Terracotta Horses from Tamil Nadu (TAM-il NA-du)
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I chose this topic because I wanted to use the opportunity to explore something I knew nothing about. In truth, I did know a little about India having spent weeks at a time there back in 1987 but had never been to Tamil Nadu nor heard of their Terracotta Horses so it seemed like an interesting thing to explore.

When I hear about terracotta sculptures I immediately think of the Terracotta Warriors and Horses in Xi'an, China, a site I’m looking forward to seeing. These were buried with the first emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang in 210-209 BCE to protect him in the afterlife and only discovered in 1974. The figures are nearly life size, generals were taller than enlisted men of course though. A 2007 estimate puts the count at 8,000 soldiers, 520 chariot horses and 150 cavalry horses. The body parts of these figures, head, arms, legs and torsos, were all created separately and assembled, originally painted to look life like and each was unique. (Show picture of horse.) The figures were created in workshops by government laborers and local craftsmen.

Tamil Nadu is a state in the south eastern part of India with a population of 72 million people. It's largest city is Chennai that formerly had the easier to remember name of Madras. Sri Lanka is just across the sea and also has a minority of Tamil people. A quote from an early Tamil poet that I liked very much reads:

"Learning is a wealth that none could destroy
Nothing else give genuine joy"
(Tirukkural: 400)

3800 year old clay urns have been found there so pottery making goes back a long ways. Most of the people are of the Hindu religion (82%). All the Hindu deities in several forms and a large number of village deities are worshiped by Hindus in Tamil Nadu and this is where the Terracotta Horses come in.

Horses are built by a Tamil villager caste of hereditary potters/priests with potter ancestors going back thousands of years. These horses can be 9' to 15' high and probably the largest hollow clay images to be built anywhere. (1.) The horses are gifts to the god Aiyanar, a sort of village protector, to be used by him and his men as they ride through the village by night protecting it from fire, thieves, draught and illness. (2.) as such, they are usually displayed outdoors near the outskirts of the village. (S.) Belief in the male deity, Aiyanar, predates the introduction of Hinduism in the second millennium BC by centuries but he was latter absorbed into the Hinduism complex pantheon of deities. (1.)

In contrast to the Chinese figures these horses were traditionally built in one piece. Since such monumental pieces couldn't be moved for fear of damage a kiln was built
around them. Any empty space was filled with other pottery to fully utilize the firing.(1.) Rice hulls and straw are mixed with the clay to control shrinking and the cracking that would result. Rice straw ropes and wood columns and platforms are used to hold the clay in place and shape the figures. A guardian (or groom) of Aiyanar's horse is molded on the neck. A face of Yallee is shaped on the Brest of the horse. It's fierce gaze guides the god on his nightly rides. Pure clay is applied over the basic straw and clay mixture figure to allow detailing. A red slip is applied to seal and smooth the course surface. A combination of straw, dung and the wood support are used the fire the kiln. Four or five men would work 14 days to complete a horse in this traditional process. The figure is then painted in bright colors and wreaths laid around its neck before parading in the street on the way to Aiyana's temple(1.) Although annual rains soak the porous clay there is no freezing weather in Tamil Nadu to cause damage. These horses last for generations. (1.) Locals claim some are more than a 100 years old. (2.) Now, most modern day horses are built of cement. (1.)

References:

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