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DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

BULLETIN II

**The Little Pottery Objects of  
Lake Chapala, Mexico**

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By

**FREDERICK STARR**

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CHICAGO

**The University of Chicago Press**

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NOTE.—The illustrations are all of natural size, and are made from pen drawings, from the originals, by M. K. Seralian.

## THE LITTLE POTTERY OBJECTS OF LAKE CHAPALA.

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Lake Chapala is the largest body of fresh water in the Republic of Mexico. It lies in the State of Jalisco, to the northwest from the City of Mexico and at a distance of about two hundred and fifty miles in a direct line. Surrounded by beautiful mountains, its scenery presents a bold and Alpine character. A number of towns lie along the margin of the lake, among which La Barca lies upon the Mexican Central Railroad, and Chapala is a place of considerable resort. The country about the lake was, and to a certain extent still is, Tarascan territory.

My attention was first called to the little potteries of Lake Chapala by Francisco Fredenhagen of Guadalajara. Mr. Fredenhagen showed me a string of little ladles and *ollitas* found at Chapala, either in the lake or washed up on the shore. He suggested that they might come from the site of some ancient town built over the water, analogous to the well-known Swiss lake-dwellings. Since then I have attempted, with no success, to find any signs of such pile-structures. The fishermen of the neighborhood deny the existence of any stumps of posts or piles in the lake, and at the times of my visits the water has been too high for satisfactory examination. The question is not decided.

The occurrence of these little terra cotta objects—vessels, ladles, sinkers, spindle-whorls, and figures—in the lake is curious. Archaeological objects abound in the district, and pottery vessels and figures of characteristic types are common all around the lake. But they are all large, and the vessels were serviceable for daily use. These larger objects appear to be rare or quite absent from the lake itself; on the other hand, the little objects which are about to be described are so rare as to be practically unknown at all the land localities with which I am acquainted.

There are several points in the western part of the lake where these little objects are found. Chapala is by no means the best locality, though the first I knew. They are found again about four miles west from it. But the best of the known localities is Ocotepéc. At all these places the specimens may be found, though rarely, along the shore, where they have been washed up by the waves. Such specimens usually show signs of wavewear. The most numerous and finest specimens are found when the water of the lake is at its lowest level. They may then be taken out or dug from the lake bottom at a spot where the water often stands from one to two fathoms deep. Many of the specimens are coated with a lime deposit or with slimy vegetable growth.

I divide the specimens in my own collection into five groups—ollitas, ladles, sinkers, spindle-whorls, and figurines. Far the larger number of them are of a dark gray—almost black—or grayish ware, fairly fine-grained and pretty well baked, but easily broken. The ollitas are the commonest of all the types. Out of a collection of 261 specimens there are 181 ollitas, 15 sinkers, 48 whorls, 11 ladles, 6 figurines. The ollitas are really more common proportionally than this, for in collecting I have often rejected them, while I have never refused specimens of the rest, if they were at all good. Taking up each of these classes, I shall describe the types in detail :

*Ollitas*.—These are made with much care. They are too small for use, and the mouths are frequently small out of proportion to

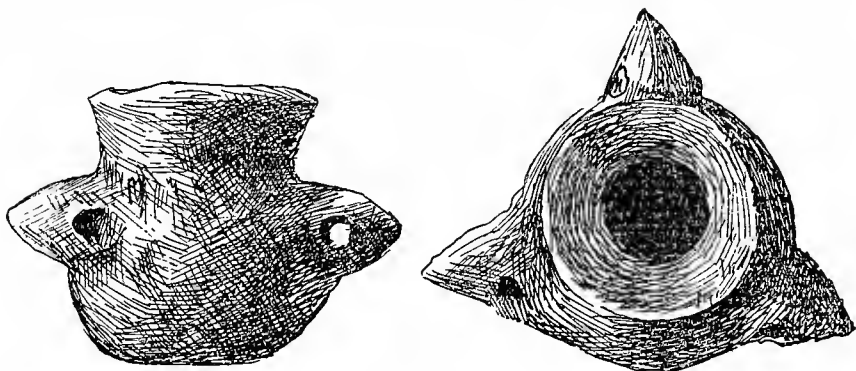


FIG. 1.

the little vessels themselves. Very commonly there are two or three projecting ears, pierced near their base for the passage of a cord.

Sometimes, however, the supports are real loops or crests or combs, made after the vessel was shaped and then attached. At times wart-like knobs, grooved across so as to resemble eyes or mouths, occur. Any of these prominences or projections break off easily and leave a nearly smooth spot where they separate. These ears,

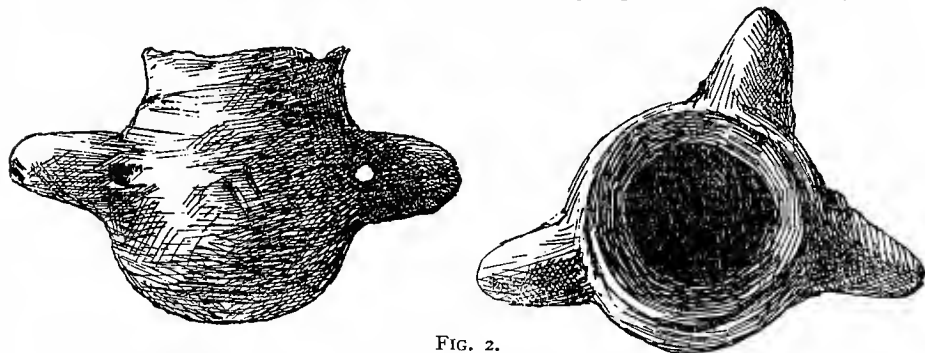


FIG. 2.

looped handles, knobs, crests, etc., vary much in position: the crests may be placed either horizontally or vertically. The most frequent type is a small, neatly rounded body, the upper rim of

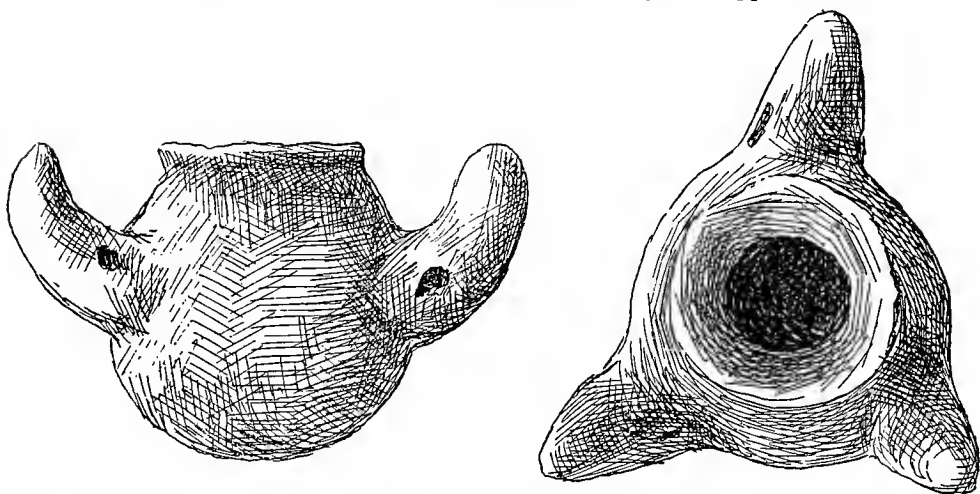
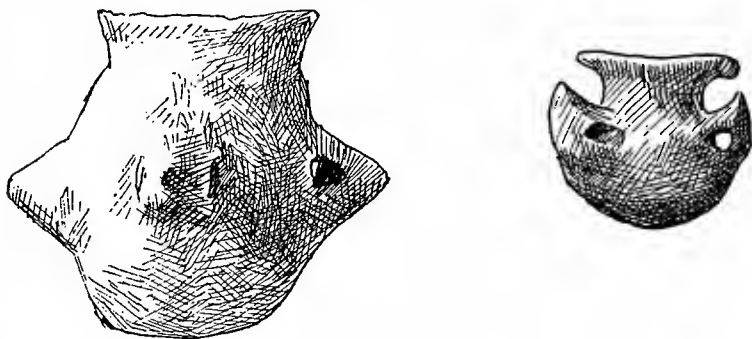


FIG. 3.

which is smooth and concave; it usually has three ears at equal intervals, placed near the top of the vessel. In size these ollitas range from 14<sup>mm</sup> to 50<sup>mm</sup> in diameter and from 13<sup>mm</sup> to 48<sup>mm</sup> in height. The series selected for illustration shows the diversity in type.

*Fig. 1* represents a fair specimen of the commonest type. The three knobs are about equidistant around the main body. As usual, they are pierced transversely for cord suspension. This specimen is somewhat above the medium in size.

*Fig. 2* is a specimen of the same size, but with the knobs less



FIGS. 4 AND 5.

regularly spaced, and rounded at the tips.

These knobs may be developed into upward or downward pointing horns (*Fig. 3*). These are rarely sharp at the ends, usually having rounded tips.

Occasionally the vessels are not so nearly globular; in such we have some approach toward jar-shaped; the knobs in these are usually badly formed (*Fig. 4*).

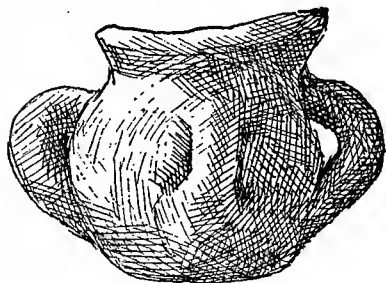


FIG. 6.

One of the prettiest types has the projecting knobs neatly developed into well-sharpened, upturned horns; the rim flares and is finely concave finished. This type is always carefully made and in nearly black ware (*Fig. 5*).

Rarely, in place of knobs there are little loop handles fastened on the sides. In *Fig. 6* is represented a specimen of this kind with a plain surface and three symmetrically placed handles. These handles are sometimes notched along the upper edge (as in *Fig. 7*), thus adding a decorative feature.

Such furnish a transition to specimens with slit knobs and with

notched ridges or crests. These may be variously combined. Thus in the specimen represented in two positions in *Fig. 8* we have the

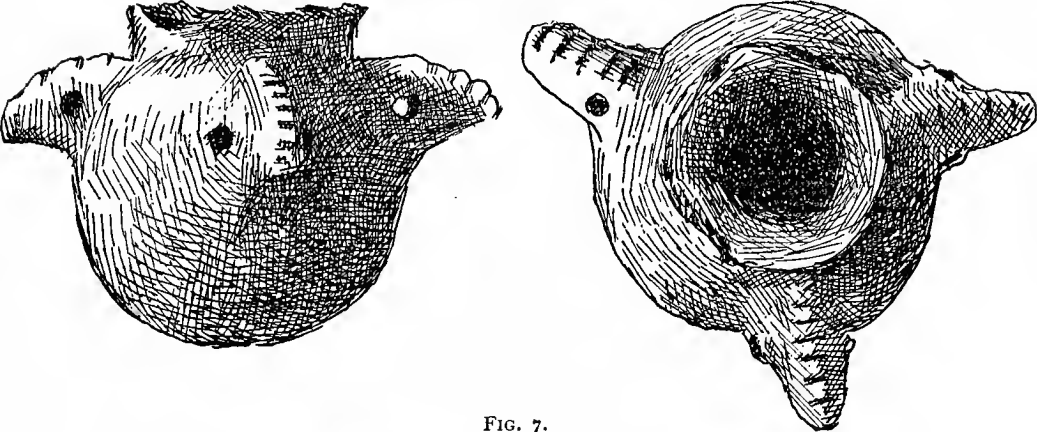


FIG. 7.

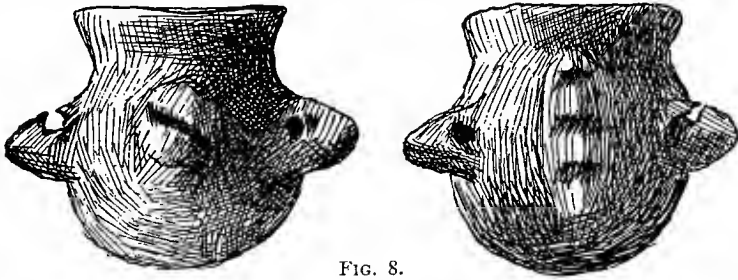


FIG. 8.

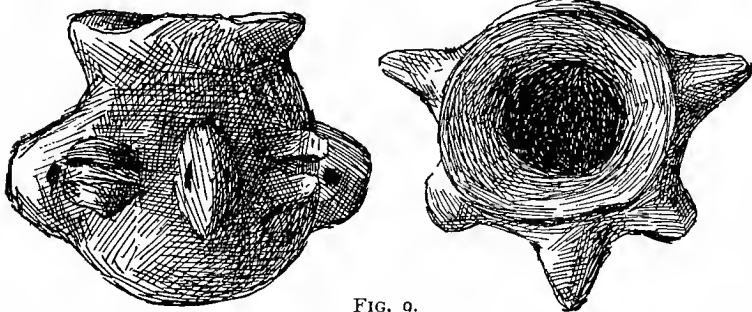


FIG. 9.

three projecting horns dividing the vessel into nearly equal parts; on one of these is a knob slit across obliquely by an incised line;

on the second is a vertical ridge, notched transversely by three lines into a sort of crest; the third space is plain. *Fig. 9* represents a vessel but slightly different; in it two out of the three spaces are occupied with slit knobs. From one point of view this specimen somewhat resembles — probably intentionally — a human face. The

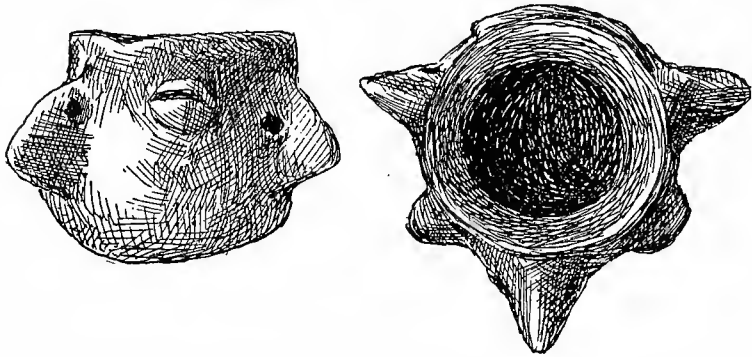


FIG. 10.

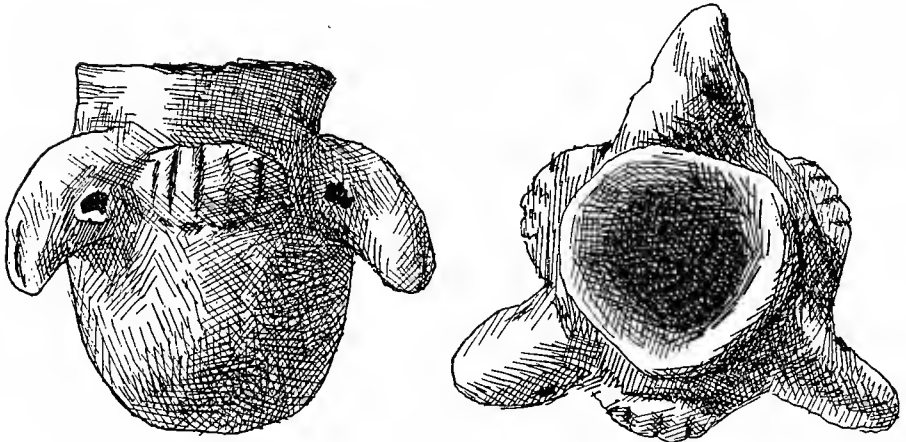


FIG. 11.

two slit knobs resemble eyes; one of the suspension knobs forms a fairly good nose, while the other two are like ears; the third space is plain. A second specimen, very close to this, has a slit knob on the third space and presents the rude semblance of a human face from any one of three points of view (*Fig. 10*).



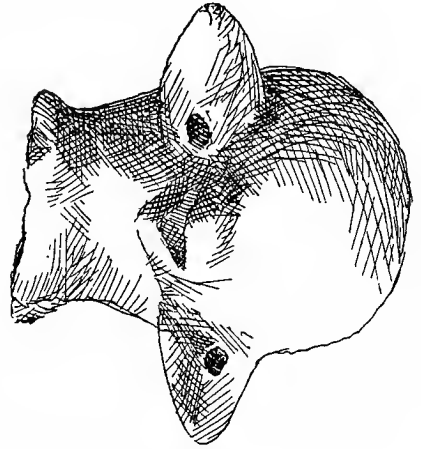
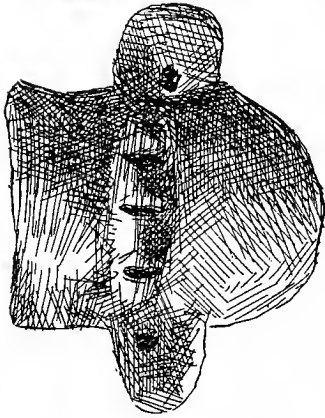
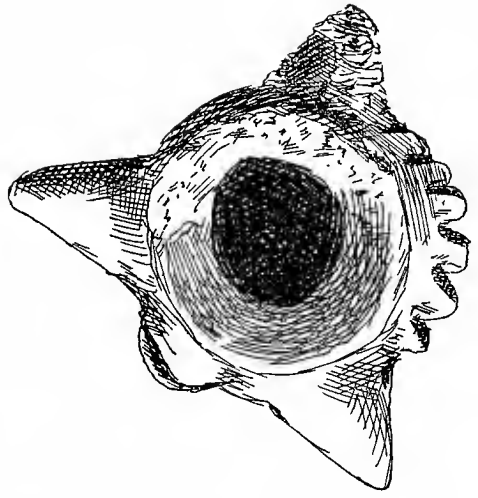
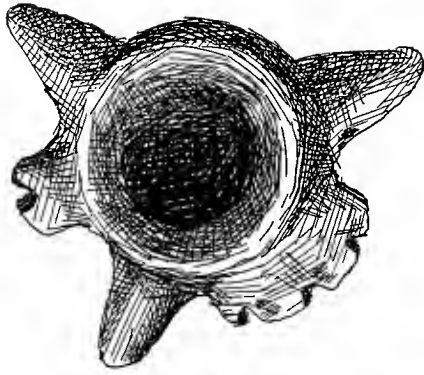
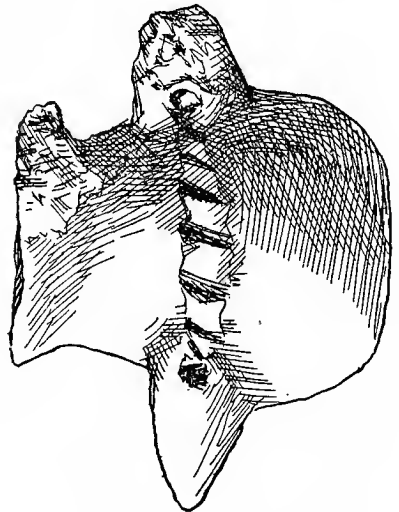
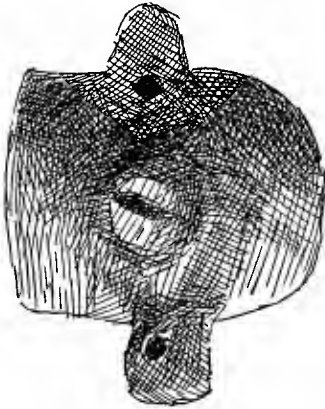


FIG. 12.

FIG. 13.



An odd but pretty form, given in *Fig. 11*, introduces us to a new series characterized by transverse or horizontal crests. The three ears are developed into down-turned blunt horns. Between them and on the same level—near the top of the vessel—are three

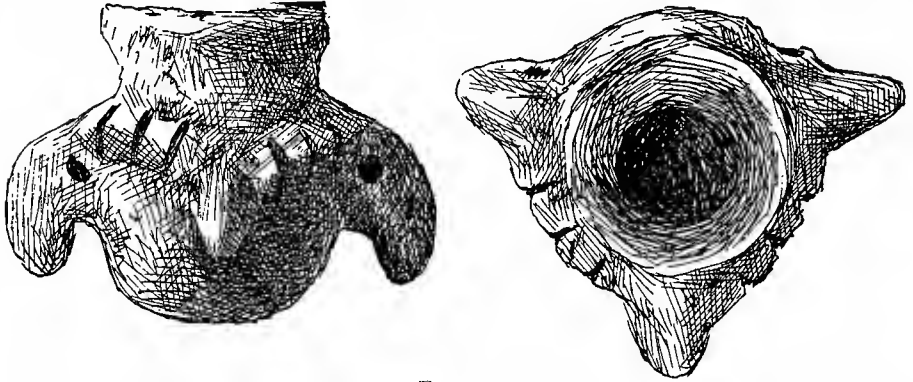


FIG. 14.

little long hummocks, notched by transverse lines into crests with five or six segments. Some specimens present a combination of crest and slit knob. Thus *Fig. 12* has one of the spaces between the ears clear, the second is occupied by a thrice notched horizontal

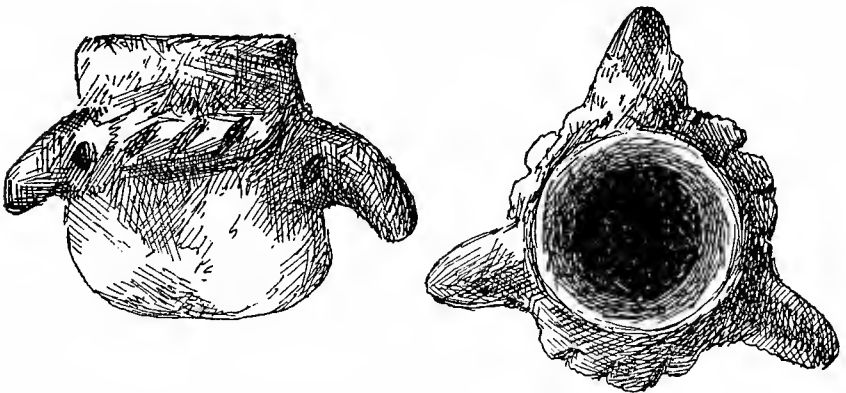


FIG. 15.

crest, and the third by a knob with a nearly vertical slit. Here the ears are of unusual breadth. In another (*Fig. 13*) the projecting ears are more nearly the usual form, but not symmetrically placed; one interspace is vacant, but in the other two are a notched knob and a crest almost like a bit of twisted rope. In one specimen,

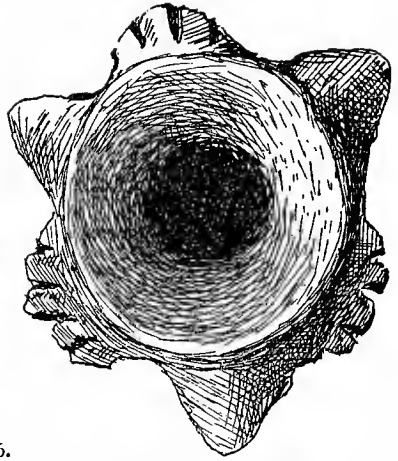
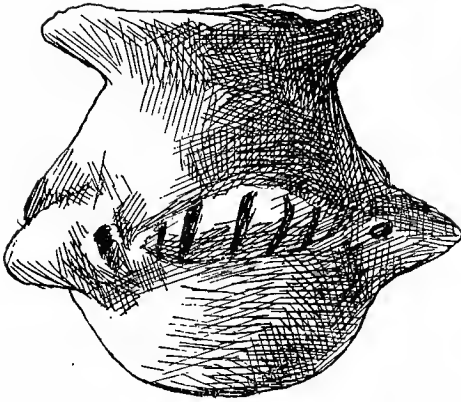


FIG. 16.

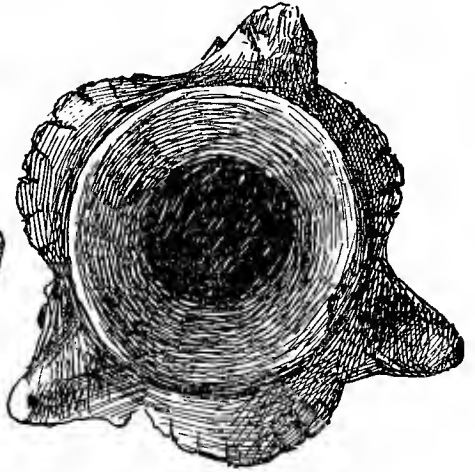
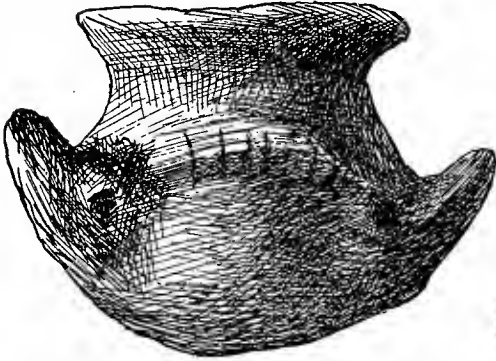


FIG. 17.

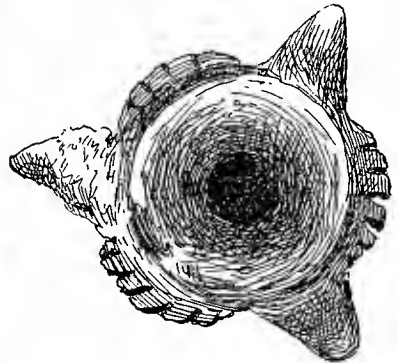


FIG. 18.

where the ears are like down-turned, round-tipped horns, they are united by two notched curved ridges; these are so arranged with reference to the intermediate ear (which is somewhat broken) as to suggest the idea of eyebrows and nose — or an owl's face (*Fig. 14*).

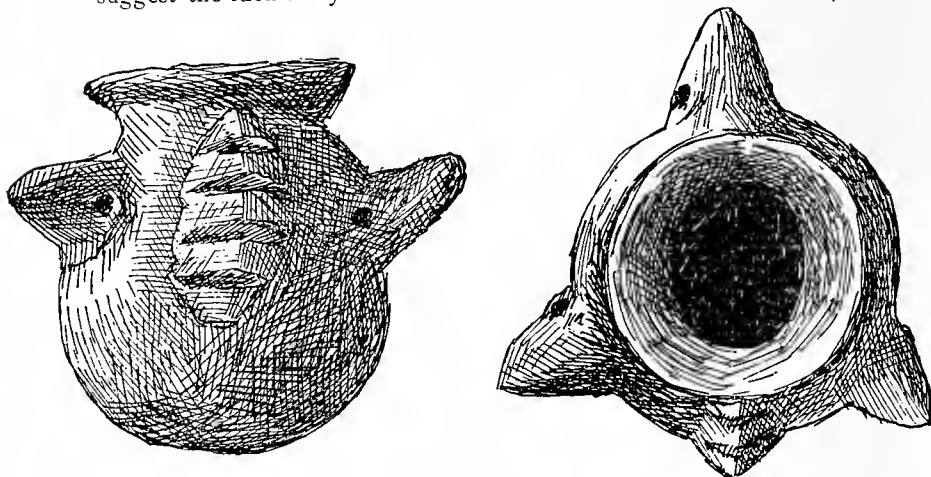


FIG. 19.

In this specimen there is an interspace vacant, but in another (*Fig. 15*), somewhat similar, there are three crests, filling thus all the spaces; these crests are nearly horizontal. Sometimes, instead of

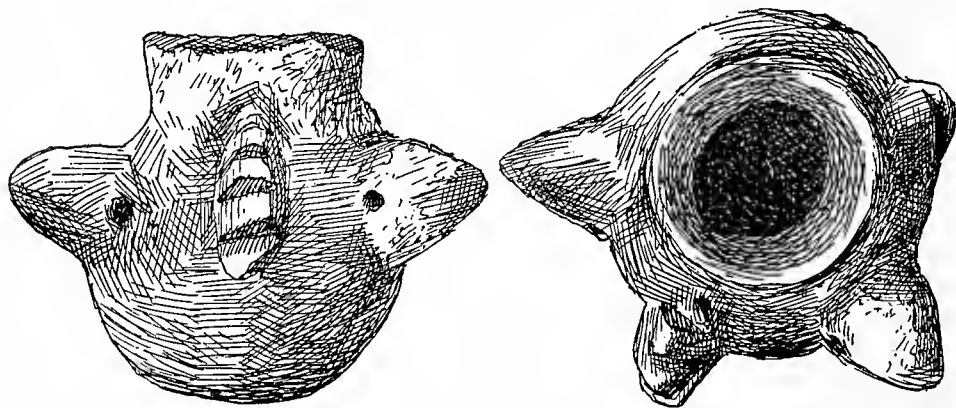


FIG. 20.

being near the upper edge of the vessel, the ears and crests may be low down on the body (*Fig. 16*). Far the handsomest of this three-crested type in our series is the specimen represented in *Fig. 17*,



FIG. 21.

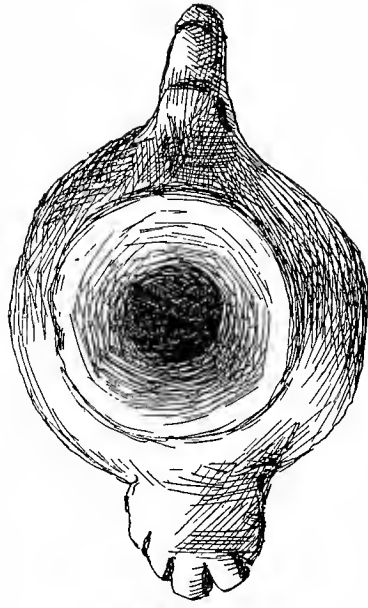
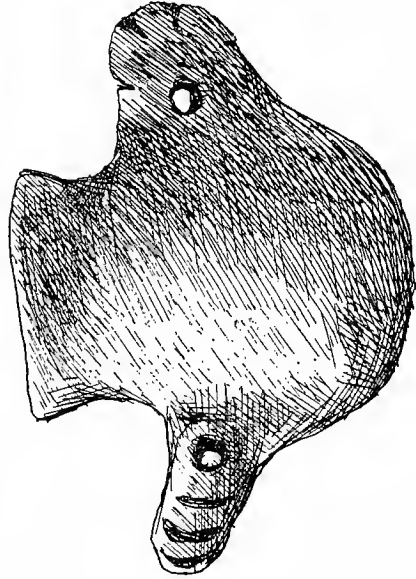
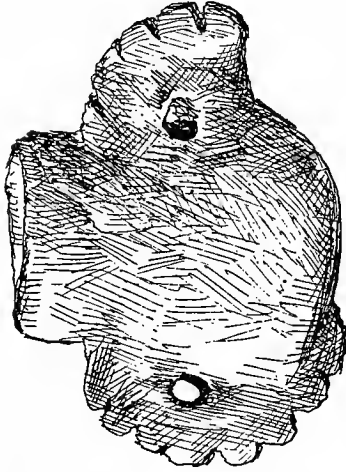
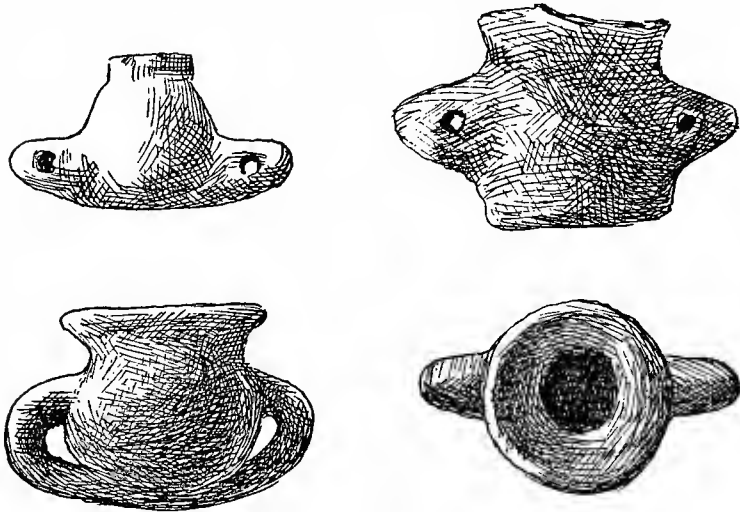


FIG. 22.



where the ears point upward and the crests are finely developed. Rarely, both ears and crests may be at the very base of the *ollita*, giving it an altogether peculiar appearance (*Fig. 18*).

Quite a distinct series occurs in which the crests run vertically instead of horizontally. These may present one crest (*Fig. 19*) or more. They may have not only the crest, but also the slit knob (*Fig. 20*). The form shown in *Fig. 21* is curious. Here two ears of the *ollita* are developed into narrow, but notably prominent vertical crests, which are pierced for suspension; between them appears a knob, probably the stump of an ear of the usual type pierced for cord passage. This specimen is unfortunately further broken, one



FIGS. 23, 24, AND 25.

of the crests having been injured. In one specimen (*Fig. 22*) are two crests, opposite each other, both perforated, but differently set—one being vertical, the other transverse. This *ollita* vaguely suggests a bird; *cf. Fig. 55*.

This last specimen leads us to a totally different series—those with but two pierced ears projecting from the body. The simplest and commonest type (*Fig. 23*) has the ears at the base, which is more or less flat. The ears may be located higher as in *Fig. 24*. Some are beautifully symmetrical, with daintily formed little ears, turned upward and pointed at the top, located near the upper edge, *Fig. 5*—representing a three-eared specimen—gives an idea of this

style. Occasionally looped handles are luted on; such are usually situated near the base. *Fig. 25* represents such a specimen, which may be compared with *Fig. 6*. Lastly, prettily crested forms occur, such as that represented in *Fig. 26*, which is really a variant of the idea expressed in *Fig. 17*. It may be objected that these two-eared

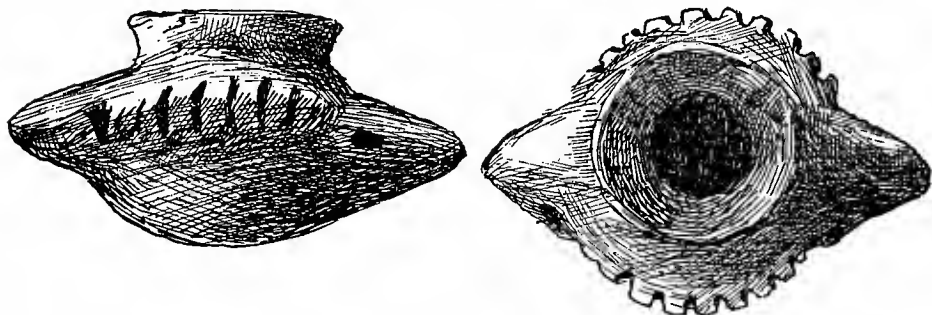


FIG. 26.

specimens are simpler than the three-eared and would precede them in evolution. They are, however, far less common than the three-eared forms, which appear to be the original type, and from which these probably were really derived.

Entirely alone in this collection is a little jar of reddish ware with gray clouding; it is fairly symmetrical and has neither ears nor crests. The whole surface is dotted with little pits. It is the only specimen of *ollita* from the lake that is unperforated. It measures 41<sup>mm</sup> in height and 31<sup>mm</sup> in greatest diameter (*Fig. 27*).

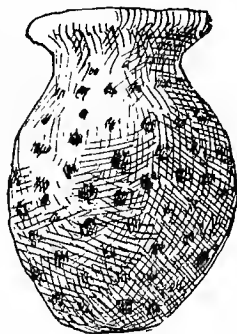


FIG. 27.

Occasionally little vessels of a totally different character are found. Two somewhat similar types occur. In one the vessel is like a cylindrical jar, contracted upward to a narrower neck, with an expanding edge or rim. The other is cylindrical, with a flat base somewhat spread out beyond the cylindrical body; the under side of the base is somewhat concave. Both types have a series of blunt, thorn-like prominences. One specimen of the first type is shown in *Fig. 28*. It is composed of grey ware. But one perforated, thorn-like ear is present, but there are traces of one—perhaps of two—that have been broken off. *Fig. 29* represents a

specimen of the second type. Two views are given of it; one shows four projections at the sides (two on each side) and a central one between them; the other shows the same four lateral projections,

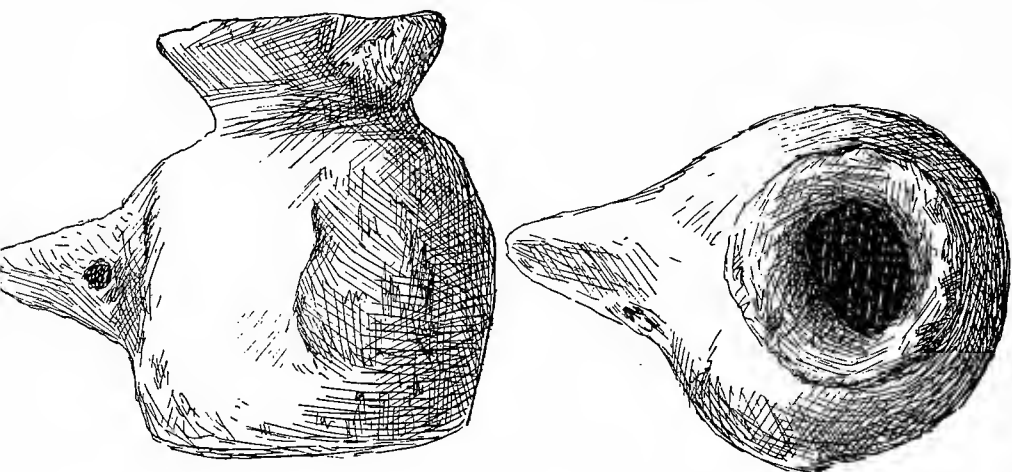


FIG. 28.

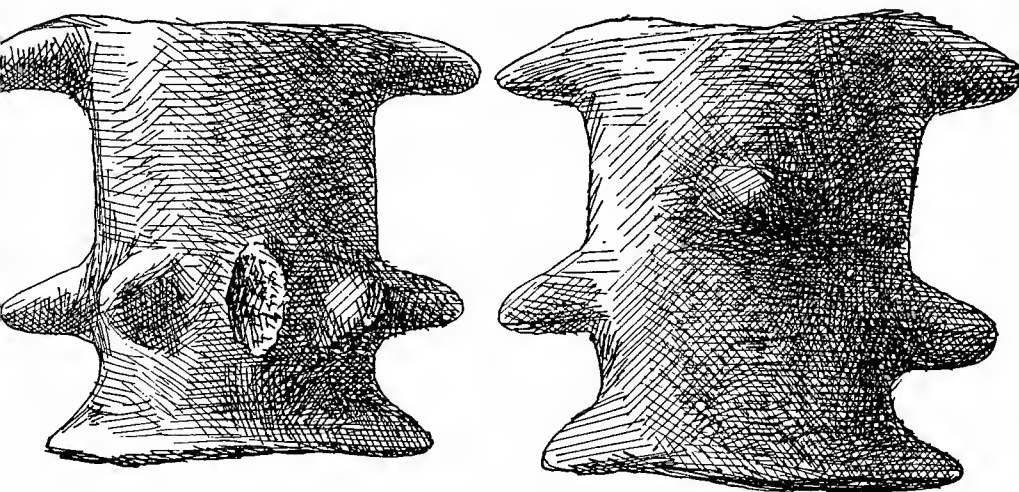


FIG. 29.

and three (one broken) knobs between the lower ones. The perforations in this specimen pierce the base of the vessel; when suspended the vessel apparently hung upside down. It is quite possible that

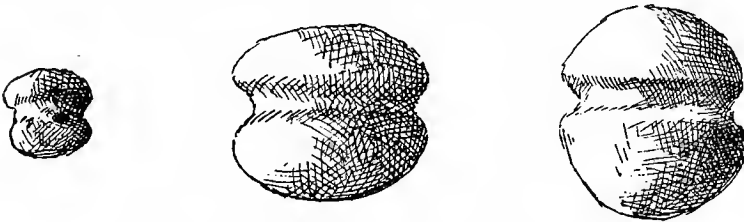


this specimen was intended to represent a human face. In *Fig. 30* is presented a cylinder, which was probably a vessel of the same character as the last, but from which the bottom has been broken out. Placed upside down, it plainly represents a human face. The eyeholes are pits; the mouth is a dug-out slit; from the sides project four knobs. Four similar knobs are placed symmetrically with these at the rear of the cylinder, but the space between, corresponding to the human face of the front, is plain.

*Sinkers.*—These present little variation. They are usually of reddish-brown, fairly baked ware; they resemble little elliptical pebbles about which a groove has been cut. They are strikingly like what Abbott and others call pogamoggons, but are in miniature and of pottery instead of stone. They are quite like the beads described by Thruston and figured at p. 320 in his *Antiquities of Tennessee*, but are not perforated. The only important variation is in size: they range from 10<sup>mm</sup> to 27<sup>mm</sup> in length (See *Figs. 31, 32, and 33*).

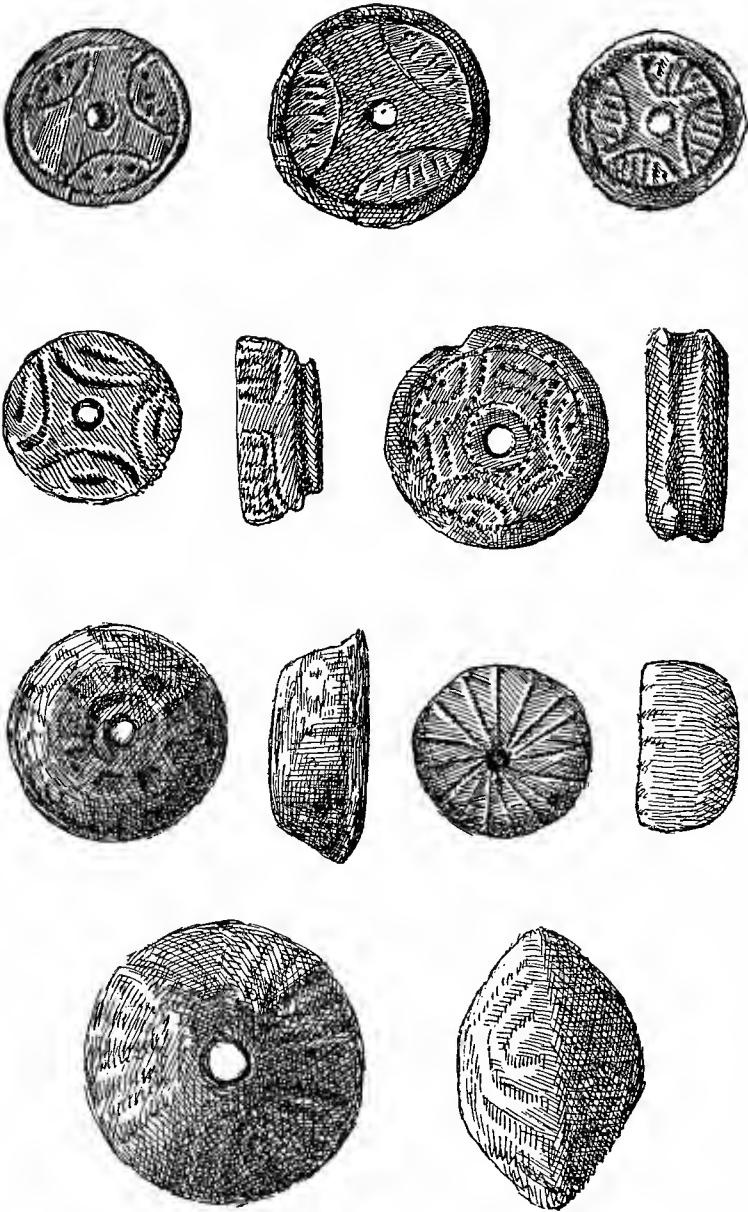


FIG. 30.



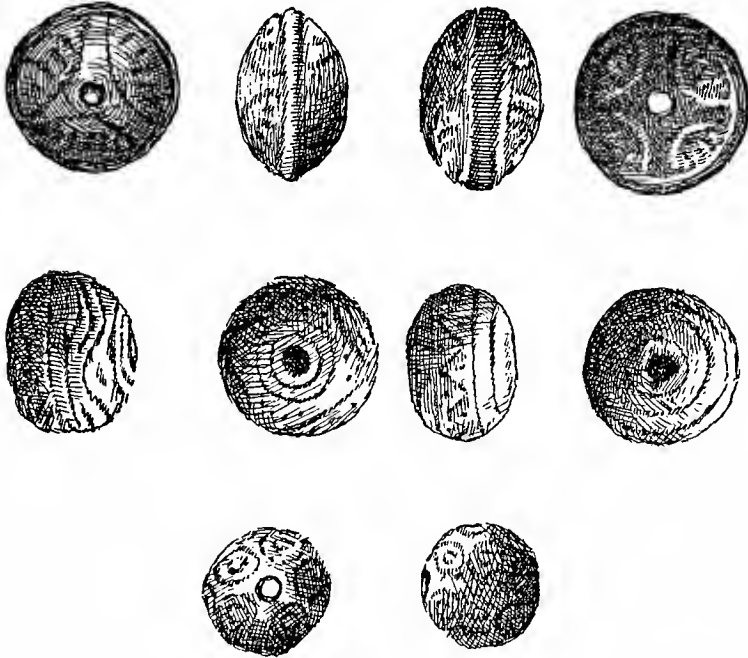
FIGS. 31, 32, AND 33.

*Spindle-Whorls.*—Spindle-whorls of pottery are found at almost every archæological locality in Mexico. They present wonderful variation at different localities. Those from Lake Chapala are unusually small and present two extreme types: (*a*) flat, straight-edged disks, like checkers in shape; they bear various patterns composed of simple lines, corded lines, and dots; (*b*) spheroidal or quite spherical forms, with more or less complicated patterns of



FIGS. 34-41.

lines. *Figs. 34, 35, 36* represent the former; *Figs. 44, 45, 46* the latter. Intermediate types are represented in *Figs. 37-43*. *Fig. 38* is a flat disk with grooved circumference; *Figs. 39-40* are plano-convex; *Fig. 41* doubly convex, but flattened; *Figs. 42-43* doubly



FIGS. 42-46.

convex, with an equatorial belt of smaller curvature. No detailed description of these forms is necessary, as the figures convey a clear idea of them.

*Ladles.*—These are not infrequently made of a red or reddish-brown ware; they range from 50<sup>mm</sup> to 94<sup>mm</sup> in length and from forms which are plainly ladles to forms which cannot be so considered. They form, however, a single series.

*Fig. 47* is a simple shaft bent up at the two ends, one of which tapers to a point, while the other is simply broadened and flattened a little. It is perforated near the middle of the shaft by a small hole punched



FIG. 47.

through from one side. This is the plainest, smallest, least ladle-like of the series.

*Fig. 48* shows a specimen where the shaft is quite heavy and thick; at one end it is broadened and hollowed into a fair ladle-

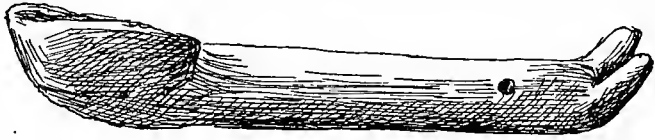


FIG. 48.

bowl, while at the other end it splits into two claws, which are quite abruptly bent upward. The specimen measures 84<sup>mm</sup> in length. The perforation is near the end of the handle. In some specimens this perforation is vertical instead of transverse.



FIG. 49.

*Fig. 49.* The shaft is much as in the last: the bowl is less well-shaped; the end of the handle is turned up into one point or claw; two legs or claws occur a little way down the shaft; the perforation

lies a little beyond these. *Fig. 50* shows a more clumsy specimen than the preceding. It bears four leg-like projections, two at the very end of the handle and two further down its shaft. The perforation is situated between the two pairs near the latter.

One imperfect specimen shows the end of the handle as a blunt



FIG. 50.

point, while two pairs of legs are situated along the shaft. In *Fig. 51* a rather slender, well-made specimen is shown. The end is bent upward and notched into three little knobs or toes; a pair of legs project from the shaft; the perforation lies between these and the end.



FIG. 51.

In almost all of these specimens the little projecting knobs suggest the legs of animals. This idea was probably in the mind of the ancient potter. In *Fig. 52* is represented, not a ladle, but a curious figurine; it belongs, however, plainly to the ladle series. It is of coarse, reddish ware, darker within. The animal represented is like

a dog, with long, slender body ; his ears (one is gone) stick straight up from the head ; the tongue hangs from his mouth ; the eyes are made by impressions of a slender, hollow, cylindrical object ; the legs are spread ; the tail is erect. From the middle of the back rises a little column, at the top of which is a shallow bowl. The length of this specimen is about 100<sup>mm</sup>, the height about 50<sup>mm</sup>.

This dog figure is in some respects notably like the extremely curious little dog-bodied chariots found by Charnay at a height of 13,000 feet, on Popocatepetl. Curiously, too, these were also found with miniature vessels, which Charnay considers children's toys. In *Ancient Cities of the New World* he says :

"Next are toys and tiny terra cotta chariots ; some are broken, some still preserve their four wheels ; they were, presumably, a fond mother's

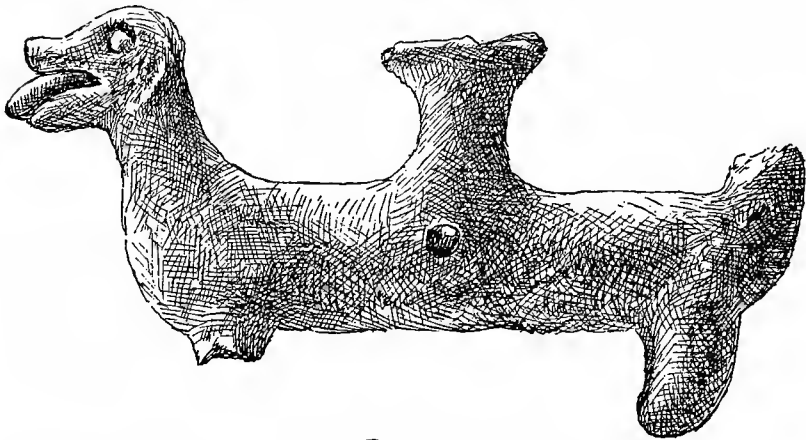


FIG. 52.

memento who, ages gone by, buried them with her beloved child. These chariots are shaped like a flattened *cayote* (a kind of long-bodied fox), with its straight ears and pointed face, and the wheels fit into four terra cotta stumps ; on my renewing the wood axle-tree which had been destroyed long since the chariots began to move."<sup>1</sup> (P. 171.)

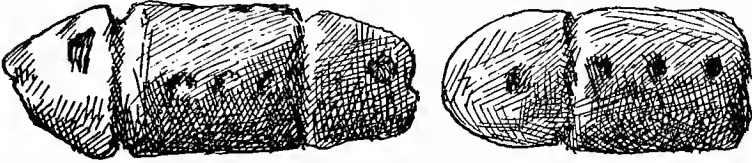
Also "baby tables, which, like the toy chariots, represented some quadruped — resembling Greek toys." (P. 171.)

*Figurines.*—From these ladles and the long-bodied dog figure with the bowl atop it is but a step to true figurines. They are not common. They are crudely shaped and of poor material.

<sup>1</sup> Figures of two are given on p. 175.

*Fig. 53* represents perhaps the *amphisbaea* or two-headed snake. It is of a dark purple brown. It tapers and flattens vertically at both ends. Two grooves encircle it near the ends; on the body space between these, on each side and on the back, are lines of three dots each. Each of the head-shaped ends has an eye spot on either side and a mouth notch. The specimen may possibly be of stone. The length is 53<sup>mm</sup>.

*Fig. 54* much resembles the last, but is certainly of pottery. One end is broken off, the other is bluntly rounded. One groove



FIGS. 53 AND 54.

remains, and traces of the other are visible at the point of fracture. The ends were probably alike. The one which is still preserved has a dot sunk in each side, but no mouth slit. A line of three dots occurs along each side.

*Fig. 55* plainly represents a bird. Its head is raised, and the eye-spots, the beak, and a little crest are indicated. The bird is represented as stalking, but curiously, probably to facilitate the figure standing rather than for any artistic purpose, the forward leg is doubled. The tail is broad, spread, and upraised: notches indicate its division into feathers; from the back of this little creature rises a short column, with a shallow bowl atop. From tip of tail to tip of beak the specimen measures 54<sup>mm</sup>. The perforation is at the base of the column.

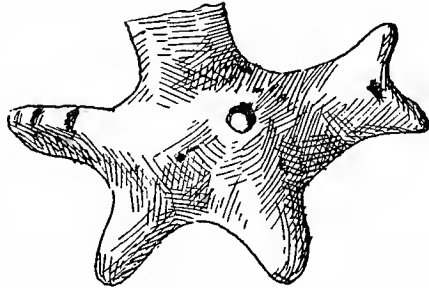


FIG. 55.

*Fig. 56* represents a quadruped. The ware is almost black. The head as represented in the figure is far too broad; the front legs are broken off; the hind legs sprawl notably; the tail is erect. The perforation pierces the body behind the fore legs. Length 68<sup>mm</sup>.

*Fig. 57* is a rudely modeled human figure, much broken and apparently representing a woman. It will be noticed that the workmanship in none of these figurines is as good as in the ollitas, but in this specimen it is particularly bad. The piece is not perforated.

*Fig. 58* represents the largest of the figurines. It is incomplete; in its present state it measures 64<sup>mm</sup> in height. It represents a

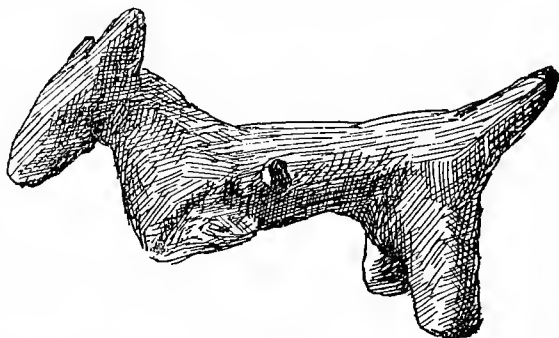


FIG. 56.

human (?) figure seated. The head is gone; one leg is folded upward, and the knee rests against the side of the chest or the upper abdomen. The arm is curved about it, and the hand, rudely outlined by two incised lines, rests upon the chest, just below the neck. A curious prominence along the back suggests an upturned tail; it is broken quite square across, just back of the perforation, which pierces the back from side to side.

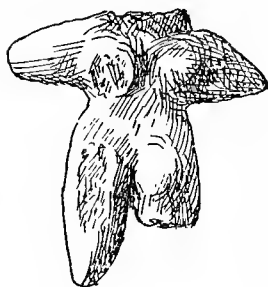


FIG. 57.

The most difficult specimen to comprehend and figure is represented, in three aspects, in *Fig. 59*. This has a flat base, from which rises a clumsy body; at the top is a projection, somewhat resembling a head. Two pieces have been broken from this trunk, which from their position might have been arms, or breasts. To the right of the head an arm-like projection ends in a shallow cup; a series of similar projections, all no doubt once cupped at top, crown the head, while a tail held upright rises behind the body and ends in a cup. Two eye-like spots are on top of the head. A perforation runs through the body, from side to side, under the armpits. This object was, no



doubt, at first bilaterally symmetrical, but many parts have been broken off. It is of fairly fine, grayish-black ware and stands 50<sup>mm</sup> high.

Such is the description of the principal types in a collection which was secured by several visits to the lake. Other types may be found later, but these satisfactorily represent the character of these little potteries. How are they to be explained? Were they toys for children, miniatures of objects used by adults in daily life? That is the most natural first suggestion; but if so, why are they only in the lake and not on the land? If the specimens came—as Fredenhagen suggested—from a pile-dwelling village site, the theory of their being toys gains in probability; but why are not larger objects found more commonly with them?

That the perforation was of importance seems certain. The sinkers and *amphisbæna* (together with one little jar and one human figure) are the only specimens not perforated. They are grooved. So all (with the exception of two out of 261 specimens) could have been easily attached to a cord or string. That they were not all simply sinkers for fish-lines is plain enough from their forms.

So far as their presence in the lake is concerned it is *possible* that the lake's level may have risen, covering an original place of deposit on the dry land. The spot is almost within sight of the active volcano of Colima, and changes of level, through volcanic or other igneous agency, in the waters of the lake are not improbable. The old schoolmaster at Chapala insists that the town of Chapala has long been slowly sinking, and that half of it has already been engulfed by the lake. He also claims that the god formerly worshipped at Chapala was a little god, a child god, and that the little vessels were offerings to him. Mota Padilla in speaking of this town says: "Chapala is at ten leagues' distance from Guadalajara, to the south-east, and the lake is named from the pueblo, because it was perhaps in its ancient days the most populous of those which surrounded it,



FIG. 58.

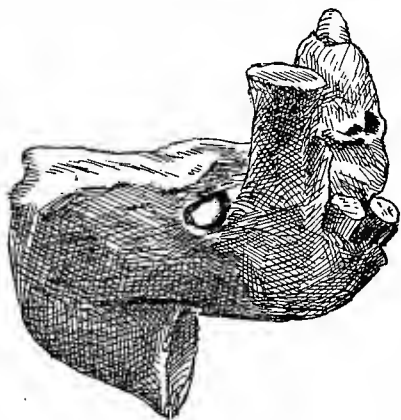
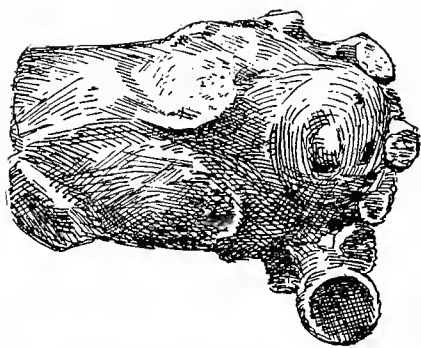


FIG. 59.

although today it is almost destroyed by various increases of the lake, especially those of 1555 and 1577;" further on, in the same passage, he states that Fr. Juan de Almolon threw into the lake idols of flint, greenstones, and clay, which he took from the natives.<sup>1</sup>

Taking all points into consideration, with some hesitancy, the following suggestions are made: May not these small objects be offerings made to the lake itself or some spirit resident therein? They may have been let down carefully into the water by means of cords, rather than thrown in haphazard. May not resin, or gum, have been burned, or offerings placed, in the little vessels and ladles and in the cups on such specimens as those shown in *Figs. 52, 55, and 59*? Their miniature size, the forms, the location, the fact of perforation, or grooving, would all be thus explained. It is perfectly realized that these hints demonstrate nothing; further explanation will be welcomed.<sup>2</sup>

Notwithstanding the emphasis laid upon the locality of these and their mode of occurrence, such vessels have been found elsewhere. The American

Museum of Natural History, in New York City, has a number from Tillo, Oaxaca. Some have also been shown me that claimed to come from near Palenque. Some in Dr. Sologuren's collection came from "near Tehuantepec." I know nothing of the circumstances under which any of these were found. They are all *ollitas*, mostly of the ordinary, three-eared, plain type.

<sup>1</sup> Mota Padilla: *Historia de la Conquista de la Provincia de la Nueva Galicia*, written in 1742; Mexico, 1870; pp. 101-102. The passage runs as follows: "Chapala está á diez leguas de Guadalajara, entre Oriente y Sur, y de este pueblo tomó la denominacion la laguna, quizá por haben sido en la antigüedad el mas populoso de los que le circundaban, aunque hoy está casi destruido por varios crecimientos de la laguna, especialmente por los años de 555 y 577."

<sup>2</sup> Mrs. Nuttall, in her paper on the little terra cotta heads of Teotihuacan, quotes Father Duran as follows: "Food was offered to each one (of these images), and the *tamales* they gave them were very small, in keeping with the images themselves, which were small. The food was placed in diminutive plates . . . two little cup-shaped gourd vessels were filled with *pulque* and put before them" (Book II, chap. 35). Also: "This accursed beverage was a special offering to the gods, and in several sacrifices and offerings I came across (besides eatables) feathers, copal, and other childish things, such as toys of bone, and little dishes of terra cotta, and also beads; I found very small jars of *pulque* as well" (Vol. II, p. 291). To this Mrs. Nuttall adds: "Light is hereby thrown upon the probable reason for the multitude of diminutive earthen vessels found in the ancient graves of Mexico, They have generally been thought to be children's toys, and to mark the burial place of children."—Nuttall: "Terra Cotta Heads of Teotihuacan," *Am. Jour. Arch.*, 1887, p. 327.





