

3273
F

12

Nature Reflected in the Art of the Ancient Chiriquians

By

GEORGE GRANT MACCURDY

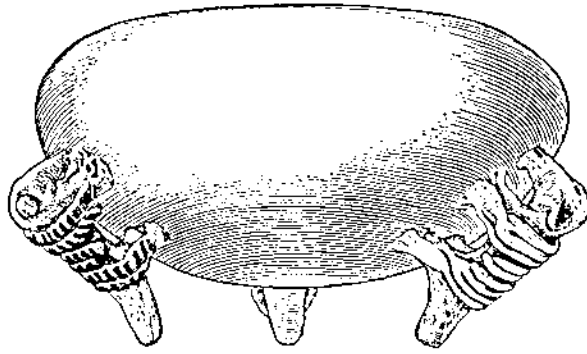
Assistant Professor of Prehistoric Archaeology and Curator of the Anthropological
Collection, Yale University

[*Reprinted from* NATURAL HISTORY, VOL. XIX, No. 2, pp. 141-151, 1919]

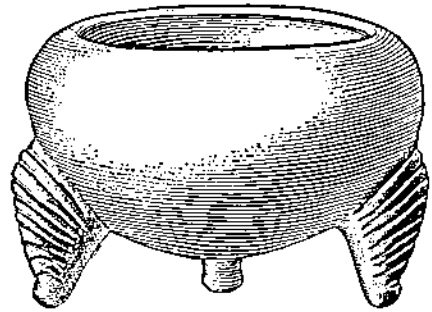
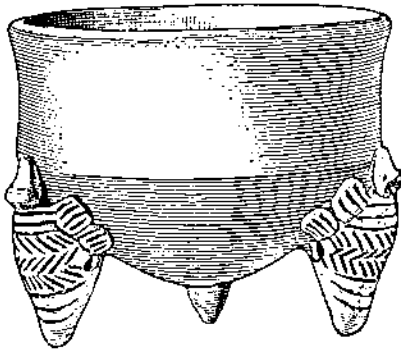
Bibliothèque Maison de l'Orient



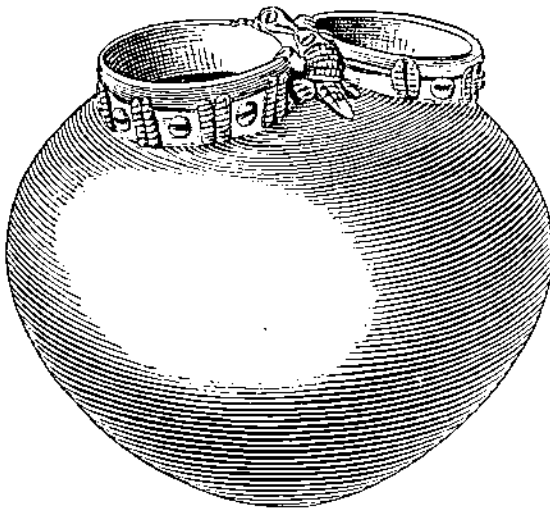
150650



Realistic figure of the armadillo serving as a tripod support.—The armadillo group of Chiriquian pottery is unpainted, but is inferior to none in beauty of form and ornament and typifies the plastic skill and unerring taste of the ancient potter



In the armadillo ware, the figure of the animal is usually conventionalized. Here the carapace alone suffices for identification



It is believed that in the development of the armadillo decorative motive a representation of the entire armadillo came first, after which certain parts, such as the carapace, were used, and finally a single band of the carapace might stand for the whole animal. The ornamentation on the double neck of this vessel is made up of paired bands from the carapace alternating with representations of the eye. Foot and tail are often used in a similar manner

Nature Reflected in the Art of the Ancient Chiriquians

By GEORGE GRANT MACCOURDY

Assistant Professor of Prehistoric Archaeology and Curator of the Anthropological Collection, Yale University

THE age of the cave artist was the age preëminent of fundamentals in art. It was then that the arts of sculpture in the round and in relief, of engraving, and painting were born and first flourished. This troglodyte art was remarkable for its realism, especially throughout its earlier phases. It dealt with life forms, for the most part those of animals useful to man. Its beginnings and its realistic character were due in a measure at least to the necessity of controlling the food supply.

With the final retreat of the continental glaciers and the disappearance of the reindeer and the mammoth from western Europe, cave art suffered an eclipse. The Palæolithic period was followed by a more practical if less artistic age, the Neolithic. While the men of the New Stone age contributed in their turn to art progress, it was in other directions, notably through the far-reaching discovery of the ceramic art.

In any discussion therefore of Neolithic art, ceramic art plays an important rôle. This is true not only of prehistoric Europe but also of prehistoric America. Since many of the ornamental designs that have had such a vogue in historic time had already taken shape before the dawn of history, their origin is to be sought for in prehistoric records. Since the problem in Europe is more complex than that in America, I have chosen some prehistoric American examples, which seem to illustrate the principles that control the origin and evolution of ornament in art. These prove that Neolithic art, like cave art, reflected almost exclu-

sively man's zoölogic environment; they also indicate that man's attitude toward this environment had changed somewhat, the change being measured by the extent to which realism was replaced by conventionalism, and the ex-voto by the totem.

During the earlier as well as the later Stone age, man must have taken a certain delight in the beauty of animal forms independent of their real or supposed influence upon his fortunes; his ability to reproduce the chief features of the animal forms which interested him most no doubt gave him added satisfaction.

The examples chosen all come from a single restricted culture area, namely the province of Chiriqui on the Pacific coast of Panama, and have been selected principally from the unrivaled collection of Chiriquian antiquities in Peabody Museum of Yale University. The specimens belong to the late Stone age, or, to be more exact, the transition from the Neolithic to the age of metals. They are almost wholly from the field of ceramic art and date from a time when the use of the potter's wheel was still unknown in America.

The pottery of ancient Chiriqui is divisible into a number of rather distinct groups depending on the nature of the paste and slip, the form and finish, the presence or absence of paint, and above all the character of the ornament; whether in the round, in relief, incised, or in color; and if in color, the method of producing the design.

An outstanding feature of ancient Chiriquian pottery is the association of a given animal with a given kind of ceramic product. The next and chief

phenomenon is the proliferation of a whole series of decorative motives grouped about a single animal form and presumably derived from it. If this be true, then Chiriqui affords some striking proofs of the way ornamental designs have arisen and of the preponderating influence of conventionalism in their evolution.

A knowledge of the folklore of the ancient Chiriquians might throw light on why the artist made so much of certain animals while ignoring others. This choice might well have been influenced by various considerations such as totemism, tradition, comeliness, or even the mere coincidence of similarity between some artificial product and some well-known animal form. The favorite models were the animals common to the region in question, those whose peculiarities of form and of habit were not beyond the reach of common knowledge. While the artist often produced figures with mixed attributes, their component parts are always referable to living local forms rather than to fabulous creatures.

The largest group of ware is characterized by a distinct kind of paste and slip, the absence of paint, a remarkable purity of form and finish, and ornamentation in the round or in relief. The ornamentation dominant is taken from the armadillo. A favorite adaptation is the use of a more or less realistic figure of the armadillo as tripod supports; another is the perching of the figure on the shoulders of vases. More remarkable still is the isolation of a single feature or part of the armadillo and its use as a decorative motive independent of and at the same time representative of the whole: the eye, the foot, the tail, a band of the carapace. A pleasing pattern for the neck of a vase is a series of carapace motives or tail motives, in zigzag, with a foot or an eye symbol filling each angular space. Each carapace band, or each tail, as the case may be, is executed

skillfully as well as realistically. Only when it comes to the arrangement, the disposition of the series, is there a departure from nature.

In dealing with the armadillo figure as a whole the artist allowed himself considerable latitude. At times he was satisfied with nothing less than a faithful copy. At other times reduction and simplification of parts were carried so far as to render identification difficult. Again, the artist indulged in the reduplication, exaggeration, elimination, or fusion of parts, at all times, however, leaving an unmistakable though indefinable stamp upon his work, a touch that entitled him to rank as a student of nature and, by virtue of this, as a true artist; for the two go hand in hand, are inseparable.

The reasons why the Chiriquian artist gave special prominence to the armadillo are somewhat obscure, beyond its local occurrence, peculiar habits, and its utility as an article of food. Its mythological background is trifling in comparison with that of some other animals; but this could be accounted for in part at least by its limited range. On the other hand the bird and the serpent have a very wide geographic distribution; and curiously enough these are, above all others, the mythological world favorites. It is therefore not at all surprising to find the trail of the serpent in ancient Chiriquian symbolism. In fact it is the chief decorative feature in one small group of ware and has left an impress on two other groups. Like the armadillo ware, the serpent ware belongs in a class by itself because of its distinctive (black) paste and slip and the fact that the designs are incised instead of being in the round or in relief. Moreover, the effect of the incised pattern is heightened through the filling in of the incisions with a white substance.

The favorite theme is a long serpentine body with a head and protruding forked tongue at each end. The whole

forms a balanced and somewhat stylistic figure, which is repeated on the opposite side of the vase. With the elimination of the heads, the breaking up of the body into geometric patterns, and the shifting of the body markings from their original position, the symbolism sometimes reaches a stage of almost complete disguise. As long, however, as the artist confined himself to the distinctive serpent ware his meaning is comparatively clear. When, and if, he attempted to carry this conventionalized serpent symbolism over into other groups of ware calling for a change of medium and technique, and where other motives dominated, the results became confused with designs that started from wholly different originals.

Like the bird and the snake, the fish has an all but universal range, but it does not seem to have left such an indelible impress on the mind of primitive man as have the former two. Chiriquian waters abound in fish, which must have been one of the chief sources of food supply among the ancient inhabitants. Nothing could be more natural than that the potter should endeavor to reproduce a form of such utilitarian as well as artistic adaptability. In fashioning the long tripod supports for urn-shaped vases he would inadvertently arrive at a form suggesting the outlines of a fish; the fortuitous resemblance could be heightened *ad libitum* by emphasis upon such details as the nose, eyes, and fins. In some examples the piscatorial attributes are suggested by the merest touch, such as the slight flattening at the end to indicate the tail fin or the application of a single node on the back to represent the dorsal fin. In others the details are worked out with such care that one is able to identify the exact species.

Few animals have left a more potent symbolic impress upon the culture of various peoples of the earth than has the alligator or crocodile (Spanish *el*

lagarto). The extent of this influence is revealed in art. The prototype of the Chinese dragon is no doubt the alligator, with which the Yangtze River teemed in prehistoric time and which must have filled with terror the heart of the riparian rice-grower of that period (as pointed out by Dr. Berthold Laufer). It was probably the Egyptian crocodile that inspired the author of the book of Job to write: "Canst thou draw out leviathan with a hook?" As was the case in China and Egypt, so it was in Chiriqui, where the record is none the less complete because of its being pictorial instead of written.

Representations of the alligator not only are confined almost wholly to two related groups of Chiriquian pottery but also are dominant in these groups. Since both groups depend on color for their ornamentation, the alligator occurs consistently in painted forms only, never as a figure in the round, in relief, or incised.

The larger of the two groups is known as alligator ware and is characterized by a paste of excellent quality, a cream-colored slip, and by red and black delineating colors, both being of an enduring nature. The more realistic figures of the alligator are in profile and decorate the bodies of globular vases, one being painted on each side. The artist emphasized certain features of the animal by preference: jaws of exaggerated length and recurved, especially the upper one, undue prominence of the frontal region, a synclinal sweep of the body line, and a scrupulous care that the scales and spines be not omitted. A favorite method of bringing the scales into view was to group them in triangular or semicircular fields that rose above the dorsal line. Profile figures of the alligator are encountered ranging all the way from elaborate realistic representations to a simple abbreviated horizontal body curve with a single dot in the hollow of the curve to indicate the dorsal body markings.

SERPENT WARE

Representations of the serpent on Chiriquian pottery are almost wholly confined to one small ceramic group, the so-called *black incised ware*. On this the serpent motive is so all-pervading as to justify the name *serpent ware*. The deep incisions in this ware were made before the paste hardened and were filled with a white substance that stands out in bold contrast with the black ground. The geometric decorations of the uppermost vessel here shown are a survival of the serpent symbol. In the second figure the body of the serpent with head at both ends passes around the body of the vase three times.

Opposite sides of the third vase are decorated with a pattern evidently intended to represent a similar serpent with head and forked tongue at each end. The body of the serpent is folded on itself in such a manner as to produce geometric outlines and thoroughly cover the field to be decorated. The handles of this vessel, where they merge into the lip, are crossed by an incised fillet resembling the carapace symbol so common in the armadillo ware. A breaking up of the elements that enter into the realistic representation of the serpent is sometimes seen, a series of triangles being formed by the body motive with the markings appearing only in the enclosed spaces. This results not only in economy of labor but also in more thoroughly covering the area to be decorated; hence conventionalism has ever been as much the child of economy as of ritual



ALLIGATOR WARE

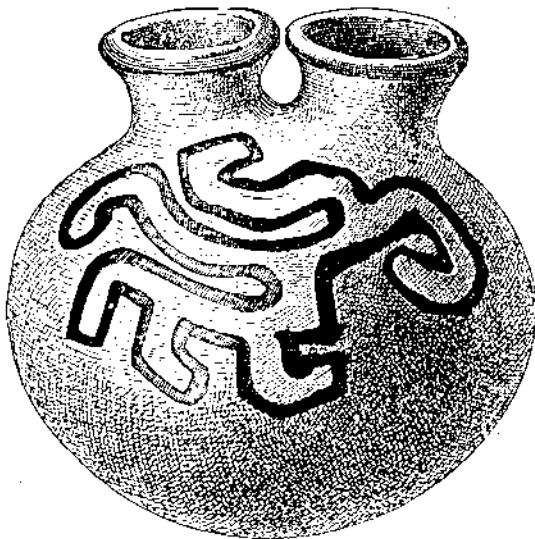
The skill of the ancient Chiriquian artist is nowhere better displayed than in his treatment of the alligator, representations of which characterize two related ceramic groups (the so called alligator ware and the polychrome ware) which, unlike the armadillo ware, depend on color for ornamentation. In this profile figure are combined the chief features of the alligator, including scales and spines.



It is by no means certain that the ancient Chiriquians may not have had in mind the crocodile rather than the alligator, since both are found in Chiriquian waters. The length of jaw depicted at times by the artist seems to indicate the former instead of the shorter muzzled alligator. The stylistic figure here shown has a head at both ends of the body. Dots representing eyes and teeth are placed where space invites rather than where they belong.



What at first glance looks like a meaningless bundle of waving arms portrayed on this vase is a conventional treatment of the alligator with the head turning backward. The much exaggerated jaws extend over the back and tail, balanced by a long appendage on the neck, while the space below is amply filled by a relatively small trunk, tail, and legs.





A favorite representation shows the alligator in absolute profile. Note the open mouth with teeth, the upturned snout, the dorsal markings on the head and tail, and the long crest attached to the neck



Vessels of the alligator group mounted as tripods are comparatively rare. The supports are usually short, solid, pointed cones marked by horizontal black bands. In this vase from El Banco the neck is quite short and the shoulder decoration consists of three panels each bearing a series of scale-group symbols.



The profile view of the alligator is here reduced to its simplest elements: the curve of the body line and a dot in the hollow of the curve to represent the scales on the back of the animal



A representation of the alligator similar to the figure at the top of the page is here shown, the body markings being represented by only one type of scale-group motive, repeated three times on the head and five times on the tail

Not content with his success in executing the profile view of the alligator, the artist also took special pains to picture the dorsal aspect of the animal, a difficult problem happily solved through the aid of conventionalism. By means of a series of parallel lines the rows of spines on the alligator's back were indicated; while to the lateral margins of the series were attached spines or dotted triangles to represent the scales. To these triangles I have given the name *scale-group* motive, while the figure as a whole I have called the *dorsal-view* motive. The latter is a favorite decoration for arched panels on the shoulders of vases.

The other group of ware in which alligator motives prevail is small but of special importance. It is known as *polychrome* ware, and is at once recognizable through the addition of purple as a delineating color, special skill in the elaboration of designs, and versatility in the shaping process. It is in this group alone that we find the highly ornamental branching scroll pattern evolved from the multiple body line of the alligator combined with a series of alligator profile motives.

In this rare ceramic group we find a painted figure with alligator and human attributes combined—alligator head on a human body to which are attached human arms and legs and an alligator tail—a figure which I have called the *alligator god*. The alligator god was a particular favorite with the Chiriquian metal worker. Over and over again we find him among the gold figurines. His human feet are usually planted on the body of an alligator, to each end of which is attached an alligator head and undifferentiated fore-legs; while on his alligator head rests a similar double-headed alligator inverted.

The octopus frequents the waters on both sides of the Isthmus. Like the alligator it might be expected to cast a powerful spell over the mind of primi-

tive man. The reasons for this would be clear enough if one could see it through the eyes of the *Travailleurs de la Mer*, as Victor Hugo attempted to do. The prehistoric as well as the historic art of the Mediterranean region bears abundant evidence of this. Figures of the octopus, both realistic and conventionalized, occur in the art of ancient Greece and elsewhere. Passing to the New World, one readily encounters two centers of the octopus cult, Peru and Chiriqui.

In Chiriqui we find the association of the octopus with a single kind of ceramic product, which for the sake of convenience we may call *octopus ware*. This ware differs from the alligator group and both differ from the *armadillo* ware. In point of numbers the octopus group ranks next to the *armadillo* group. It consists for the most part of slender-necked globular vases of medium size. The prevailing color of the slip is red. On this the designs were laid down in wax. The part to be decorated was then treated with a uniform coat of black. Later the vessel was passed through a hot bath; this melted the wax which carried with it portions of the overlying black, leaving the desired pattern in the color of the ground. The technique and the nature of the colors employed are thus wholly different from those in the ceramic groups already described. The only point in common is that here again the prevailing decorative motives center about a single zoömorphie original—the octopus—and are presumably derived from it.

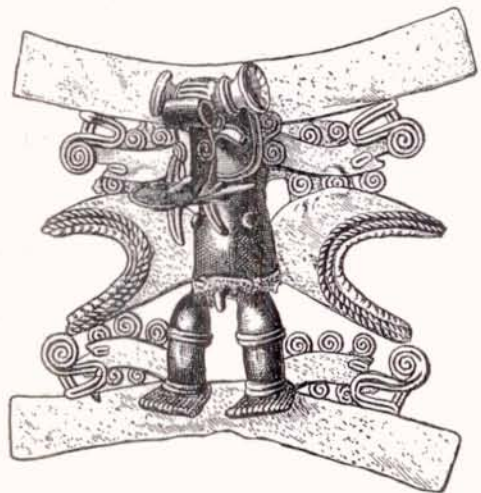
There is something peculiarly fitting in the association of the octopus with small-necked round-bodied vases that depend for their ornamentation upon a system of negative painting. By adding eight appendages the body and mouth of the vase at once become the body and mouth of an octopus. This is equally the case whether the arms depend from the neck or rise from the



Polychrome ware is remarkable for its rarity as well as for its refinement and beauty of ornamentation. It is more closely akin to the alligator ware than to any other, the delineating colors, black and red, being the same, while the addition of purple in many cases gives a distinguishing character. The elaborate branching scroll decorating this vase is derived from the multiple body curve of the alligator, to which seven alligator profile motives are attached (compare with third figure, page 146)



The alligator god (at the left).—This extraordinary design on the inside of a cup or chalice of polychrome ware represents the human body and extremities surmounted by the alligator's head with all its characteristic traits. The artistic red and purple spines are attached to the crests instead of to the head proper. It has been observed that there is great resemblance in this decoration to that of the earliest known period of Chinese art



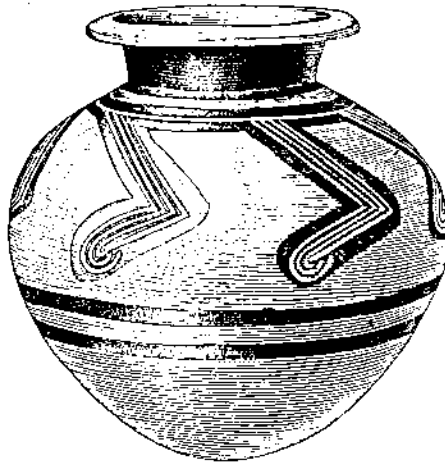
The parrot god (at the right).—The human body is sometimes combined with avian attributes, as seen in this figure cast in gold. Even here alligator symbolism is present in the foot rest, which is repeated in inverted position to form the headdress of the god



Octopus ware, showing realistic figure of an octopus.—One of the best examples of the association of a given animal with a certain ceramic product is exemplified in this so-called octopus ware, which like the alligator ware depends on color for its ornamentation. The method of producing the design and the nature of the colors used are, however, very different in the two.

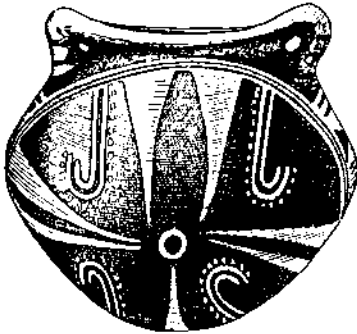


In this example of octopus ware the octopus appendage alone is used. It appears in a curved frondlike representation and also in the guise of a short-based triangle with a series of dots representing the suckers, these motives alternating in a series below the neck of the vessel



FURTHER
EXAMPLES OF
OCTOPUS
WARE

Outlined in black on a light ground, eight octopus arms (of the curved frond type) depend from the neck of this vase, the neck and mouth of the vase being in the position of body and mouth of the octopus.



Triangular and curved frond octopus appendages converging toward the center of a circular panel. On the vessel at the right there are four sets of appendages, namely, one descending from the neck, one rising from the base, and two converging toward the centers of opposite circular panels.



Here the triangular and frond type (the fronds are straightened) of octopus appendage alternate, filling an arched panel. The straightened fronds bear two rows of suckers each.



A pale yellow and black vase has a zonal decoration. The two broad black bands are broken up by a succession of diamond-shaped figures each representing an octopus body. (Compare with figure at top of page 149.) Appendages have been eliminated and dots indicating the suckers have been placed within the body areas.

vessel's maximum horizontal circumference.

Again the globular shape of the body makes it possible to describe a circular panel on each side. This is sometimes filled by a realistic figure of the octopus. Again in the center of this panel a small circle may be traced; and toward this make-believe mouth as a center, octopus appendages converge from the periphery of the panel. Thus can a single vase be made to represent two complete octopus figures. In some examples the reduplication is repeated about the neck and bottom of the vase respectively, resulting in a quadruple representation of the complete octopus figure.

The one outstanding feature of the octopus is the set of eight suckered appendages; to these the Chiriquian artist gave special attention. The more realistic appendage representations are frondlike and accompanied by a row of sucker dots along the convex margin. The less realistic appendage motive takes the form of a short-based triangle, with a row of suckers paralleling one or both of the long sides. From both the frondlike and the triangular appendage the suckers are often omitted, or they may appear by transposition on the body of the octopus.

In addition to the armadillo, serpent, fish, alligator, and octopus,¹ each of which is dominant in a distinct ceramic group, there are several other ani-

mals which appealed more or less to the fancy of the artist. Among these are the frog occurring by preference in the armadillo group, the monkey, raccoon, squirrel, iguana, tapir, deer, peccary, crab, owl, parrot, and jaguar. The two last named are met with not only in the alligator ware especially as whistles but also among the metal figurines. Both are sometimes combined with human attributes to form what I have called the jaguar god and the parrot god.

The development of decorative and symbolic art is not to be demonstrated by means of mathematical formulas; that its manifestations are however subject to the laws of growth and of decay, there can be little doubt. In the evolution of ornament in art, the haphazard plays an insignificant rôle. The reasons for each step may not always be obvious, but they exist nevertheless. The work of a given artist reflects alike his spiritual make-up and his environment, cultural as well as natural. The marks of kinship running through the group of alligator or octopus motives, for example, rest on a more solid basis than mere fortuitous convergence toward a common type. Each artist either had in mind the common source of inspiration, or else copied from someone who was drawing on that original source. The source is always and everywhere nature; and that art is best which remains true to its source.

¹Mr. B. W. Merwin of the University Museum, Philadelphia, has recently called attention to a snake (*Crotalus durissus*) from Chiriqui, the scale pattern of which is not unlike some of the designs to be found both in the alligator and octopus ceramic groups. In other words, with such an exuberant proliferation of decorative motives derived from a single zoomorphic original there is ever present the possibility of the overlapping of motives that started from wholly different originals. For example dots were employed not only to represent the scales of the alligator but also for the suckers of the octopus; they might also be made to stand for spots on a snake's back. The dotted triangle served as a convenient symbol for groups of alligator scales. On the other hand a short-based triangle accompanied by dots along one or both of its longer sides was without the

shadow of a doubt derived from the octopus appendage. A realistic representation of the body pattern of a Chiriquian rattlesnake is satisfactorily expressed by means of rhombs, and perhaps even by triangles. The confusion arising from possible convergences of this kind is, however, reduced to a minimum by the fact that the three animals in question are each dominant in its own distinctive ceramic group. In the alligator ware, the influence of other animal forms is negligible; the same is true of the octopus and the serpent wares. The probabilities are therefore that a dotted triangle is not a serpent motive when occurring on alligator or octopus ware; neither is it a scale-group symbol or appendage-sucker motive if occurring within the ceramic group known as serpent ware. This much can be said without denying the possibility of the reverse being true in exceptional cases.