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The Pottery of the Casas Grandes District, Chihuahua

By A. V. KIDDER



THE Casas Grandes district in northern Chihuahua was the center of what seems to have been the southernmost of the ancient Pueblo cultures. The writings of Bartlett,¹ Banelier,² Lumholtz,³ and Hewett⁴ give us general descriptions of the main Casas Grandes ruin and of numerous mounds in the vicinity; in Lumholtz' book there is a series of fine colored plates of the pottery. Little, however, has been done toward a classification of the wares or an analysis of their elaborate decorative system.

The present paper, which is intended as a start in this direction, consists of a study of the Phillips collection in the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology at Cambridge. In it there are one hundred and ninety pieces of pottery, excavated principally at Janos, Ramos, and Corralitos, all of which are localities in the Casas Grandes region. Other collections examined, though unfortunately very hastily, were those in the Museum of the American Indian, the American Museum of Natural History, and the Fred Harvey Museum at Albuquerque, New Mexico. With the exception of the American Museum collection, which was made by Lumholtz, all these specimens were acquired by purchase in lots from local diggers and are accompanied with few or no data. It appears, however, that most of the vessels were mortuary offerings recovered from graves under the floors of the ruined houses.

The pieces fall into the following general classification:

1. Rough dark ware.
2. Polished blackware.
3. Redware.
4. Painted ware.

ROUGH DARK WARE

This class is not represented in the Peabody Museum collection, but among the Lumholtz specimens in the American Museum are

¹ Personal Narrative, vol. II, chap. xxxv.

² Final Report, chap. xiv.

³ Unknown Mexico, vol. I.

⁴ Communautés Anciennes, chap. 8.

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fragments of a few coarse, dark-brown to rusty-black vessels, apparently of olla form. The smaller pieces, being thin-walled and much blackened with soot, were probably used in cooking; the larger ones have walls nearly half an inch thick and must have been two feet to two feet six inches in height. These heavy fragments are not sooted and are probably parts of capacious jars for storage or for holding water. The paste of all the sherds is dark-brown, coarsely tempered in most instances with bits of pounded quartz; there is no slip, and while the surfaces are rough, they show no trace of corrugation.

POLISHED BLACKWARE

These pieces, of which there are sixteen in the Phillips collection, are jet-black in color and have a highly polished, lustrous surface. Technically they are identical with the well-known polished blackware made today at Santa Clara pueblo, New Mexico, and are doubtless the product of the same smothered-fire process of burning used at that village.¹ The commonest shape is a full-bodied bowl with incurved rim (pl. I, fig. 6); there are also small jars with flaring lips, bearing two horizontally perforated suspension lugs. Some of the jars have vertical flutings on their sides (pl. I, fig. 8), a feature also found on similar forms made at Santa Clara. While one small piece (C-3999) bears added ornament in the form of knobs and ridges crudely imitating the wings and tail of a bird,² and another (Mus. Amer. Ind. 4811) is double-lobed, the blackware in general does not run to eccentric forms; this is undoubtedly due to the fact that the polishing stone, the use of which was, of course, essential for the production of the lustrous finish, could be employed only on gently curving surfaces free from protuberances or abrupt changes of angle. The above is a very good example of the influence of technical processes in the development of vessel forms.

REDWARE

Technically this ware is comparable to the black, was probably made of the same clay, and differs from it only in not having been polished so highly nor subjected to a smothered firing. The base is yellowish brown, considerably darker than the base of the painted ware; broken pieces show (in common with most other Southwestern pottery that has been burned at low fire) a central streak of gray.

¹ See Hewett, op. cit., p. 77; and for the chemistry of the process, Franchet, *Céramique Primitive*.




² This little object and another like it were apparently used as whistles. Such instruments made of pottery are not found, so far as I know, elsewhere in the Southwest.



RED, BLACK, AND PAINTED WARE

KIDDER—CASAS GRANDES POTTERY

Tempering consists of tiny, light-colored particles, presumably ground potsherds. Visible surfaces are generally coated with a rich red slip that has been polished on areas free from added ornament, handles, etc., with the rubbing stone.

Shapes (pl. I, figs. 1-5 and 7).—Unlike the black, the redware occurs in so many different shapes that a classification is practically impossible. There are several tiny bowls one to three inches in diameter; many small jars with outcurved lips, no two of which are of exactly the same form; and a few larger jars with rather fat bodies. Besides these more ordinary types there are double pots connected by hollow bars and arching handles (pl. I, fig. 1); small, plain-bodied pieces with high handles (pl. I, fig. 4); double-lobed jars; small-mouthed bottles (a shape of great rarity in the Southwest); and jars with snakes (pl. I, fig. 7), pairs of frogs (Mus. Amer. Ind. ) , or unidentifiable animals modeled on their sides. Tiny ladles copied evidently from gourds split lengthwise (Mus. Amer. Ind. ) , and small flat jars in the form of squashes (Am. Mus. ) , Rancho San Diego), are conscious imitations of vegetal forms.

The *decorations* of the surfaces of redware vessels are no less varied than are their shapes. A few pieces are plain polished red; on others polished areas are opposed by figures or areas left unpolished or even in the lighter colored, unslipped base clay. A dull-black paint is occasionally used to contrast with the polished red, or is applied independently in bands or roughly drawn stepped figures.

Aside from color variations there were employed a great number of different methods for texturing parts of the surfaces of vessels. Some of these were: the leaving unsmoothed of the original structural coil (pl. I, fig. 3); incising, (pl. I, fig. 1), both heavy and light; gouging; scoring with a stick; marking in small circles with the end of a reed or hollow bone; indenting with the fingernail; and scraping with a rough-edged tool, possibly a corncob. The most interesting of these devices is the leaving of the coil; this shows us how the vessels were made, and also provides an example of the retention of coiling for decorative purposes after it had been abandoned on the cooking wares.

PAINTED WARE

Technology.—Painted ware forms about 70 per cent of the collection. It is made of light-colored clay of such good quality that an outer covering or slip was usually dispensed with.¹ Where it occurs it is of a whitish color, is soft and crumbly, and often partly wears

¹ This is an unusual feature in Southwestern pottery, being found commonly only here, in the ancient Hopi ruins (Sikyatki, etc.), and in the finer black-and-white ware of the Kayenta district.

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away, carrying with it the design painted over it. Tempering material is scanty, appearing in the form of fine granular bodies, which seem to consist of ground-up sherds. There are also in many pieces tiny particles of pyrites, some of which, appearing on the surface, have given rise to the popular belief that this ware was made of gold-bearing clay. The color of the vessels varies somewhat according to the amount of iron in the paste and the degree of heat developed in firing; the shades range from dead white (rare) through cream color, to an almost lemon yellow, the commonest tone being a warm yellowish gray.

The outer surfaces of the pots are well smoothed, presumably with the rubbing stone; but a glossy polish, such as is seen in the blackware, was very seldom produced.

Shapes, Jars.—By far the commonest form is the jar, a vessel of every characteristic shape, not regularly duplicated elsewhere in the Southwest (pl. 2, figs. 2, 10, 11). The pieces average about $7\frac{1}{2}$ inches high and have a capacity of $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 gallons.¹ There is one specimen in the collection (C-4329) that is nearly 15 inches high, but in general the divergence from the average size is slight. Typical features are: high, gently sloping upper body; rounded shoulder; full, round bottom; and point of greatest diameter set very low. The rim is slightly outcurved, ending in a plain round lip. To the rim are occasionally added a pair of horizontally perforated lugs, and many of the smaller examples have opposite pairs of suspension holes, apparently made by pushing a small reed through the rim while the clay was still soft.

A few jars do not follow the standard form, having high necks,² or globular bodies; in general, however, the type is a remarkably constant one and is not only the predominant simple form but serves as the basis, so to speak, for many of the effigy vases, which were made by the addition of various sorts of plastic ornament to the sides or rims of standard jars.

Effigy vases of one kind or another make up nearly ten per cent of all the painted specimens; this high ratio of modeled to plain pieces is not approached in any other Southwestern culture.³ A general classification follows:

1. Examples with plastic features added to the sides of standard jars.
2. Examples with heads of animals, birds, or human beings added to the rims of standard jars.
3. True effigies.

¹ The average dimensions of twenty-five pieces are: ht. 7.47"; great. diam. 8.34"; orif. 4.60".

² Lumholtz, pl. v, f.

³ The percentage of effigies in the collections of the American Museum of Natural History and the Museum of the American Indian is not quite so high as in the Peabody collection.



PAINTED WARE

KIDDER—CASAS GRANDES POTTERY

The most characteristic pieces of the *first class* are jars which bear on opposite sides two bird-heads modeled in the round (pl. II, fig. 7), or the head on one side and a conventional tail on the other (pl. II, fig. 9). The birds are evidently some species of parrot, and the portrayal is fairly realistic, showing the heavy upper mandible, the smaller lower one, and the tongue. The representation is completed by the use of paint, the eye being indicated by a black circle containing a dot; the top and sides of the head are colored red, the throat and lower mandible black. When the tail takes the place of a second head it consists of a flat, horizontal projection with little or no attempt at naturalism. Other pieces with added sculptures in the round are

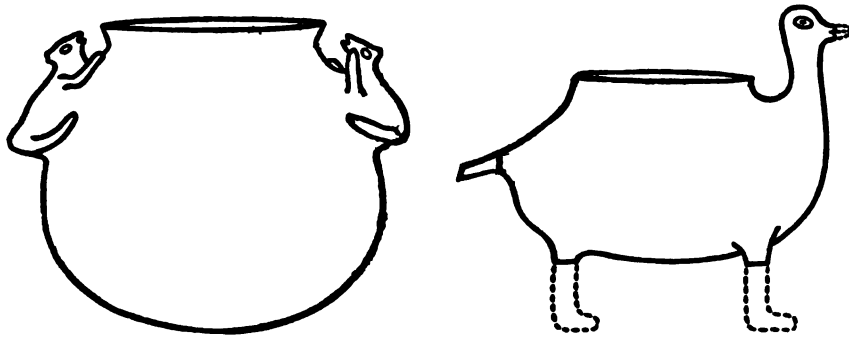


FIG. 1.—Plastic ornament.

shown in figure 1. The former has two crouching animals under the rim; the latter presumably represents a quadruped, although the head is somewhat birdlike.

Also formed by additions to standard-shaped jars but with their parts in low relief rather than in the round, are examples such as appear in plate II, figures 1 and 4. Number 4 is an arrangement of two serpents so coiled about the vessel as to cover its entire surface and end with their heads on opposite sides. The bodies and heads are formed, partly by repoussé work, partly by building up on the outside. The other example (pl. II, fig. 1) has a human face in low relief on each side of a rather stout standard jar. In this case there is no repoussé work, the features merely having been added to the rounded wall of the vessel. Brows, ears, eyes, nose, mouth, and chin are built up from the surface, pinched or modeled into some semblance of naturalism, and picked out with paint. Both the mouth and the eyes are made by cutting a shallow horizontal groove in an applied oval pellet of clay. Plate I, figure 10, shows a second specimen of this type; the eyes of this one are small, round protuberances; the pupils are indicated by dots of paint.