

A Short Note on Mra Dherai in Charsadda, Pakistan

MUHAMMAD QASIM JAN MUHAMMADZAI

Introduction

To reduce distances and make transportation more speedy and convenient, the Government of Pakistan has initiated to construct motorways between major cities. One such motorway M1, being constructed between Islamabad and Peshawar, passes through rural areas where there are numerous sites of archaeological importance, and we apprehend that a number of these may have been damaged during the operation. The present author had a chance to collect possible information about a similarly suffered site Mra Dherai near the Nisatta village in Charsadda.

Mra Dherai lies on Latitude 71°-46' N and Longitude 34°-07' E in Charsadda some three kilometres from the main Tehsil Bazar square on the road leading to Nowshera (see the Map). The Jinde, a branch of the Swat river now running a kilometre apart, once flowed close to the southern fringes of the site where evidence of the old riverbed can be seen as several meters thick deposit of sand (Pl. 1).

Spreading along its long-axis in the east-west direction, this site, before the construction of the motorway, covered an area of 100 × 60 meters and rose to the height of 12 meters at its southern half. One could see, at that time, from its top sites of Majoki, Balahisar and Dharmasal Dherai situated within the radius of a few kilometres. Walls made of stone blocks, burnt and mud bricks could then be seen in the fallen sections of the mound. Taking its soil for filling the motorway, the contractors have now razed most of the site to the ground (Pl. 2).

The surviving northern part of the mound raises to the height of seven meters from the surrounding land. Using its soil as fertiliser, the local people have exposed in sections of the site structures and cultural material (Pls. 5, 6 and 14). Founded on pebble stones, a 2.7×3 meters mud-brick wall is still visible in the eastern section (Pl. 4). On the top of the mound there is a grave, which is believed to be of a hero Murad. Its name Mra Dherai is, probably, derived from the burial of Murad.¹ The western and northwestern portions of the site are now being claimed by the Muslim graves and settlements of the nearby village Faqirabad Majoke (Pl. 6).

The surface of the site is covered with red potsherds, some decorated in black, and brickbats, indicating burnt brick construction. Polychrome glazed potsherds, associated with the Hindu Shahi and Muslim periods, are occasionally found.

Finds

The antiquities from the site find their way to private collections and some of the owners allowed the author to study and photograph a few finds in their possession that are presented here to the scholarly world for academic interest.

STONE SCULPTURES

1. A badly defaced enthroned human figure, 18×12 cm, in black schist seems to be the Buddha seated in *dhyanamudra*, meditation pose (Pl. 7). Head and the left arm missing, it is fully draped in the usual Gandharan style.

2. A standing male figure in grey schist, 19 × 11 cm, has its head, arms and part of the legs missing (Pl. 8). It wears a typical Indian *dhoti*, loin-cloth, commonly seen on Gandharan figures.

ANIMAL FIGURINES

A number of terracotta animal figurines recovered from this site are hand made; their clay is well levigated and well fired. They include bulls, rams, monkeys and other unidentified animals (Pl. 9). The down-curved horns of the ram are decorated with incised lines, also found on the body of some figurines. Similar figurines are already reported from other sites in Charsadda (Dani, 1965-66, p. 71; Wheeler, p. 111).

HUMAN FIGURINES

The site has yielded a variety of human terracotta figurines, majority being female. They are either handmade like the Baroque Ladies or moulded like the Hellenistic type. The clay is well levigated and the firing is uniform in both the types.

Some of the crudely-made figurines indicate their affinity to the protohistoric period. A headless figurine with broken legs and short stretching arms seems somewhat similar to that of the Timargarha type from period III, dated from the 9th to mid 6th century BC (Dani, 1967, Pl. LI), (Pl. 11, No. 8). Termed as fiddle-shaped figurines (Wheeler, p. 109), this type is also found at Sari Dheri in Charsadda and Taxila.

A large number of terracotta female figurines, known as Baroque Ladies, have been found at the site. They are found all over the Peshawar valley, more especially associated with Hashtnagar (Charsadda), having their own characteristic decorative features that make them so distinguished from other female figurines unearthed from various settlement sites. Six to seven inches in length, these brightly reddish figurines are made of smooth well levigated clay. They are found from the excavations of Sari Dheri, Mir Ziarat, Bala Hisar, Shaikhan Dheri along with other sites in the Hashtnagar area. M. Wheeler, because of their elaborate or baroque style of decoration, referred to them as Baroque Ladies, discussed in detail in his excavation report (Wheeler, p. 104). They for the first time were described by A K Coomaraswamy in 1928 and assigned to the second millenium BC (Wheeler, pp. 104-05). At Bala Hisar they were found from layer 2 through to 22 and at Shaikhan Dheri they were the dominant type in the Bactrian Greek period (V and VI) that continued to the end of the Kushana period, i.e., the reign of Vasudeva (Dani, 1965-66, p. 47).

The author has observed two mutilated Baroque Lady Figurines from the site. One of them is headless and armless, while the other is missing below the chest level (Pl. 11, nos. 7 & 4 respectively.). Both of the ladies are decorated with a typical neck-girdle, sash and braids. A number of body fragments of such figurines are also collected from the surface of the site (Pl. 13). Did they serve as toys or were they objects of worship is difficult to guess at the moment. But its widespread availability in the vicinity of Pushkalavati, ancient capital of Gandhara, leads us to postulate that they depicted a city goddess and were widely distributed in areas under the administrative control of Pushkalavati. Their presence in other parts of the Peshawar valley indicates that they were produced here *en-masse* and sent to the surrounding areas.

The site has yielded a number of squatting figurines, seemingly modelled on pedestals and having their hands clasped in the front (Pl. 10). They have pinched beak-shaped faces, projected ears and a broad crown like headgear or hairdo.² Another figurine of this type, with missing head, having a neckband and bangles in the folded hands is also found. The same pedestal figurines have been reported from Girawar, Shahre Napursan, Malkadher, Majuki and Sartor Baba sites in Charsadda.³

The moulded type figurines, prepared of well-levigated clay and well fired, are found in a large quantity. Their legs are generally joined together and seem as if framed in a single anklet. Their backs are flat, while their fronts, having large breasts, are pressed in a mould (Pl. 12). Such figurines are reported from Shaikhan Dheri from Period I to IV, but not from the Greek levels (Wheeler, p. 109). Sir John Marshall also found moulded figurines at Taxila and termed them *ex-voto* plaques (Marshall, pp. 443-44; Pls. 132, No. 6). Another variety of moulded figurines is hollow and prepared in a double mould. They are nude and their anatomical features are excellently portrayed (Pl. 11, Nos. 3 & 6). They are pink or pinkish-brown in colour. This variety has also been found from the Kushana and Scytho-Parthian levels at Shaikhan Dheri (Dani, 1965-66, p. 58).

The Gandharan style, if we can refer to as such, type is another variety among the moulded figurines. They have a beautiful face in Gandharan style with elaborate headdress and hairdo. In our example, only the head is preserved, while the rest of the body is missing (Pl. 11, No. 1). Similar figurines are unearthed from the 2nd period, Kanishka to Huvishka, of Shaikhan Dheri (Dani, 1965-66, p. 65, Pl. XXIII).

POTTERY

A number of red earthenware pots obtained from the site are made in various shapes and sizes and almost all of them are wheel turned having a red slip on their exterior. Among the five medium size storage pots four have globular bodies, large everted necks, disc bases and a height of 16.6 cm (Pl. 14). They are all plain. The fifth one has comparatively shorter neck, out curved rim and a flat base. It is decorated with incised lines on its shoulder and neck and has signs of over baking.

Another large medium size storage jar, the upper half broken, survives to 45 cm in height (Pl. 15). It is oval in shape with a flat base and thick texture. Its red-slipped texture is rough and contains grits of lime and sand as tempering matter. Similar jars have been recovered from other sites in Charsadda. (Dani, 1965-66, p. 63, Fig. 26; Wheeler, p. 188, Fig. 18 No. 1-3).

TERRACOTTA SEAL

A number of terracotta seals have been reported from this site. One of them made of well-levigated clay is 4.0 cm long and 2.08 cm in diameter (Pl. 16). It depicts a branch of palm, as is clear from the positive impression on the left, having eight and seven leaves on its left and right respectively. On either side of the branch at the base is a small hole. Terracotta seals from Shaikhan Dheri are also reported (Dani, 1965-66, p. 120; Pl. XLVII). Due to its large size, it could not have been used for pottery decoration, rather it might have been used as seal of identification by an individual or a company.

BURNT BRICKS

Before the destruction of the southern part, brickbats and potsherds were scattered all over the surface of the site indicating burnt brick construction. This is confirmed by the presence of burnt brick walls and a well exposed by the illegal diggers. The local people used to extract the bricks from the mound for their own use. The brick size seems to have been uniform, 25.5 × 25.5 × 4.5 cm.

COINS

Copper coins of various types and sizes reported from the site are round in shape and being sold in bulk as raw material. Gold and silver coins are also reported, but the author has not been able to see one. The owner allowed us to photograph the left over of a coin hoard, found in a small earthen round pot from the southern part of the mound (Pl. 17). Almost all of these copper coins

are heavily rusted and could not be identified on the spot. Only one of the coins, round in shape, shows a king on a horseback with the Greek legend 'Megas' and seems to be that of the Kushana King Soter Megas, whose coins are widely found in the Hashtnagar area.

Chronology

On the basis of finds, the site seems to be contemporary with that of Akhtar Dherai, Majuki Dherai⁴. The typological affinity of the cultural material of Mra Dherai with that from Bala Hisar as well as Shaikhan Dheri indicates the possibility of Greek and Scytho-Parthian rule on the site. Terracotta animal and human figurines belonging to the protohistoric as well as historic period and the typical Gandharan schist stone sculptures suggest the chronological sequence of the site from the protohistoric to the Buddhist period. However, the coin of Soter Megas is a solid evidence of the Kushanas' rule.

Before important archaeological data is lost for ever, it is imperative for the concerned agencies to protect the cultural material through a rescue excavation and preserve it for the posterity.

Notes

¹ Strange and interesting stories are attributed with this site. It is a general belief in the surrounding area, that a child if taken thrice around the grave for three consecutive Fridays would be cured from nightmares. It is also said that a certain Jabarja, a wicked jogi (sorcerer) who had command over evil spirits, lived here. He even killed his brother Ghumbaris to take his beautiful wife. His cruelties and immoral activities compelled a brave local youth Murad to put him in a dungeon. On this the inhabitants of the place crowned Murad as their leader, who ruled justly. After the evil spirits killed Murad, the inhabitants abandoned the place because they feared Jabarja, who occasionally came out of his dungeon and took away his prey with him.

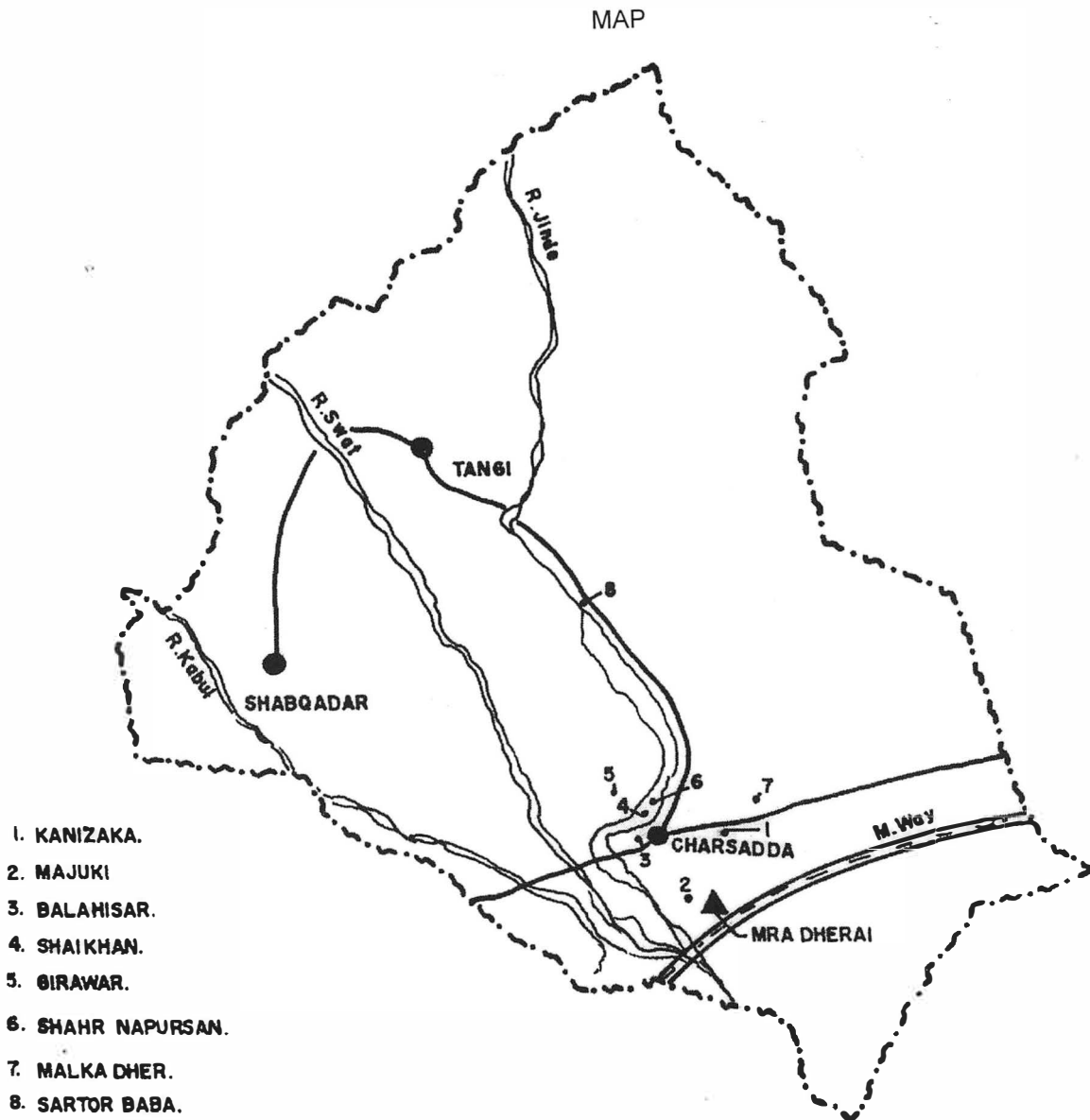
² Although the Indus Valley terracotta figurines have the same fan shaped head projection, yet there is a marked difference between the two.

³ Girawar is situated one km to the west, Shahre Napursan one km to the east, Malkadher three km to the east and Majuki two km to the southeast of the Balahisar mound. While Sartor Baba lies one km to the north of the town of Umarzai near the shrine of Bibi Saidah on the left bank of river Jinde.

⁴ An area of 20×60 meters to the south of this mound has recently been levelled by the villagers to make room for their graves. Cultural material unearthed from here is borrowed from the owner for analysis and subsequent publication.

Bibliographic References

- Ali, I., 1994, "Settlement History of the Charsadda District", *Ancient Pakistan*, Vol. IX.
- Ali, T. et al, 1997-98, "Preliminary Report of the two Seasons of Archaeological Investigations at the Bala Hisar of Charsadda NWFP Pakistan", *Ancient Pakistan*, Vol. XII, pp. 1-33.
- Cunningham, A., 1864, Charsadda, *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India*, Calcutta.
- Dani, A. H., 1965-66, "Excavations at Shaikhan Dheri, Charsadda", *Ancient Pakistan*, Vol. II.
- 1967-68, "Timargarha and Gandhara Grave Culture", *Ancient Pakistan*, Vol. III.
- Foucher, M., *Ancient Geography of Gandhara*, tr. by H. Hargreaves, Frontier Post Publications, Lahore, pp. 20-23.
- Jan, M. Q., 2000, "The Protohistoric Graves of Palai (Malakand Agency)", *Lahore Museum Bulletin*, Vol. XIII, 2, pp. 9-12.
- 2001, "Evidence of a Proto Historic Grave Culture in Katozai, District Charsadda", *Journal of the Taxila Institute of Asian Studies*, Vol. XXIV, pp. 122-36.
- Marshall, J. and Vogel, J. Ph., 1902-03, "Excavations at Charsadda in the Frontier Province", *Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report*, Calcutta, pp. 141-84.
- Marshall, J., 1960, *A Guide to Taxila*, Cambridge.
- Wheeler, S. M., 1962, *Charsada, A Metropolis of the North West Frontier*.



Map Showing Location of Mra Dherai.

Scale. 5 0 5 10km.



Plate 1: Southern fringes of the mound where once flowed the river.



Plate 2: Portion of the recently levelled ground for the road, here once stood the Highest mounds of this ancient town.



Plate 3: Surviving northern mound used as fertiliser for the surrounding fields.



Plate 4: Eastern section of the northern mound showing a mud-brick wall based on stone foundation.

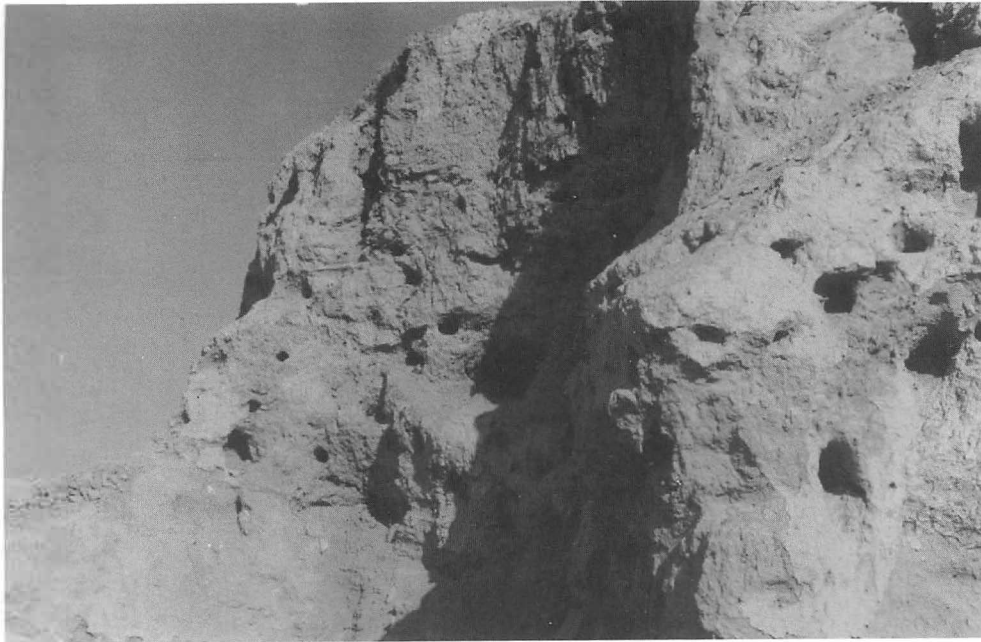


Plate 5: Western section of the northern mound showing traces of wall footings, based on pebble stones.



Plate 6: Potsherds and Muslim burials in the foreground of the northern mound.



Plate 7: Mutilated and defaced statue of the Buddha in schist stone.



Plate 8: A mutilated standing figure in stone wearing Indian *dhoti*.

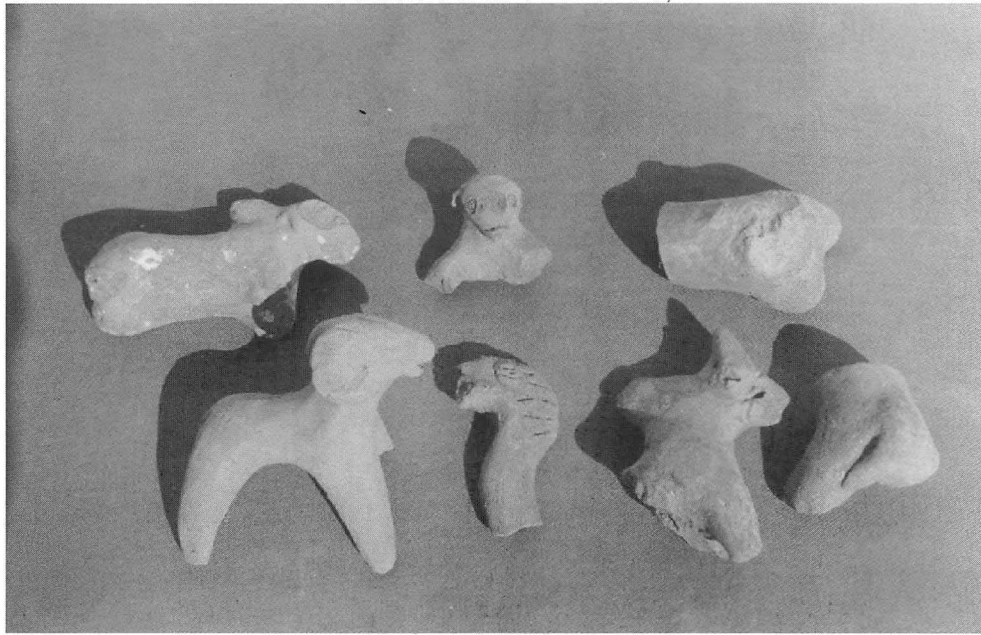


Plate 9: Terracotta bull, ram, monkey and other animal figurines.



Plate 10: Pedestal human and other human and animal figurines.



Plate 11: Baroque lady and other female terracotta figurines.

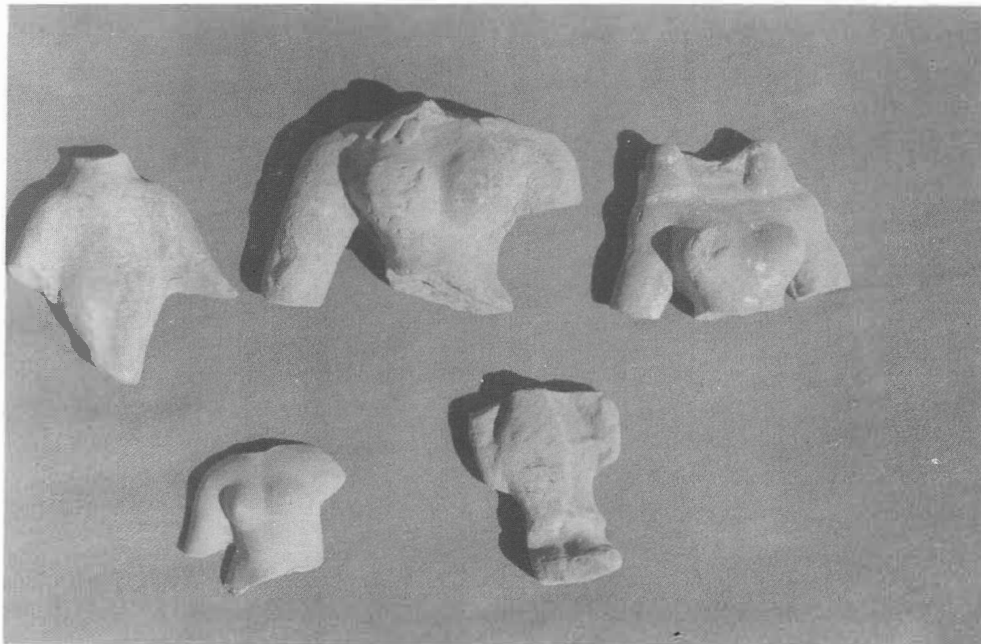


Plate 12: Moulded terracotta figurines.

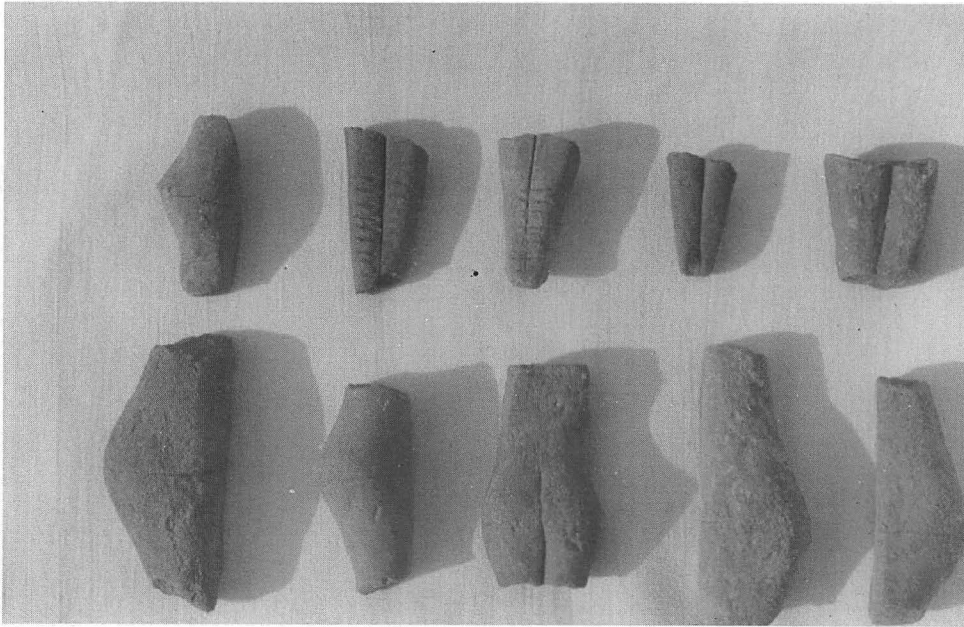
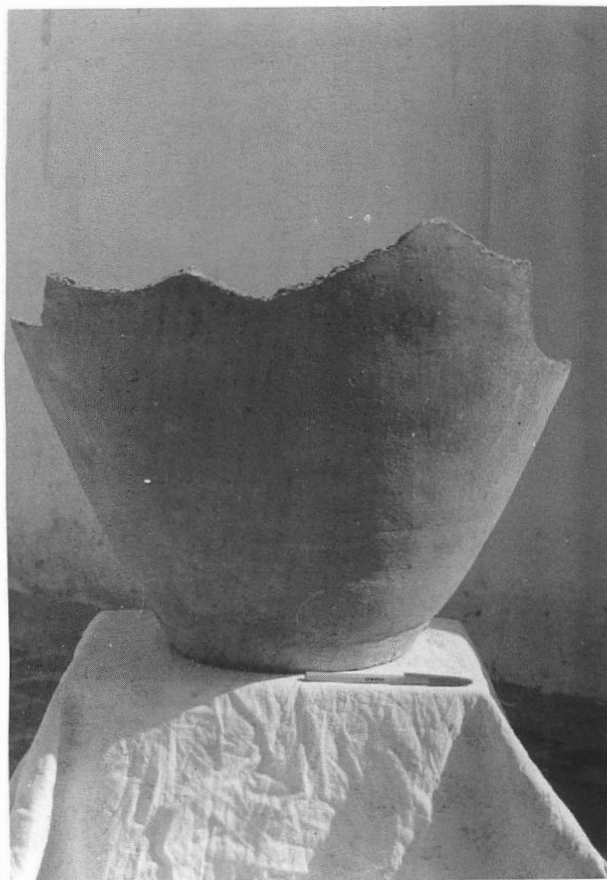


Plate 13: Broken parts of body of female terracotta figurines.



Plate 14: Medium size globular storage jars.



Plates 15: Lower part of a storage jar with a flat base.

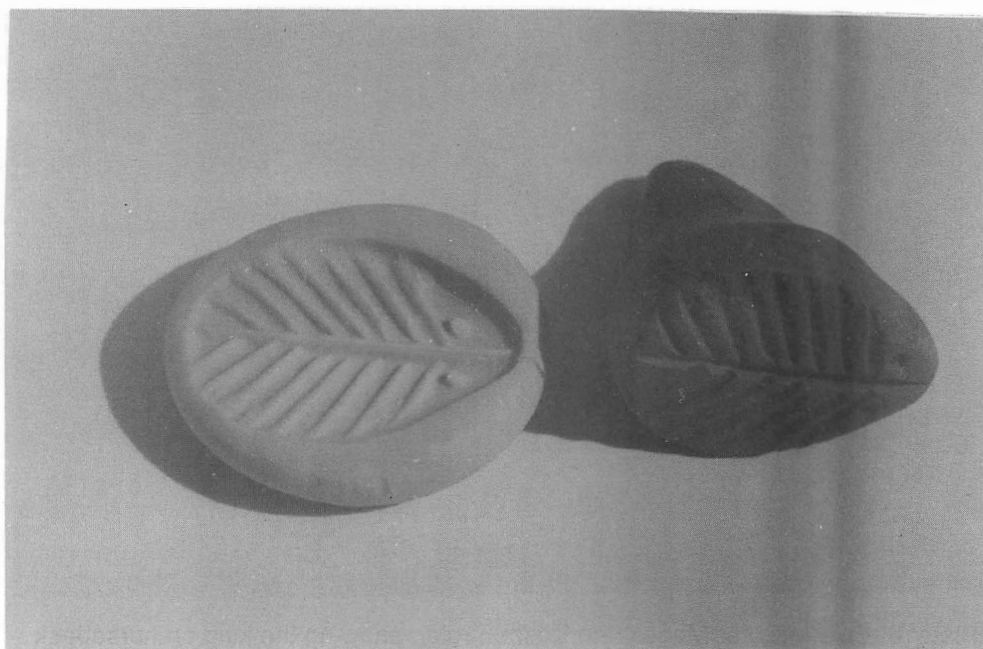


Plate 16: A terracotta seal (right) with its positive impression (left).



Plate 17: Some of the heavily rusted copper coins from a hoard.



Plate 18: Coin of Soter Magas, the Kushan ruler, showing the king on horseback and his name in Greek legend.