

Pottery Ornaments from Rio Tapajós, Brazil

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"Aborigine pottery ornaments from a village site on plateau near Bellaterra, Rio Tapajós, Brazil. Coll[ected by] J. R. Weir, 1934-38." This little note on the top of a stationary box doesn't say much, but it tells us all that we know of the origin of these pieces of Amazonian art collected by the late James R. Weir of Edinburg, Indiana.

The Rio Tapajós flows North into the Amazon River and on the South East bank at this junction is the village of Santarém. Rain was the first "archeologist" to do extensive excavating at Santarém: "a cloudburst washed out the streets of Santarém and uncovered stone tools and a great quantity of pottery" (1). This was in the summer of 1922, and it was the beginning of the formal definition of the Santarém complex. The items here described belong to that complex, which, says Betty J. Meggers, "is perhaps the most remarkable in the Amazon Valley". The paste is light grey in cross section and light tan on the surface. Santarém pottery is notable for its unusual shapes and profusion of modeled bird and animal ornament" (1). Descriptive notes on a few such ornaments follow.

Designs are: a) geometric, No. 10; b) anthropomorphic, Nos. 6, 7, 8, & 11; or zoöomorphic, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, & 9. The numbers refer to the ornament numbers in plate 1.

An ichthyologist could identify the fish heads represented in Nos. 4 & 5; but to the uninitiated the former is a naturalistic and the latter is a stylized representation of the finny family. The hole which pierces below the eye of No. 4 is the place for a cord or thong with which to carry the vessel to which this ornamental handle was attached. In No. 5, the eyes are appliqué and the facial lines are incised. The tiny trout-like mouth is cut into the bottom corner of the face.

Of the other zoömorphs, Nos. 2 and 3 represent caymans, but the eyes differ: dots of clay are applied in No. 2, while in No. 3 they are projecting fillets with a neat circle depressed around the eye-balls. The conventionalized punctate decoration motif is repeated.

The color of No. 2 differs from all of the other pieces—which are the usual grey paste and light tan fired area. No. 2 is pink on the bottom of the rim and on the interior of the vessel. This may be the result of intensive firing. The only piece here that manifests a certain aboriginal paint job is the frog, No. 1, which has a bit of red paint on the interior of the vessel. We note that the artist caught the dynamic nature of this little amphibian by placing his hind legs in a jumping position.

There are traces of black stain on the surface of No. 9, a beetle—a common motif in Amazonian pottery ornaments from the Santarém

¹ Photograph and original drawings by Robert E. Easton.



Plate 1. Pottery Ornaments from Rio Tapajós, Brazil.

area (2). This may be aboriginal, but the light blue paint (which also appears on rather freshly broken surfaces of other pieces in this collection), is almost certainly a non-aboriginal modification.

The rim of No. 10 exhibits a very neatly expressed fillet in a geometric pattern. But the really interesting facet of this piece is the cross-section, for it is hollow. A diagram of this is given in plate 2.

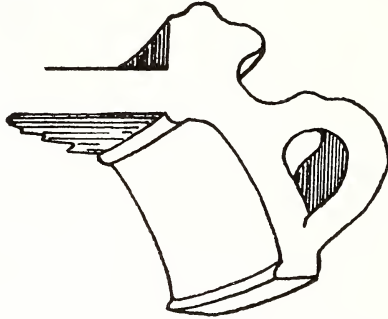


Plate 2. Hollow Rim of Dish, Cross Section.

The slight slit at the top of the hollow interior indicates that the rim was drawn out of the side section of the dish and carefully remolded into the vessel at the top of the rim; it is not a separate piece of clay added to the dish.

Of the anthropomorphic items, No. 11 represents a child clinging (possibly) to its mother. The inside of this ornament is hollow, but not light tan. Therefore, the inside does not represent a fired surface. So, this is (probably) a curious double ornament: the child (made of at least three pieces of clay) is attached to the breast, and this, in turn, is attached to the vessel. The alternate, of course, is that this is simply a part of a large hollow figurine, and not a complete ornament by itself.

The group, Nos. 6 (rear view), 7, & 8, is composed of caryatids. Plate 3 illustrates their function in Santarém pottery. No. 6 shows

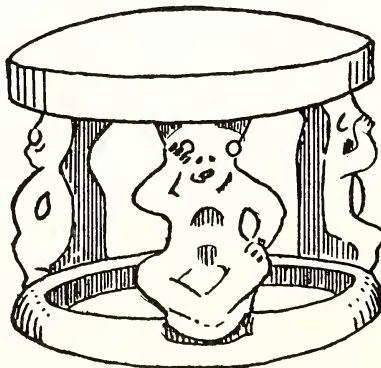


Plate 3. Caryatids.

how the caryatid is fastened to the annular base and to the bowl of the supported object, which can be a dish, plate, or cup. The positions of Nos. 7 & 8 approximate the monkeys of "See-no-evil" and (?) "Speak-no-evil" fame. These three are solid figurines in the round, but obviously not from the same "vase a pied".

Even so cursory a glimpse at Santarém pottery, as this perforce must be, is enough to lead one to begin to see why Nordenskiöld could write (15 years before Betty Meggers said the same thing): "De tous les lieux d'Amazonie d'où a été exhumée de la céramique, c'est peut-être Santarém le plus remarquable" (2).

Literature Cited

1. MAGGERS, BETTY J., "The Archeology of the Amazon Basin," Handbook of South American Indians. Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin No. 143, III, pp. 162 & 163.
2. NORDENSKIÖLD, ERLAND, 1930. *L'Archéologie Du Bassin de L'Amazone*, Paris, pp. 22, 50, & plate XXVI.