran and dated to the 3rd Millenium (Hakemi 1993). Folded hands are common in Mesopotamia as on the statue of Ishtup-Ilum of *Mari* and the Tell Asmar sculpture hoard both from the 3rd Mill., the latter including one which is clean-shaven, and furthermore a terracotta plaque from *Tello* early 2nd Mill. with Elamite hair-style (Barrelet no 314). In conclusion, figurine 1 reiterates a theme which has been used in Iran and Mesopotamia for a long time.

Conservative order is emphasised by the symmetrical outline and static upright posture. Garb and adornment signalise high status. The head does no lack any natural attributes - except for hair. To be clean-shaven would in Mesopotamia be an indication of an official role like a priest (Emberling, webpage) or age, and folded hands may signify prayer or greeting (Hakemi 1993). The lines over the cheeks could indicate a mouth cover as those Zoroastrian priests wore. While this idea links the figurine to the Indo-Iranian presence in the 1st mill., it also suggests that people may have used the figurine to re-enact religious rituals (Bailey 2005, chapter 4). The marked division of the body in three by neck-ring and belt is a feature recurring in other human images of the assemblage: figurine 2, a human image on a mace-head, fig. 5, and a metal sheet figurine, fig.6. I suggest this may have symbolic connotations, in this case head for authority/spirituality, torso/arms for providing, and lower body for more profane matters. Circulative exchanges between the official person and gods and community come in focus by the hands that may give and take – willingly or unwillingly as the hands are locked together. Therefore, the figurine may be asking for respect and deference, and the one who held it may have pleaded for mercy or favours. Such demands on the figurine may have been supported by the violence done against it. Beheading is not unusual in the life of a figurine; the destruction of the mouth is more remarkable. Did that happen in order to silence it? The figurine could have been a protective figure or a hate figure – or the first becoming the latter? The natural rendition may as a "double" embody a certain person with ever open eyes and ears and an authoritative or perhaps noxious mouth. Picking up the figurine and embracing it in the hand, may have connected the person holding it and the person depicted, with memories of past engagements. Mutilating it, has severed ties or may even have been a rebellious act.

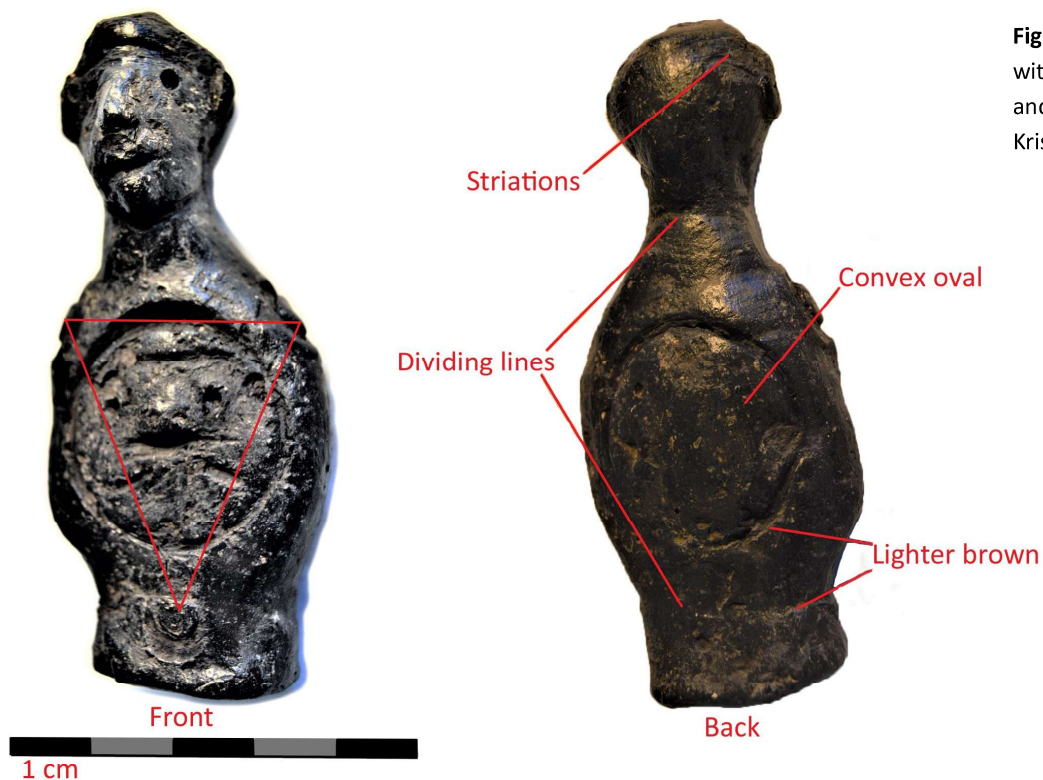**Figure 5:** Mace-head. Photo © Kristian Alex Larsen

Dividing lines

1 cm
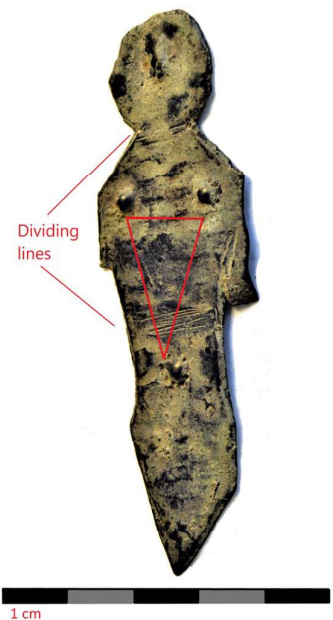
Figure 6: Metal sheet figurine. Photo © Kristian Alex Larsen

Figurine 2 (ID 46983)

Another anthropomorphic figurine, fig. 7, measures 82 mm from top to bottom, maximum 35 mm in width and 25 mm in profile and weighs 49 grams. The clay is dark brown and black and compared with figurine 1, more surface is glossy especially at the head and only few spots of lighter colours beneath are revealed. Two features stand out: an ill-shapen flat face in the stomach and the projecting naturalistic head. The latter has small, deep starring eyes, a prominent nose with a long bridge, an open mouth slightly bent as in the middle of a conversation and a marked upper-lip and chin. The small, round and deep ear-holes have surroundings looking like hair buns continuing over the forehead and bulging up at the back-head; hair is indicated by striations. The large oval in the stomach is filled out with a face with two small holes for eyes, a broad nose protruding over a long horizontal line, and under this, two descending oblique lines. On the back is another oval which is empty and convex. Legs and arms are lacking, and lines demarcate the neck and the waist. Three 10 mm wide circles with a button inside are impressed at the shoulders and in the middle at the waist forming a triangle. The body of the figurine is flattened in profile and frontally symmetrical, except for a slight bending of the head to the right. I am not aware of any clay parallels.

Figure 7: Figurine 2, Human with face in stomach, front and back. Photo © Kristian Alex Larsen

Like figurine 1, this figurine also manifests doubleness, but in a more literal sense. The extra face looking out from the stomach may be a fetus, an extra personality or perhaps a demon. The 'buttons' may be female gender marks, the 'breasts' then pushed to the sides by the prominent 'stomach', but since they are positioned at the shoulders, arm-stumps are perhaps signified. The metal sheet figurine mentioned above, fig. 7 also has a comparable triangle of buttons, two arm-stumps as well two lines demarcating neck and waist. Since the lower button in figurine 2 is cross-cut by the waist-line, it may be understood as a protruding navel, which makes sense if 'pregnancy' is the case. Some Luristan bronze standards also have a head on top and one or more faces below. Ghirshman suggested this is reminiscent of the ancient myth of the god Zurvan, who had two sons in his womb (Ghirshman 1958). When figurine 2 is turned 180 degrees, an additional pair of eyes seems to look out from the stomach. The Zurvan myth is not attested before 4th century CE, but that does not exclude its existence long before. In the Zoroastrian "Yasna", a being called Zruuan is mentioned in association with Θwāša (firmament) and Vayu (the realms of light and darkness) together framing cosmos (de Jong 2000). That could explain the vaulted back of the figurine as symbolising the sky. In contrast to the projecting face of the head, the flat stomach-face seems both eerie and sweet. The contrast emphasises otherness or tension and expresses perhaps a fear of chaos. This fear is perhaps contained by the division of the body in three by neck and belt, that may have symbolic connotations parallel to figurine 1: head for communication and determination, stomach for embracing and navel for providing. The figurine does not have marks of mutilation not even a neck-break, implying perhaps relations more cordial or venerating than those connected with figurine 1, which would also be expectable if the figurine embodies a god.

Figurine 3 (ID 46978)

This figurine, fig.7 and 8, measures 95 mm from snout to tail, 35 mm wide over the shoulders, 55 mm in height at the head and weighs 107 grams. The colour has alternating brown nuances and even black and glossy areas, a lighter colour beneath is revealed by exfoliations. The figurine may resemble a bull but probably more a dog because of the right ear, which protrudes horizontally and hangs down a bit at the end. It has a snout with an opening for a mouth and two dots for nostrils, eyes are regular circles impressed with a tool. Legs are short and broad, paws clearly marked on the right slightly lifted foreleg, and genitals protrude beneath the stomach. There are indications of different kinds of impact and handling. The left foreleg has been broken, a part of the left ear is missing and another break shows it had a thick and upstanding tail. Black glossy discolouring is especially visible on the genitalia (the seemingly blue colour on the photos is due to the reflection). Peculiar are two similar 3 mm holes: 17 mm deep in the back and 30 mm deep at anus, both exactly placed on the central axis. Dogs have been common in ancient West-Iranian imagery since the neolithic and onwards (Curtis 1984, 36). Schmidt (1989) presents several examples from Luristan e.g. no CS 561. Usually, these are simple like a Late Iron Age dog from Nush-i Jan (Curtis 1984, no 316) and quite similar to e.g. Early Chalcolithic figurines from Chogha Gavaneh (Forouzan 2012).

Compared to these, figurine 3 is more detailed and rendered realistically, but not as skilfully as in the Elamite bronze figurine of a man and his dog mentioned above, where the man lovingly embraces his dog (Álvarez-Mon 2020, 433-434).

The first impression of figurine 3 is charm and attractiveness. A slight asymmetry from the front and the unevenness of the surface adds to the realism and makes it look alive. Playful growling is suggested by the staring eyes and the slightly open mouth. Porada (1995, 69) mentions that Neo-Assyrians made dog figurines for ritual destruction to avoid bad omens expressed by stray dogs. But this dog was finely made and may have had a long life. If it belonged to Indo-Iranians, it might have been esteemed as a companion species with human traits (Omidsalar 2011). In both cases, people took into consideration the agency of dogs, found ways to avoid or welcome it and connected them with healing. A special trait in dogs is that they seek humans and dogs at the same time as though they belong to both species. A dog changes its humans by being with them and nudging them to adopt some of its desires and instincts. These traits may have been evoked by the persons engaging with the figurine. The particularly marked gloss on the genitalia shows it is not an accidental speckle, but points to something of significance – probably sex or fertility. This special mark probably also indicate that the figurine was not a toy for children. 'Stabbing' marks like those on figurine 1 are not found, but the broken extremities may have been mutilations if not due to their position; however, the front leg would not have been easy to break. Perhaps body parts were offered

as sacrifice? The deep holes in the back and behind could have been used for attachments that would turn the dog into a part of a complex figuration.

Figurine 4 (ID 46979)

The last figurine in the assemblage, fig. 9, measures 123 mm from snout to feet and is 46 mm wide at the shoulder, 49 mm in height at the head and weighs 185 grams. It has alternating nuances of darker and lighter brown and glossy black, the original light colour appearing in cavities. It also has many fine details, but what stands out is the motif itself. It looks very much like a seal reclining in water with the flippers in relaxed position. A long groove depicts the mouth and two short, deep grooves the nostrils. Eyes protrude slightly and small ear flaps hang down. The feet are short and broad. Fur is indicated by striations and fat wrinkles by grooves. The back-side is flattened, with a fat roll under the neck and no tail. Many random cavities and abrasions are present on the surface and a large crack is running down from the top of the head. The figurine has a natural symmetry, though the head is leaning slightly to the right. I am not aware of any parallels.

It is certainly surprising to find a depiction of a seal in Luristan, but in fact, the seal is not that far away from Luristan, as the Caspian Sea used to have a large population of seals. The figurine is much more similar to a seal than to an otter or a dugong, as the otter has a long thick tail and long 'fingers', whereas the dugong has a relatively small head, a very different mouth, no ears, a tail like a dolphin and do not lean back. Nor do

seals have ears, but perhaps it is not decisive to make a correct species match. The seal and the otter are both caniform, so the zoologically incorrect ear flaps perhaps relate to dogs, good hearing and guardianship. Majestic mastery over the waters is demonstrated by the reclining position of the voluminous and powerful animal. Water in Luristan is sparse in summer, frozen in winter and the rivers are dangerous in spring, so companionship with a 'water-dog' could have been an appealing prospect, as also the pacification of a predatory water-spirit would be. Contrary to figurine 3, this one has been extensively mutilated. Since Indo-Iranians lived around the Caspian Sea in the 2nd Mill, the figurine may also have evoked common memories and legends. The large crack in the head probably appeared during firing, but could also be about clubbing, recalling hunting-tales.
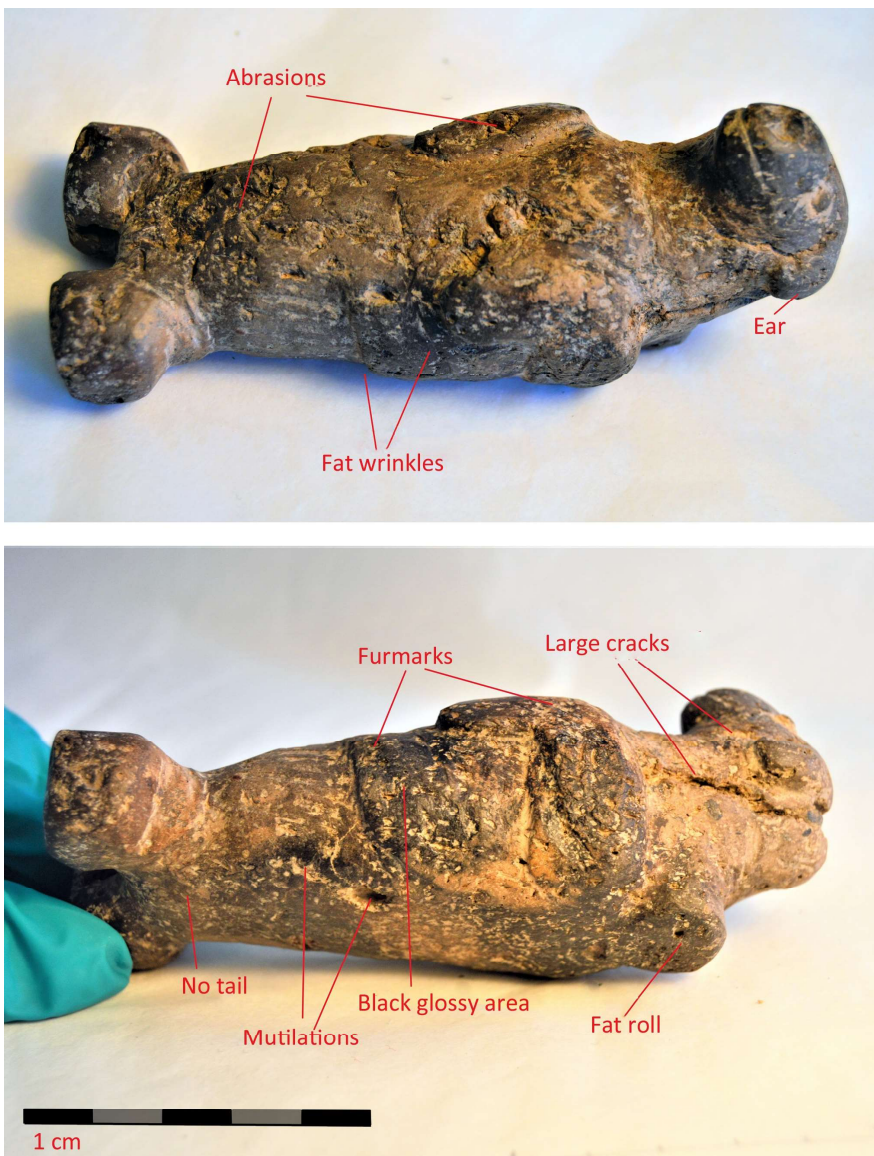
Figure 9: Figurine 4, Seal, front and back. Photo © Kristian Alex Larsen

Conclusion

Attention to the small details in the figurines has led to hypotheses and narratives, which open up perspectives and suggests lines to follow in further research. The figurines were dynamic entities which moved about, gradually changing as they darkened and were pierced and broken. Marks of intra-action has co-defined the figurines in a dialectical process with their human and non-human relations; they knotted the past and the future together with presence. Certain general design ideas seem clear, like the detailed rendition of all the faces and the tripartite division of the human figurines. I suggest the tripartition may be understood as a recognition or even a praise of the complementarities of social life, whereas symmetries celebrated static uniformity. The fact that they all come from Kazabad, may suggest that their peculiarities were a specific local practice, as no exact parallels elsewhere is found (yet). Therefore, it is not possible to give a well-supported relative dating but the period between 1500-500 BCE seems likely especially because of the possible Indo-Iranian connections. Absolute dating methods like luminescence-dating and carbon-dating, if the dark surface is a result of human touch, would be valuable.

Even more important than style is how all sensory features come together in the individual artefact in order to express something. Agential realism gives justice to concrete findings rather than subsuming them under categories, and it allows the marvel of engaging with the past through tangible things. Like any other phenomenological approach, agential realism may be criticised for being overly subjective; however, no analysis whatsoever can escape being subjective in the sense that any basic element is already endowed with meaning by the interpreter (Hodder 2003, 51), and any engagement and perception will also always co-constitute the phenomenon as an agential cut. Moreover, relevant archaeological and historical knowledge must surely be involved whenever possible as the artefact is connected on small as well as large scales. Most important, the research process has to be transparent and open to observations, tests and interpretations by other researchers.

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