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LIFE FIGURES
ON
HOHOKAM POTTERY



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In the Southwestern United States many different tribes of prehistoric people existed in various localities for long periods of time. Living apart and under different conditions they developed along different lines, and expressed themselves in different ways. The knowledge we have of them is derived from a study of imperishable objects which they left in their houses, graves and rubbish heaps.

In the Gila and Salt River valleys of southern Arizona there lived a people we today call the Hohokam, which is a Pima word meaning "People who are gone." The Pima tribe, together with the closely related tribe, the Papago, which today occupy part of the territory of the Hohokam, may be their descendents. They were different from other prehistoric people in a number of ways.

A characteristic difference is the method of construction of their houses and walled villages, the latter now named compounds. All walls were made of caliche, a native earth found as a sub-stratum about three feet below the present surface. It was mixed with water to make a mortar of a thick consistency which was piled up in layers of approximately twenty to thirty inches by use of the hands.

Another peculiarity of the Hohokam is that they cremated their dead, and after cremation they placed the calcined bones in a pottery vessel or with broken pieces of pottery and buried them. The designs on a great many vessels are of a red or maroon color on a creamy or buff background called Red-on-Buff. The designs are usually well executed, and occasionally portray figures derived from life; human, animal and insect forms, which occur on plates, shallow bowls, jars, ollas and a few special shapes. These figures are usually from three quarters to one and one half inches in height. On the larger vessels they are repeated many times, extending around the vessel in many rows.

Some human figures join hands in what is evidently a circular dance of action and grace. There is also the effect of a circle of animals each stalking the one immediately ahead, and a circle of feeding birds. A whole jar or plate of large size or a repaired one with more than half of the original pieces is rare. It can be inferred that shapes were similar to other utensils of the same period which bore geometric figures: crossed lines, squares, dots, and various other elements. Smaller utensils such as plates and small jars are more likely to have only a few figures and occasionally only one.

It was thought that a minor contribution would be made toward an understanding of Hohokam lives by gathering together and reproducing as many figures representing life forms as possible. Some are shown on the plates following. The pottery of the Mimbres Valley is well

known for its representation of life forms, but many are highly imaginative and exaggerated. For instance, there is a piece showing a man on the back of a grasshopper; there is no mistaking the grasshopper. This is clearly impossible, yet it establishes the fact beyond question that grasshoppers existed during or before the time of the Mimbrenos. Although this may be suspected or assumed, where else can one obtain as positive a confirmation of that fact? Similarly, it is hoped that Hohokam figures, when many more are obtained, will show something definitely which is now only suspected.

The plan followed was to visit all collections of Red-on-Buff pottery available, and to photograph the figures. Nearly all figures were secured, however, from fragments of former sites of archeological investigation. The amount of broken pottery, literally tons of it, that comes from an archeological excavation in the southwest can hardly be realized by one not familiar with the work.

Photography rather than sketching was used, because it was necessary to reproduce accurately. One figure may be either a deer or rabbit, another may be either a quail or a parrot, and a less accurate reproduction would tend to throw the identification one way or the other. From a photographic print an outline tracing was made on white cardboard by means of a carbon paper under the print. The tracing was then filled in solid with black India ink.

Much of the design on Hohokam pottery is quite easily rubbed off, and many figures had to be examined closely to make certain of the exact outline. However, the contrast between the bluish-red markings and the buff background was more pronounced in the photograph, when a suitable color filter was used over the lens, than when inspected by eye. In all except ten cases the figures are about eighty percent of the size of the originals, which was the largest percent of reproduction that could be obtained with the cameras at hand. The ten referred to were usually much larger figures in the originals, and were made smaller purposely, as the smaller size was more suitable for reproduction. Two of the figures were built up or re-assembled from a sherd that showed several repeated parts of figures but no complete ones. Each part of the completed figure occurs somewhere on the sherd. With these exceptions, great care was taken to avoid supplying missing parts and lines. For instance, the figures with a basket and staff in one hand (Plate II) would probably hold a crook as do other figures in the same plate if the sherd had not unfortunately been broken off at that point, but this is only a probability and cannot be definitely known.

The figures seem to have been drawn one feature at a time. For instance, a bowl with a line of repeated turtles appears to have had all the bodies painted in first, and the legs and heads added after completion of the bodies. This is evident because the color concentrates in a drop at the end of the brush stroke, visible because it

is a much darker bluish-red than the rest of the line of color, and often when the painter drew the appendages the paint had been thinned and was slightly lighter in color. There is a sureness in the stroke of the brush, which must have been nothing more than a chewed piece of yucca blade or a twig, and a fascination in their repetitive technique that is most interesting, and yet the lines themselves are extremely crude.

No facial features in the human forms are even attempted, excepting rarely a dot representing an eye; in fact, an attempt to make the facial outline with the tools that were available, would have detracted from the artistic value of the product. The little figures are, nevertheless, realistic, and perhaps in many cases portray the life of the times without the least imagination on the part of the observer.

The dancing figures (Plate I) seem almost to be in motion, and the action which they show is characteristic of the social and religious dances of the present day Indian. Today we know that both the Pimas and the Papagos gather from miles around for the social and ceremonial dances. These are gala affairs which everyone attends dressed in his best and all thoroughly enjoying themselves.

In Plate II the figures with the crook predominate. Besides being a utility implement it might have some ceremonial significance, as it appears as part of the regalia of the dancing figures. In modern times the Pimas occasionally used their burden baskets supported by a tumpline across their foreheads. Some of the baskets in the drawings may have been earlier forms of burden baskets. Below is the hump-backed flute player so common to the Pueblo region.

The animal figures which seem to represent dogs, deer, antelope or rabbits (Plate III) are very common, but in form are so much alike that it is hard to tell what kind of animals they are. Below them on the bottom row of Plate III are two figures which are clearly scorpions. The middle figure has not been identified.

On Plate IV bird figures are numerous and a number of different birds are found. Probably the most common is clearly the quail of this region, the Gambel Quail. Others might be Road Runners. Some of the longer-legged birds might be wading birds, probably common at that time in the Gila River Valley.

The last are the reptiles shown on Plate V. Three bird figures are also shown on this plate. The first one may be a Turkey Vulture; the second shows what may be a flock of eagles or hawks. The third was not identified. The reptiles seem to be turtles, lizards and Gila Monsters.

This short paper is only a beginning in the study of figures on Red-on-Buff pottery. It is hoped that it may inspire others to do more work along this line.

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