

## Sculptural Portraits, Artistic Traditions of Ancient Lahore

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**Abstract:** There is not much of evidence available regarding the ancient city of Lahore. History is shrouded in mystery and the archaeological evidence is almost non-existent. In this scenario of scarcity of evidence, it's almost a miracle when we come across some visual evidence related to this period, no matter how meagre it is. Current research is based on such specimens, which were acquired through very unconventional methods but they are important enough not to be ignored. These are the small sized sculptural heads of terracotta discovered not during some formal excavation but by digging the earth few meters deeper than usual. The detailed study of these objects not only confirms their antiquity but it also reveals the fine aesthetics and high level of skill involved.

**Keywords:** Lahore, art, terracotta, potter, sculpture

All the important centres of art and culture in the world have a distinct characteristic of their own; Lahore is also one of them. The study of its art reveals a very interesting feature that the artists of Lahore put a great emphasis on the portraiture of people in sculpture and painting. Here we come across many examples, both from the distant past to the recent past, that the Lahori artist was a great believer of the true representation of the people around him.

The walled city of Lahore is a highly valuable place commercially and many buildings and markets are under construction in the area. Traditionally *Purani Kotwali* (old Police Station) is one of the oldest Muslim inhabited areas of Lahore. In June 2007 at *Purani Kotwali*, labourers were working at a plaza site. The owner required a basement, so the digging was carried out deeper than usual. During the digging, at the depth of almost 30 feet, they started to discover broken pottery, animal figurines, lamp holders and some building materials like latticework and bricks etc. The material used was terracotta (Figure 1).

During the digging it was observed that the clay underneath had twelve very clear layers that differed from one another in colour. The deepest and last layer was dark coloured and it had no sign

of any human activity. It was virgin soil. Every layer was two or two and a half feet in thickness. It was important to determine the time period of the findings. Many sources were employed to define the period of the objects found in this locality.

The most important factor in determining the time period was the material. It has been mentioned by Percy Brown that terracotta and wood were the main materials for art and craft of Lahore in the pre Muslim and early Muslim days because stone or marble were not available in the alluvial plains of Punjab (Brown, 1942, p.33). An important comparison was made with the digging at Lahore Fort by the archaeology department of Pakistan in 1952 (Figure 2). By comparing finds of both diggings, the objects discovered in *Purani Kotwali* were given a tentative time frame i.e. late Hindu and early Muslim era.

Further research revealed that there were two main centres of pottery makers in Lahore, one was near Bhati Gate behind the tomb of famous saint Data Ganj Bakhsh and the other was at *Purani Kotwali*. Many potters had their wheels and kilns in those localities. Citizens of Lahore used to buy the terracotta objects specially pottery from these centres as late as 1960s. Even today we can buy bowls, vases, cooking utensils from

Delhi *Darwaaza* that is near *Purani Kotwali* (Figures 3, 4).

But the most amazing discovery came to light when some small terracotta human heads of brilliant quality and style were found in the trench. Their sizes varied from one inch to four to five inches. These were the faces of the people of Lahore and depicted in a highly realistic manner.

### **The *Kullals* (clay artists) of Lahore**

When the Muslims arrived in Lahore, a popular medium for artwork of the city was baked clay and many people were associated to this profession. They were given the names of *Kullal*. It is a Persian word used for the potter. Later on a side business was added to these potters and that was the making and selling of wine. To differentiate between these two branches; another word was employed and that was *Kallal*. The difference is very subtle but the *Kallals* were those who were potters and wine sellers while the word *Kullal* was reserved for the potter/clay artists alone.<sup>1</sup> The study of archaeological remains of Lahore reveals that *Kullals* were not only involved in the making of clay pots but one of their specialties was the small sculptures that depicted the personalities who caught their attention.

There are many verbal references by the old men of Lahore when they say that *Kumhars* (which is probably a mispronunciation of *Kullal*) used to make lots of *Mitti Dian Murtian* (terracotta figurines).<sup>2</sup>

Apart from this there are late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century photographs of the important professions of Lahore in which potters with their wheels have been photographed with the caption ‘Kukkeyzye or Muhammdan Kallal Lahore’, ‘Hindoo Kullal

Lahore’, i.e. Hindu and Muslim potters of Lahore (Figures 5, 6).

When the British came to India they recorded the landscapes, arts, crafts and professions of this region. Photographic albums were prepared and they were kept for future references. In one such album, at Lahore Archives, different professions of Lahore have been recorded. Most of these photographs have been shot in the studio. An important photograph is preserved in this album. The main purpose of this particular photo was to show the potters with their wheel but an interesting feature to notice is some figurines that are in front of these potters (Figures 7, 8). They seem to be recently made by these potters. There are three animals and two human figures. The three animals are a donkey, a dog and a lion and they are not bigger than two to three inches. The two human figures are almost five to six inches tall. One figure is with an English cap and he is wearing an overcoat. The other figure can be seen partially and that is a European lady in a skirt. The main focus of interest is the male figure because it is of the same size and style that was observed in the old sculpture faces discovered in Lahore. This was the time when British were in Lahore and they were a common sight. The presence of a European figure at a common potter’s place means that as late as 19<sup>th</sup> century, the clay artists of Lahore were making the figurines of the people living here in a very realistic manner.

Now I will go back in the history to establish the tradition of sculpture in Lahore. Before the arrival of Muslims, Lahore was the city of idol worshipers. An authentic reference to this fact was found in a compilation, *Hadood ul Alam* written by an unknown author in 982 AD. He wrote, “Lahore is a city with vast area. The ruler

<sup>1</sup> A detailed interview with Dr. Moin Nizami, head of the Persian Department, Punjab University Lahore, helped me to understand the concept. Many Persian dictionaries were also consulted.

<sup>2</sup> During an interview with Hajji Bashir, who belonged to a painter/carpenter family of Lahore mentioned about his ancestors who were accomplished sculptors also.

of Multan governs it. This city has many bazaars and temples. The trees of *chalghoza* (a small nut like pistachio) walnuts and almonds are in abundance. The whole population consists of idol worshipers and there is not even a single Muslim in this city” (Baqar, 1962, p.24). This is an evidence to prove that there were people in Lahore who were already making statues that were bought and worshipped by the citizens. During the excavation of Lahore Fort in 1959, the finds of pre Muslim era are noteworthy because many religious sculptures and reliefs were found (Figures 9, 10).

The latest findings of human sculpture in *Purani Kotwali* (Figures 12) reveal that the Muslims enhanced the element of portraiture to an already established tradition of sculpture in Lahore (Figure 11). Amazing quality of these faces is the observation of the artist because these are the faces of individuals. They are not generalized features of some religious figures but they are living people whose personalities have been preserved in these old terracottas. It shows another dimension of the city that the Lahore art has been based on the true likeness of the models. Priests, soldiers, women and even children are sculpted. There are faces of monks with shaven heads, big eyes and small chins. Another face is that of a soldier who has a scar on his face. There is a small head, not more than two inches high, of the face of a woman who is wearing a Chinese headdress. Some faces are hardly one inch in size but the modelling of their features is beautiful (Figure 13). A very strong face is sculpted with large moustache with a look of authority on it (Figure 14).

## References

Brown, P. (1942). *Indian Architecture (The Islamic Period)* (Bombay: Treasure House of The Books), 33.

No complete figurine has been discovered so far and may be this is because most of these sculptures are hollow cast, a technique that is quite difficult to master but the artist was able to handle it skilfully to produce impressive result.

A great number of other objects and some more faces have also been discovered in other parts of Lahore (Figures 15, 16).

In the light of these discoveries the concept regarding the artists of Lahore has undergone a change and we can say that later art has been a further development of the past artistic activities. Unfortunately we have no evidence of the art of the later centuries i.e. Sultanate Period. But the little proof that we have, shows that the art of Lahore was of a high quality and it only declined when different conquerors destroyed the city and it was abandoned for years afterward. Perhaps the most devastating of them all were Mongols who invaded in 13<sup>th</sup> century and left ashes behind, of a Lahore that once was the pride of the Muslim world because it was said that if Shiraz and Ispahan were united, they would not make one Lahore of Ghaznavide period.

Due to this massive destruction no known specimen of the painting has been found so far and above-mentioned terracotta sculptures are possibly the only reference we have about the pre Mughal art of Lahore.

Muhammad Baqar, “Lahore Tareekh, Tasees Aur Wajah Tasmia,” *Naqoosh, Lahore Nama* (Lahore: Idara-i-Farogh-i-Urdu 1962), 24.



Figure 1. 'Pottery and Animal Figurines', terracotta, found at the depth of almost 30 feet, *Purani Kotwali*, Lahore. Collection Chughtai Museum, Lahore.

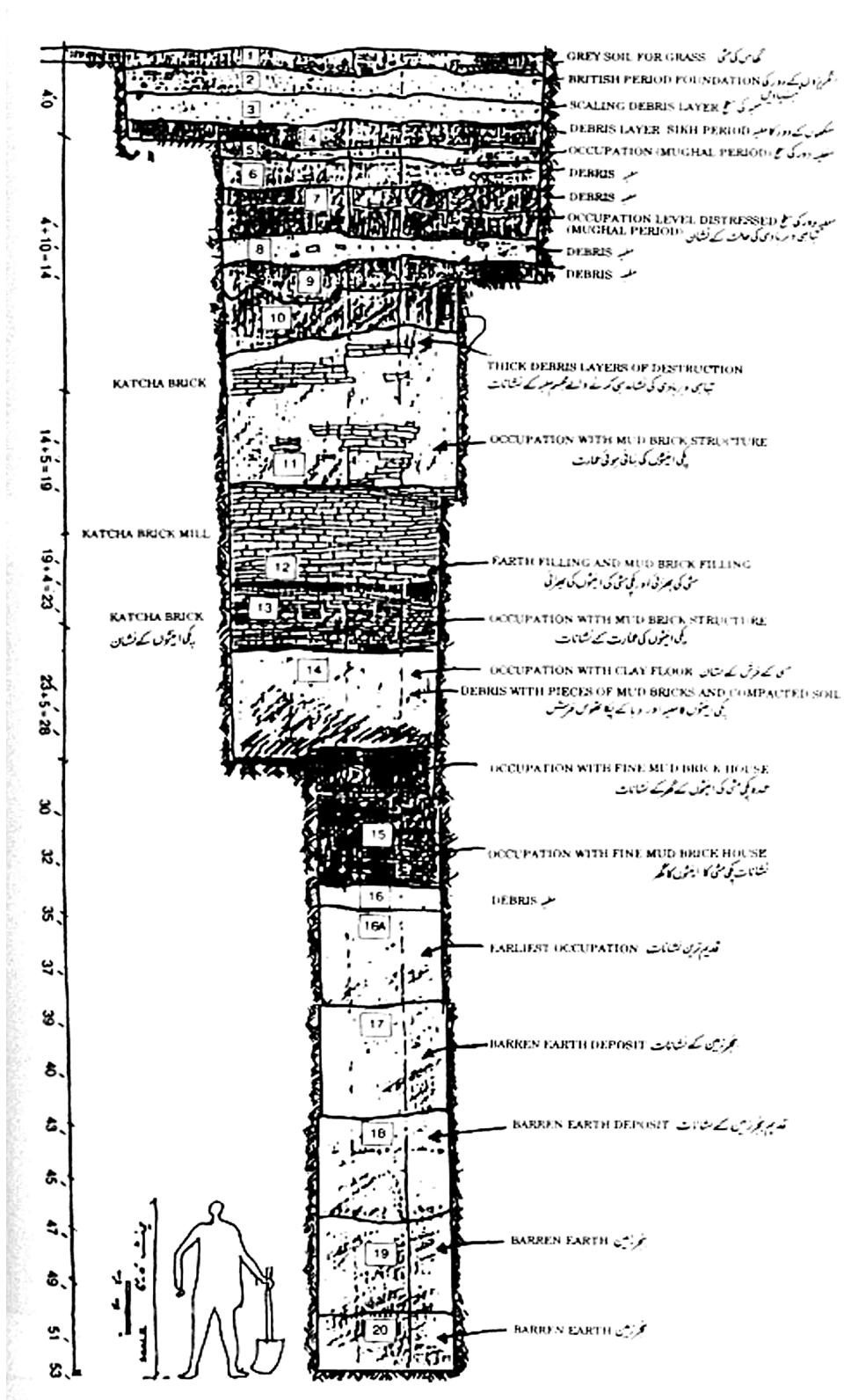


Figure 2. Archaeological strata uncovered in 1959 in the Lahore Fort. Department of Archaeology, Government of Pakistan, Lahore.

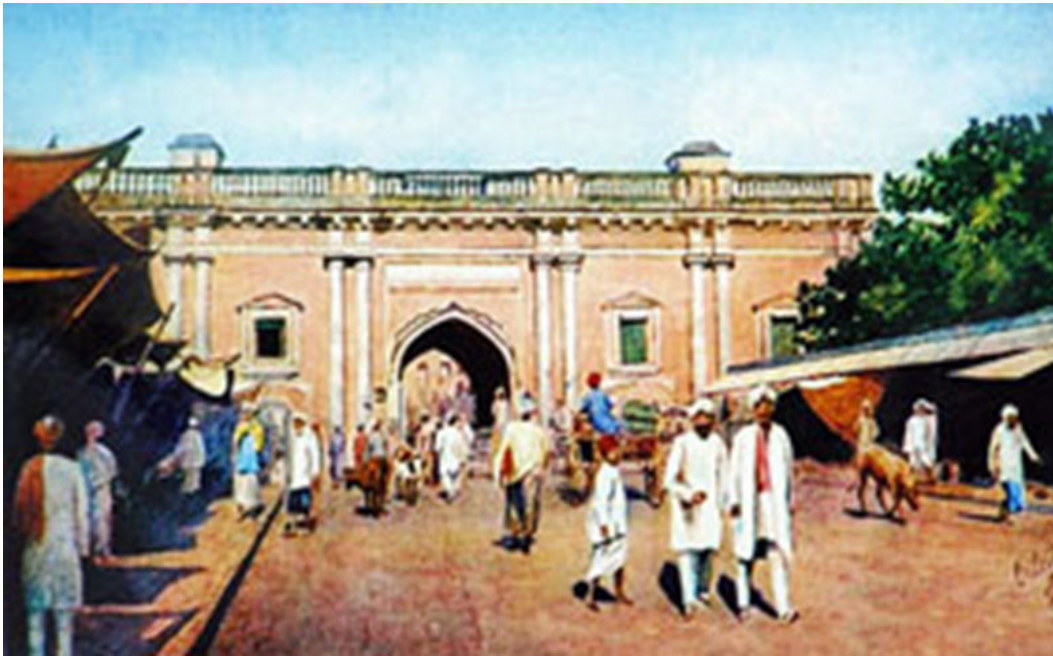


Figure 3. An old view of Delhi *Darwaaza*.

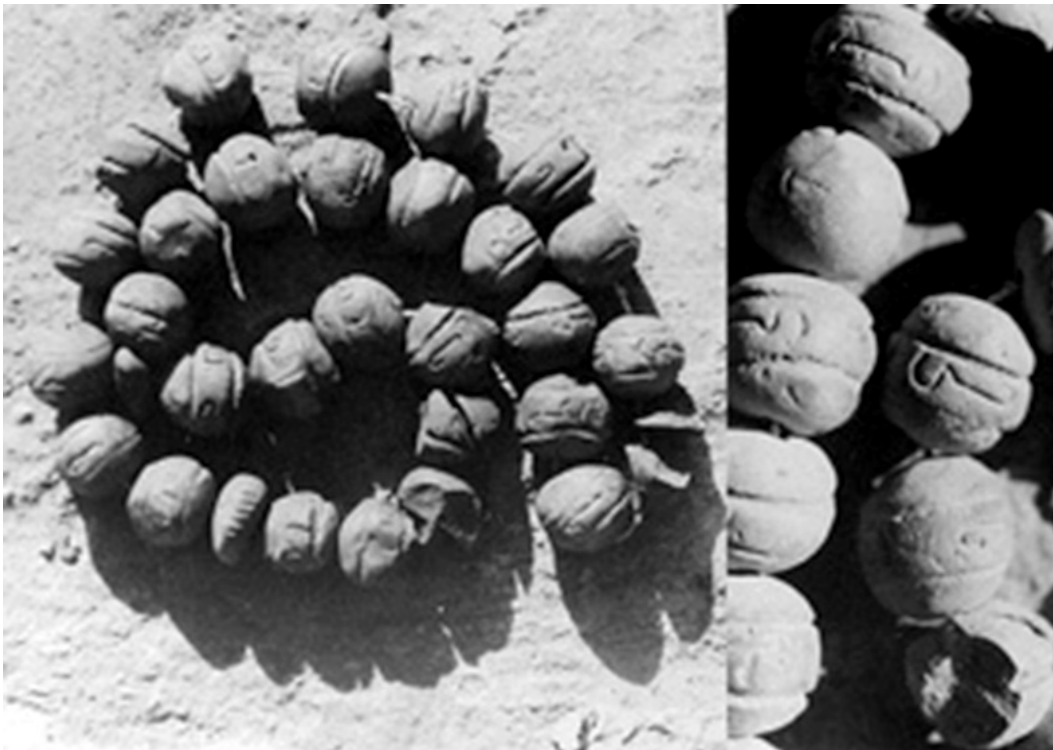


Figure 4. 'Terracotta Stringed Beads', found at the depth of almost 30 feet, *Purani Kotwali*, Lahore. Collection Chughtai Museum, Lahore.



Figure 5. Kukkezye or Muhammadan Kallal Lahore', page from a 19<sup>th</sup> century photographic album. Punjab Archives.



Figure 6. Hindu Kallal Lahore', page from a 19<sup>th</sup> century photographic album. Punjab Archives.



Figure 7. 'Hindoo Kumhar Lahore', page from a photographic album. Punjab Archives.



Figure 8. Detail 'Hindoo Kumhar Lahore'.



Figure 9. 'Terracotta Plate Representing Three Dancing Women', found during the excavation of 1959 at Lahore Fort, Pre Muslim Layer. Collection Lahore Fort.



Figure 10. 'Relief of a Goddess with a Child in her Lap', found during the excavation of 1959 at Lahore Fort. Pre Muslim Layer, Collection Lahore Fort.





Figure 11. 'Relief of a Goddess Holding Garland in her Hand', terracotta, Hindu Period, found during the 1959 excavation at Lahore Fort. Collection Lahore Fort.



Figure 12. 'Small Sculpture Heads', terracotta, found at the depth of almost 30 feet, inside the walled city, Lahore. Collection Chughtai Museum, Lahore.



Figure 13. 'Small Sculpture Heads', terracotta, found during different diggings inside the walled city, Lahore. Collection Chughtai Museum, Lahore.



Figure 14. 'Man with Moustache', terracotta, found at the depth of almost 30 feet, *Purani Kotwali*, Lahore. Collection Chughtai Museum, Lahore.



Figure 15. 'Lady with a Headdress', terracotta, found at the depth of almost 30 feet, Lahore. Collection Chughtai Museum, Lahore.



Figure 16. 'Child Monk of Lahore', terracotta, found at the depth of almost 30 feet, Lahore. Collection Chughtai Museum, Lahore.



Figure 17. 'A Man Mounted on an Elephant', terracotta, Lahore. Collection Chughtai Museum, Lahore.



Figure 18. 'Man Holding an Instrument', terracotta, Lahore. Collection Chughtai Museum, Lahore.