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SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION  
Bureau of American Ethnology  
Bulletin 191

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Anthropological Papers, No. 71

EL LIMÓN, AN EARLY TOMB SITE IN COCLÉ  
PROVINCE, PANAMA

By MATTHEW W. AND MARION STIRLING

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# EL LIMÓN, AN EARLY TOMB SITE IN COCLÉ PROVINCE, PANAMA

By MATTHEW W. and MARION STIRLING<sup>1</sup>

During the course of our archeological investigations in Panama in the month of April 1951, Mr. Simeón Conte of Penonomé guided us to an archeological site in the mountains back of Penonomé near a place called El Limón.

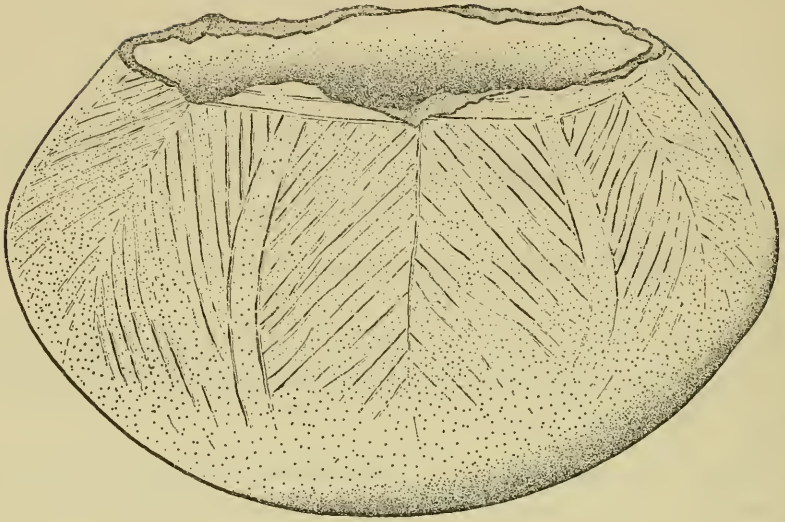
The site consisted of a small burial ground with shoe-shaped shaft tombs about 8 feet deep scattered for 100 yards along the top of a high ridge. At the time of our arrival about nine tombs had been opened; these apparently were all that the looters had been able to find. Miguel Conte had acquired the contents of one of these tombs, which he generously gave to us. The grave offerings consisted of four tall slender vases and two globular pots with incised decorations.

The four vases are similar in size and form (pl. 27). Each rests on a relatively small flat base tapering upward to a slender waist, then flaring outward to a wide trumpet-shaped rim. About two-thirds of the way upward each vase is encircled by a raised beveled ridge, the upper portion of which on three of the specimens is further embellished with small coffee-bean-like applied nodules. The nature of the incised decorations can best be seen in the illustrations.

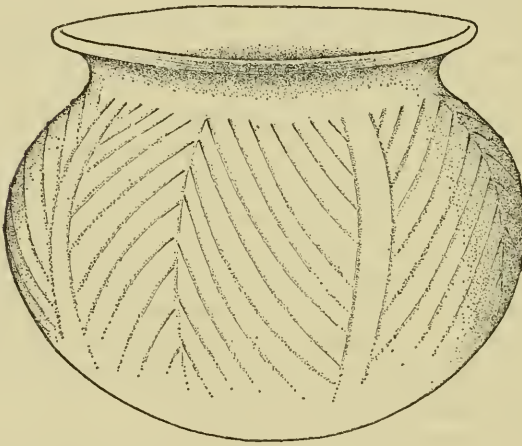
The natural color of the pottery is a pinkish buff, but a polished brown slip had been applied, remnants of which remain on all four examples. The tempering consists of crushed rock in which can be seen some large fragments of clear quartz.

The two pots are of the same ware (fig. 17). They are subglobular in form with round bottoms. The smaller pot has an outflaring rim, and the other probably had a similar rim, but it has been entirely broken off. The body of each pot is almost completely covered with an incised herringbone design. The pattern on the smaller pot is particularly interesting as it is produced by negative incising—if such a term may be used. The incising was done with a broad chisel-like instrument, producing between the strokes narrow raised ridges which form the design.

<sup>1</sup> We are grateful to Mr. Edward G. Schumacher, artist for the Bureau of American Ethnology, for the line drawings in this paper.



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FIGURE 17.—Incised globular pots.

It is possible that the tall “vases” were stands for the round-bottomed pots. This theory would sound more probable if it were possible to determine that there were originally four instead of two

pots in the tomb. Had they been broken, it is likely the looters would have thrown them away. It is our impression that this is an early ware, possibly the earliest type of tomb ware from Panama.

An apparently related type is found in Chiriqui. This type was first described by Holmes (1888, p. 87). In his classification of Chiriqui wares he describes it as the scarified group. Holmes states:

This group is represented by about forty specimens and is worthy of especial attention. It comes from the graves of two localities, one near C. E. Taylor's hacienda, north of David, on the slopes of Mount Chiriqui, and the other at Alanje, southwest of David. As a variety of ware it stands so entirely alone that had it arrived unlabeled no one would have recognized its affinities with Chiriquian art. It is rather inferior in material, grace of form, and surface finish, and the decoration appears to belong to a lower grade of culture than that of the other groups.

Holmes speculates that it is a degenerate type, and therefore late. He says further (*ibid.*, pp. 88-89):

Nearly all of the vessels are tripods, but a few have rounded or flat bottoms and a few are supplied with annular stands. The walls are thick and the shapes are uncouth or clumsy. The paste is coarse, poorly baked, and friable; near the surface it is a warm reddish or yellowish gray; within the mass it is a dark gray. . . . These vessels are embellished by painting, incising, or scarifying and by modeling in relief. Color was not employed in the production of designs, but a dark Indian red pigment was daubed over that part of the surface not occupied by incised ornament. Little or no slip was used and the rude geometric patterns were executed with pointed tools in a very haphazard manner.

In general Holmes' description fits the El Limón material, but there are a number of differences. His material has no vase forms, and tripod supports are lacking in the El Limón specimens as well as the application of red paint. The tripod supports are evidently solid. However, the scarified designs are similar, as are the flat and rounded bottoms. Scarified material is shown in Holmes' illustrations (figs. 118 to 127). His figure 122 in particular resembles the material from El Limón.

More recently, Wolfgang Haberland (1960) has published another find of ceramics closely similar to the Holmes material, from Aguas Buenas in Costa Rica, just across the border from Panama.

At Mojara in Herrera Province, we found in our excavations a somewhat similar vase, associated with polychrome ware. This is a much more handsome piece and is made of harder, fine-textured ware. The encircling element consists of two notched fillet bands, the lower of which turns downward at each side to the base of the vessel. At this point on each side is a projecting conventionalized animal head from which two more notched fillets run downward, parallel with the other two.

Under the outflaring rim is a triple row of heavy punctate dots. Between these and the encircling fillets is a zone of highly polished

rich mahogany brown slip. The interior of the vessel is of the same polished brown.

The fundamental points of difference with the El Limón specimens is that the Mojara example has a hollow base, lacks the slender waist, and lacks incising. Also, it is somewhat larger, being  $9\frac{1}{4}$  inches high.

Dr. S. K. Lothrop kindly called to my attention a number of specimens, from near David, in the Peabody Museum, Harvard University (C-2809, C-2813, C-2817, C-2823) which also belong to this class of ware. Dr. Lothrop shares our impression that this is an early type of ware.

While the small number of specimens from El Limón make speculation unsafe, nevertheless we feel that this material, lacking paint and tripod supports, is the earlier form. The simple solid supports of the Chiriqui and Costa Rican sites may well be ancestral to the later developed hollow supports in the same area. The simple application of red paint may be a forerunner of the later elaborate polychrome ware, while the primitive applique work might precede the later more complex type found, for example, on Chiriqui alligator ware.

The simple scarification and incising of El Limón ware could in turn be an outgrowth from the type of decoration found on the early Monagrillo ware.

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Incised slender vases.