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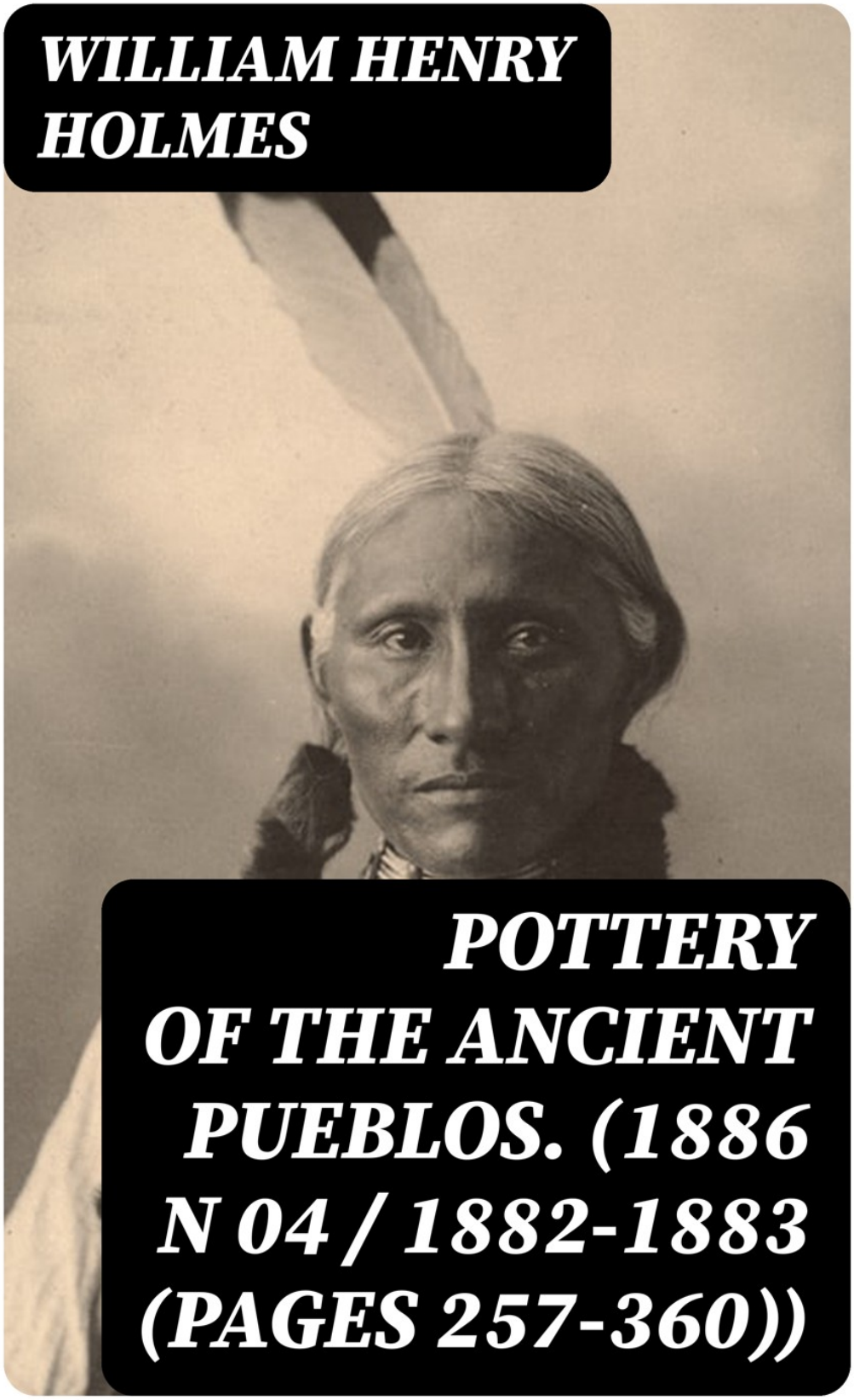

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William Henry Holmes

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POTTERY OF THE ANCIENT PUEBLOS.

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By William H. Holmes.

INTRODUCTORY.

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A study of the pottery of the ancient Pueblo peoples is here commenced in accordance with plans formed years ago by the Director of the Bureau of Ethnology. His aim was to present to the world a monographic work upon the splendid material obtained by the Bureau, including with it the important collections made previously by himself. The preparation of this work has been postponed from time to time with the view of completing the collections, which were being enriched by annual visits to the Pueblo country. Meantime I began the study of the collection for the purpose of securing at the start a satisfactory classification of the material on hand.

The present paper is the first result of that study. I have, however, taken up only the more ancient groups of ware, leaving the rest for subsequent papers. A comparative study is not attempted, for the reason that a detailed examination of all the groups to be considered is absolutely essential to satisfactory results. Conclusions drawn from partial observations lead generally to error.

There were great difficulties in the way of treating satisfactorily the modern varieties of ware, as no one had sufficient familiarity with the language of the Pueblo tribes to discuss the ideographic phases of the ornamentation. Mr. F. H. Cushing's studies bid fair to supply this want, and his recent return from Zuñi has led to the preparation of the valuable paper presented in this volume.

Mr. James Stevenson, who has procured a large portion of the collection of modern pottery, has published catalogues with copious illustrations. Most of the cuts have been prepared under my supervision, and have been selected with the view of securing engravings of a full series of typical examples for a final work.

PUEBLO ART.

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DISTRIBUTION.—The ancient Pueblo peoples dwelt in a land of cañons and high plateaus. They had their greatest development in the valley of the Rio Colorado, where they delighted to haunt the shadows of the deepest gorges and build their dwellings along the loftiest cliffs. The limits of their territory are still in a measure undefined. We discover remnants of their arts in the neighboring valleys of Great Salt Lake, the Arkansas, and the Rio Grande, and southward we can trace them beyond the Rio Gila into the table-lands of Chihuahua and Sonora.

Thus outlined, we have an area of more than one hundred thousand square miles, which has at times more or less remote been occupied by tribes of town-building and pottery-making Indians.

CHARACTER.—High and desert-like as this land is, it has borne a noble part in fostering and maturing a culture of its own—a culture born of unusual needs, shaped by exceptional environment, and limited by the capacities of a peculiar people. Cliff houses and cavate dwellings are not new to architecture, and pottery resembling the Pueblo ware in many respects may be found wherever man has developed a corresponding degree of technical skill; yet there is an individuality in these Pueblo remains that separates them distinctly from all others and lends a keen pleasure to their investigation.

TREATMENT.—The study of prehistoric art leads inevitably to inquiries into the origin of races. Solutions of these questions have generally been sought through migrations, and these have been traced in a great measure by analogies in archæologic remains; but in such investigation one important factor has been overlooked, namely, the laws that govern migrations of races do not regulate the distribution of arts. The pathways do not correspond, but very often conflict. The arts migrate in ways of their own. They pass from place to place and from people to people by a process of acculturation, so that peoples of unlike origin practice like arts, while those of like origin are found practicing unlike arts. The threads of the story are thus so entangled that we find it impossible to trace them backward to their beginnings.

For the present, therefore, I do not propose to study the arts of this province with the expectation that they will furnish a key to the origin of the peoples, or to the birthplace of their arts, but I shall treat them with reference

rather to their bearing upon the processes by which culture has been achieved and the stages through which it has passed, keeping always in mind that a first requisite in this work is a systematic and detailed study of the material to be employed.

THE CERAMIC ART.

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AGE.—The ceramic art of the ancient Pueblos is practically a unit. We find in its remains few indications of distinct periods. There is nothing to carry us back to a remote past. The oldest specimens known are nearly as high in the scale as the latest. In the deposits of caves and burial-grounds we find, so far, nothing more archaic than in the ruins of once populous villages and beneath the fallen walls of hewnstone cliff houses. In methods of manufacture and in styles of ornamentation there is no specific distinction.

Once introduced, there is much in the character of the country to develop this art. The people were sedentary, and thus able to practice the art continuously for a long period; and in a country so arid there was often great need of vessels suitable for the transportation and storage of water.

MATERIAL.—Nature was lavish in her supply of the material needed. Suitable clay could be found in nearly every valley, both in the well-exposed strata and in the sediment of streams. I have noticed that after the passage of a sudden storm over the mesa country, and the rapid disappearance of the transient flood, the pools of the arroyos would retain a sediment of clay two or three inches thick, having a

consistency perfectly suited to the hand of the potter. This I have taken without tempering and have made imitations of the handsome vases whose remnants I could pick up on all sides. In drying and burning, these vessels were liable to crack and fall to pieces; but I see no reason why, with the use of proper tempering materials, this natural paste might not be successfully employed. It would not be difficult, however, to find the native clay among the sedimentary formations of this district. Usually the clay has been very fine grained, and when used without coarse tempering the vessels have an extremely even and often a conchoidal fracture.

TEMPERING.—The materials used in tempering do not often come into notice. It appears that, in a majority of cases, fine sand, probably derived from naturally disintegrated rocks, was employed. A large percentage of rather coarse sand is found in the more roughly finished coil-made ware, but vessels intended for smooth finish have little perceptible tempering material.

The speckled appearance of some of the abraded surfaces suggests the use of pulverized potsherds, a practice frequently resorted to by the modern tribes. In some localities, notably in the south, we find a slight admixture of mica, which may have come from the use of pulverized micaceous rock.

CONSTRUCTION.—No one can say just how the materials were manipulated, fashioned into vessels, and baked; yet many facts can be gleaned from a critical examination of the vessels themselves; and an approximate idea of the various processes employed may be formed by a study of

the methods of modern potters of the same region or of corresponding grades of culture.

It is evident that the vessels were built and finished by the hands alone; no wheel was used, although supports, such as shallow earthen vessels, baskets, and gourds were certainly employed to a considerable extent. Primitive processes of building have varied considerably. The simplest method perhaps was that of shaping a single mass of clay by pressure with the fingers, either with or without the assistance of a mold or support. The mold would be useful in shaping shallow vessels, such as plates, cups, and bowls. The walls of vessels of eccentric forms or having constricted apertures would be carried upward by the addition of small more or less elongated masses of clay, with no support but the hand or an implement held in the hand. Casting proper, in regularly constructed molds, was practiced only by the more cultured races, such as the Peruvians. A variety of methods may have been employed in the construction of a single piece.

Surface Finish.—A great deal of attention was given to surface finish. In the coiled ware the imbricate edges of the fillets were generally either smoothed down and obliterated entirely, or treated in such a way as to give a variety of pleasing effects of relief decoration. Vessels with smooth surfaces, whether built by coiling, modeling, or molding, very often received a thin coat of fine liquid clay, probably after partial drying and polishing. This took the place of the enamels used by more accomplished potters, and being usually white, it gave a beautiful surface upon which to execute designs in color. Before the color was applied the

surface received a considerable degree of polish by rubbing with a suitable implement of stone or other material. Attention was given chiefly to surfaces exposed to view—the interior of bowls and the exterior of narrow-necked vases.

Firing.—The firing of the ancient ware seems to have been carefully and successfully accomplished. The methods probably did not differ greatly from those practiced by the modern Pueblo tribes. The ware is, as a rule, light in color, but is generally much clouded by the dark spots that result from imperfections in the methods of applying the fire. The heat was rarely great enough to produce anything like vitrifaction of the surface, and the paste is seldom as hard as our stone ware.

Glaze.—A great deal has been said about the glaze of native American wares, which exists, if at all, through accident. The surface of the white ware of nearly all sections received a high degree of mechanical polish, and the effect of firing was often to heighten this and give at times a slightly translucent effect; a result of the spreading or sinking of the coloring matter of the designs.

Hardness.—The paste exposed in fractured edges can be scratched with a steel point, and often with ease. Some of the white pottery of ancient Tusayan can be carved almost as readily as chalk or sun-dried clay. At the same time all localities furnish occasionally specimens that through the accidents of firing have the ring and hardness of stoneware. The ancient pottery is generally superior in hardness to that produced by the historic tribes.

COLOR.—This pottery presents a pleasing variety of color, although the light grays prevail, especially in the more archaic varieties. The general color probably depended greatly upon the natural constituents of the clay and the degree of heat applied, and these conditions varied with the locality and the people. Reds and browns result from the presence of iron, which may have been oxidized in burning, or the red oxides may have been used in rare cases as coloring matter in kneading the clay. The surface is often lighter than the mass; a condition probably resulting from the presence of vegetable matter in the clay, which is destroyed on the surface and remains unchanged within. In the south the colors of the paste are often slightly reddish or yellowish in hue. It is notable that a small percentage of the ware of all localities is red. This gives rise to the suggestion that vessels of this color probably had some especial or sacred use. Color is known to have an intimate connection with superstitious observances among many barbarian peoples.

FORM.—In form the ancient ware is universally simple and pleasing. Many shapes known to both civilized and barbarian art are absent. High-necked bottles and shallow plates are of rare occurrence, and pitchers, canteens or lenticular bottles, and vessels with legs and stands are unknown. There is a notable dearth of life forms, a circumstance that would seem to indicate the rather tardy development of a taste for modeling—a condition which may have resulted from the comparatively recent origin or introduction of art in clay.

Vessels with full globular bodies prevail. The bottoms are generally round or a little pointed, indicating primitive conditions of life and suggesting great simplicity in methods of manufacture and in the models copied.

Origin of Forms.—There can be no doubt that ceramic forms are to a great extent derivative, and the search for their originals will constitute a most important feature in our studies. Turning to nature for possible originals, we find them liberally supplied by both the animal and the vegetable kingdom. The shells of the sea shore were probably among the first receptacles for food and drink. We have examples of pottery from the mounds in the Mississippi Valley, representing three or four distinct varieties of shells. The shells of turtles and the horns of cattle and other animals have also served as models.

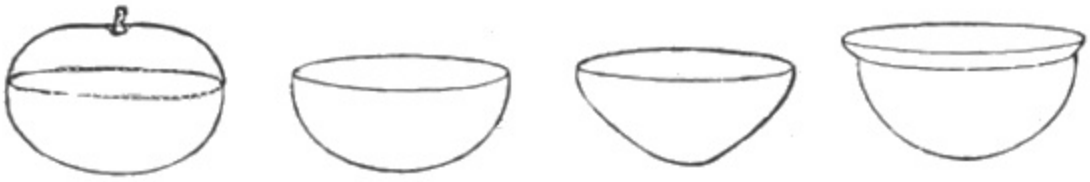

FIG. 210.—Origin of forms.

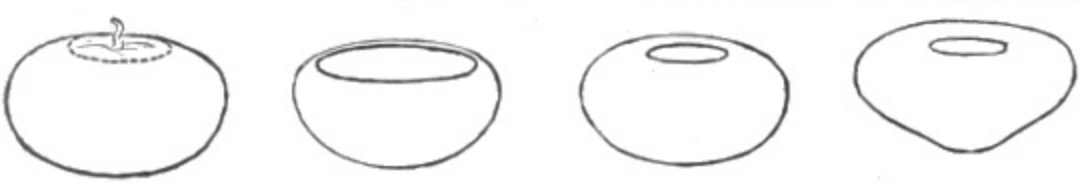

FIG. 211.—Origin of forms.

The vegetable world furnishes many originals; the gourd, for example, was utilized at a very early date. Its forms are greatly varied, and must have given rise to many primitive shapes of vessels in clay, and perhaps in wicker-work and

wood. One of the ordinary forms cut off midway would suggest the series of bowls outlined in Fig. 210. Simply perforated it would give rise to the series illustrated in Fig. 211.

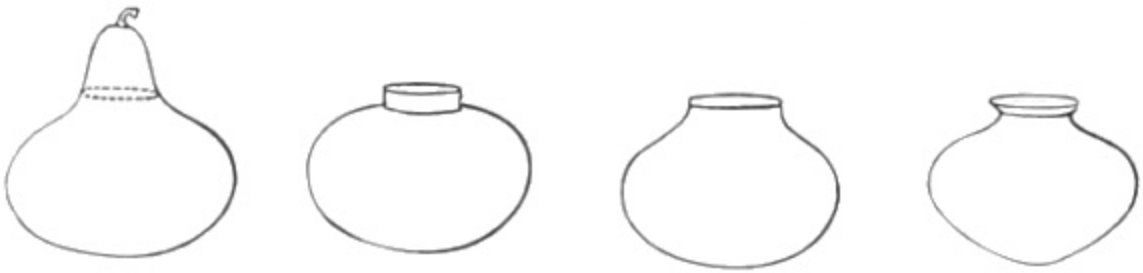

FIG. 212.—Origin of forms.

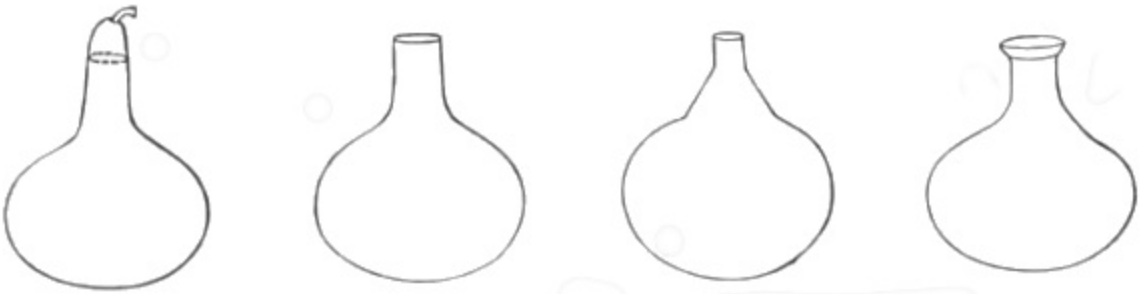

FIG. 213.—Origin of forms.

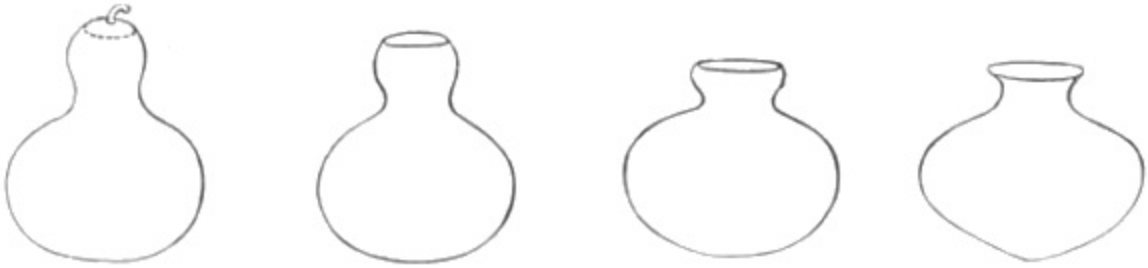

FIG. 214.—Origin of forms.

Wide-mouthed vases would be suggested as indicated in Fig. 212, bottles as shown in Fig. 213, and eccentric forms as seen in Fig. 214.

These particular examples are presented in illustration of the manner in which forms may be derived and nothing more, as there are many possible origins of the same forms. In a separate paper I have amplified this topic, and have discussed the relative importance of the influence of natural and artificial products upon the conformation of utensils of clay.

HANDLES.—In searching for the first suggestions of handles we must certainly go back to the very beginnings of art, when men and women employed leaves or vines to carry their children or their food, or to suspend them for safety from the trees of the forest. The art of basketry would naturally fall heir to this use of handles. Clay, bronze, and iron, when they came into use, would also inherit some of the forms thus developed. There are, however, other sources of equal importance, among which are animal forms, such as horns, and various forms of vegetable growth, such as the gourd. The latter may again serve as an illustration.

By cutting the body of the gourd longitudinally at one side of the axis, we have dippers with straight or curved necks or handles. The primitive potter would in like manner have the suggestion of a handled vessel in clay, which, carried forward by the ever active spirit of improvement, would in time give us the series shown in Figs. 215 and 216:

Fig. 215.—Origin of handles.

FIG. 216.—Origin and development of handles.

ORNAMENT.—The shapes of vessels are, in a measure, ornamental, but it is difficult to say just how much the necessary or functional characters of particular forms have given way to decorative modifications. Pure ornament is a feature not essential to the vessel. Its ideas may be expressed by three principal methods: by relieved, by flat, and by intaglio figures.

Relief ornament was not extensively employed by the ancient Pueblos. The forms are few and simple, and nearly all are traceable to constructional or to functional features. Thus the ornamental crenulated surface of the coiled ware is constructional, consisting as it does of ridges, resulting from the method of building. The knobs, isolated coils, and festooned fillets are probably, in some cases, atrophied forms of handles.

Intaglio decoration is still more rare. It consists of incised, impressed, and punctured figures. No designs of importance are produced by this method, the most notable being the simple patterns traced by the finger or a sharp implement upon the relieved edges of fillets in the coiled ware.

With these people, the highest class of decoration consisted of designs in color. This topic is fully discussed in a subsequent section.

Origin of ornament.—It is probable that before pottery came into use the decorative art had been cultivated in other fields, and we shall need to look both to nature and to antecedent arts for the originals of many decorative ideas.

From a remote period man has been able to appreciate beauty. The first exercise of taste would probably be in the direction of personal adornment, and would consist in the choice of colors or articles thought to enhance attractiveness, or in the grouping and modification of objects at first functional in character. Later, taste would be exercised on a variety of subjects, and finally it would extend to all things in use. Man may have recognized the comeliness of the first simple articles employed in his humble arts, but when he came to attempt the multiplication of these articles artificially, utility was probably the only thought. In reproducing them, however, non-essential features would be copied automatically, and the work of art would through this accident inherit purely ornamental attributes.

Thus it appears that the first ideas of decoration do not necessarily originate in the mind of the potter, but that, like the shapes of art products, they may be derived, unconsciously, from nature. This is an important consideration. At a later stage new forms of ornament are derived in a like manner from constructional features of the various arts. Invention of decorative motives is not to be expected of a primitive, tradition-following people. Advance is greatly by utilization of accidents.

Use.—A satisfactory classification of this pottery by functional characters will be most difficult to make. In the

early stages of its manufacture it was confined chiefly, if not solely, to the alimentary arts. A differentiation of use would take place when certain vessels were set aside for special departments of the domestic work. Thus we would have vessels for eating, for cooking, for carrying, and for storage. When vessels came to be used in superstitious exercises, certain forms were probably set aside for especial ceremonies. With some peoples, particular forms were dedicated to mortuary uses, but we have no clew to any such custom among the ancient Pueblos, as the same vessel served for food both before and after death, and cinerary vessels were not called for. Certain classes of the ruder and plainer ware are found to be blackened by smoke. These were evidently cooking vessels. The painted pottery rarely shows evidences of such use. Bowls were probably employed chiefly in preparing and serving food. The larger vessels were devoted to carrying and storing water, fruits, grains, and miscellaneous articles. Smaller vessels were used as receptacles for paint, grease, and the like. The ancient people had not yet devoted their ceramic art to trivial uses—there are no toys, no rattles, and no grotesque figures.

Classification.—In treating a subject covering so wide a field, and embracing such a diversity of products, a careful classification of the material is called for. Three grand divisions of the ceramic work of this province may be made on a time basis, namely: prehistoric, transitional, and modern. At present I have to deal chiefly with the prehistoric, but must also pay some attention to the transitional, as it embraces many features common both to