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POTTERY VASE FROM THE UPPER AMAZON.

ORIGINAL ARTICLES.

Peru.

With Plate D.

Read.

On Two Pottery Vases from the Upper Amazon, Peru. By C. H. Read, F.S.A.

32

The Ethnographical Department of the British Museum has recently received an acquisition of considerable importance in the form of two pottery vases unusual both in size and in make, one of them being represented in Plate D. The museum owes this valuable gift to the liberality of Mr. George Lomas, of Iquitos, a station on the upper waters of the Amazon, and about 2,000 miles from its mouth. That these colossal vessels should have reached the British Museum unharmed is due to the thoughtful care of Mr. Charles Booth, who kindly superintended the transport, so that from Iquitos to Liverpool there was no transhipment.

A reference to the scale will give an idea of the unusual dimensions of the vase represented, which is about the same size as its companion (Figs. 1 and 2). The greatest diameter of the one shown in the plate is 3 feet 9 inches, and the height 2 feet $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches ; of the second, the height is 2 feet $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches, and the diameter 3 feet $7\frac{1}{2}$ inches. The side view shows the somewhat unusual proportions of the vessel, the base diminishing to a very small foot of about 8 inches in diameter, so that standing upon a flat surface it is somewhat insecure, even when empty. The most remarkable point about the vessel is that its sides are only from a quarter of an inch to half an inch in thickness, and for any potter to make a vase of such dimensions of such thinness would be in any country a *tour de force*, but in the present case the potter seems to have deliberately added to his difficulties by making the upper part almost horizontal, while the mouth is further weighted by the bulk of the vertical neck. How this upper part was supported in the process of manufacture, and more especially in the firing of the piece, is not easy to understand, but, as the plate shows, the result displays a perfectly symmetrical outline, whether viewed from above or from the side. We have no information as to the particular tribe producing these remarkable vessels, but a much smaller specimen which has been for some years in the British Museum is stated to have been made by the Cocama Indians of the River Ucayali, one of the affluents of the Upper Amazon. This latter vase is identical in form and very similar in ornament to that shown in our plate. The clay of which the large vases are made is of the common buff colour, the surface of which appeared to the eye of the Indian potter to need some modification ; he has, therefore, taken a fine white clay of the nature of pipeclay, and has applied this evenly over the whole of the upper part of the vase, polishing the surface with either a bone or a smooth stone. Upon this the decoration is applied in a kind of distemper, producing a somewhat eccentric geometrical design executed in ochre with brown outlines. Over this has been originally a coat of varnish, now to a great extent worn off. A similar method of decoration was not uncommon in ancient Mexico, where the use of what is technically known as "slip" was thoroughly well understood, and a large number of vases from the cemetery in the Island of Sacrificios have a white coating as a base for their painted decoration ; but it is obvious that, the colours not being burnt in and only protected by a coat of varnish, the vessels must have been consistently treated with great care. There can be little doubt that the ornamentation, complicated as it appears, has its origin in plaited designs. This has been well insisted upon by Mr. William H. Holmes in an interesting article in the fourth *Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology*, page 443. Mr. Holmes there points out how a curved pattern, on being reduced to plaiting, becomes angular, and, in one instance, Fig. 480, demonstrates how the interlocking rectangular fret may become a continuous spiral. In the vase shown in our plate it will be noticed that the Indian artist must have carefully set out his design before proceeding to paint it, as he has throughout preserved the balance of the parts and made a symmetrical decorative effect. The other vase, sent by Mr. Lomas,

is of somewhat sturdier build (Figs. 1 and 2), and, in addition, does not show the same amount of finish in its surface decoration, but it possesses an added feature in the

FIG. 1.

modelling, on the two opposite sides of the shoulders, of a male and female figure in fairly high relief. Another peculiarity is the following; the ornamentation between the two figures is not the same on both sides of the vase. On the one side (the lower in Fig. 2) the lines forming the pattern are rectangular with the radii of the circle formed by the outline of the vase; on the other they intersect the radii at an angle of 45 degrees. The varnish on this specimen also is well preserved, and thus shows

more clearly what was the original intention of the potter.

It would seem to be fairly certain that these vases, unless partly sunk in the earth, could only have been used to contain dry contents which must have been light in weight; filled with liquid and standing upon an even surface the movement of the liquid inside would assuredly be disastrous to the vessel, but the smallness of the base and the fact that the lower part is undecorated in both cases make it probable that the vases were kept partly embedded in the floor of the house.

An illustration of the possible method by which, at any rate, the base of such vases might be built up can be seen in the recently published *Guide to the Antiquities of the Bronze Age in the British Museum*, where, on page 67, is shown the method of manufacture of a Bronze Age bowl from the early settlements on the south-east coast of Spain. It would appear that a cavity of the required shape was made in the earth and the clay required to make the vessel was then moulded in the hole, so that during the process the whole of the outside was well supported, and at the same time the inside could be carefully smoothed, and, if allowed to dry *in situ*, such a bowl could be easily and safely fired.

FIG. 2.

C. H. READ.

Africa, West.

Notes on the Form of the Bini Government. *Extract from a Report to the Colonial Office, permission to reproduce which has been obtained for the Anthropological Institute by the kindness of the Trustees of the British Museum.*

As in most African kingdoms, there is a link with the past in the Bini form of government. In some cases it is simply a title of the living king, meaning the spirit of the late king; in the case of Bini it is the queen-mother.