ARCHEOLOGY.—*Potsherds from Choctaw village sites in Mississippi.*[1] HENRY B. COLLINS, JR., U. S. National Museum. (Communicated by D. I. BUSHNELL, JR.)

Archeological research in the southeastern states can probably never reach the point of exactness that it has in the Southwest. There are

[1] Published by permission of the Bureau of American Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution. Received April 12, 1927.

no stone ruins, and barring a few exceptional kitchen-middens along the coasts, no extensive refuse heaps showing successive culture layers. The climate, furthermore, is not such as to preserve textiles, basketry, wood-work or other perishable objects so that about all that is now left of the once high material culture of the Southern tribes is the pottery and the ornaments and implements of stone, shell, and bone. It is very desirable, therefore, to seize upon every available source of tribal identification of the cultures represented, and to accomplish this end there is probably no safer beginning than to locate the historic Indian village sites and to study their type of cultural remains for comparison with other sites of unknown age. This method was followed during the past two summers when for several months the writer carried on preliminary archeological work in Mississippi for the Bureau of American Ethnology in coöperation with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, represented by Mr. H. H. Knoblock.[2]

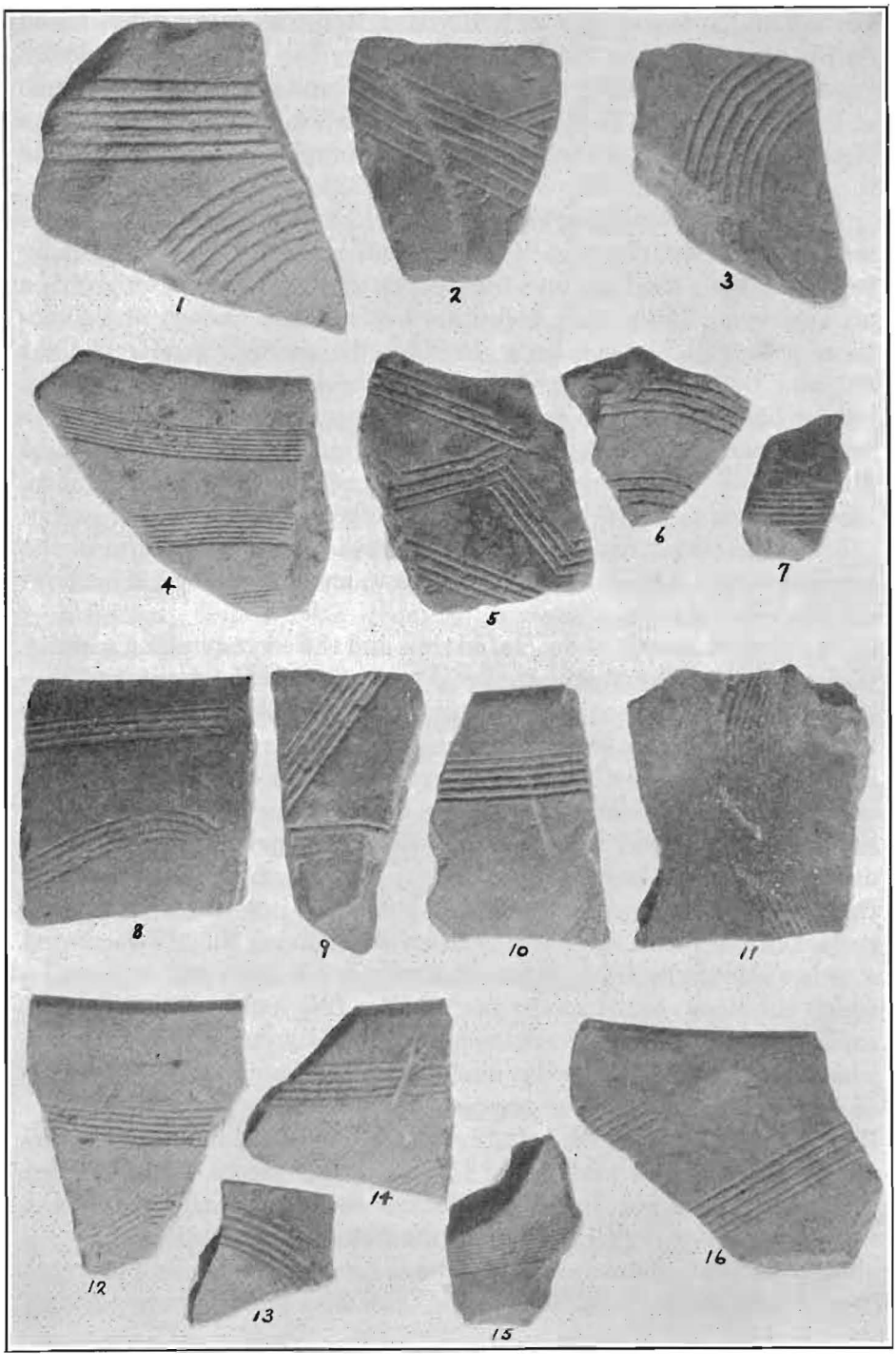
The region chosen for investigation was the east central section of the state, the former home of the Choctaw. A brief reconnoissance of this area was first made and a number of mounds and Choctaw village sites were located and later explored. Wherever possible, surface collections of potsherds, flint artifacts, etc., were made. It is to such collections of potsherds that attention is here called, for these seem to indicate that there was a definite type of historic Choctaw pottery, entirely distinct from that of any other region.

In the accompanying plate are shown examples of this type of pottery from the sites of two old Choctaw villages, Chickachae in the northeastern part of Clarke County, and Ponta (Coosa) in northern Lauderdale County. According to Prof. H. S. Halbert, who worked for many years among the Choctaw in Mississippi, Ponta was occupied as late as 1846.[3] The time of the abandonment of Chickachae is not definitely known but it probably took place between 1810 and 1834, during which period the greater part of the Choctaw lands were signed away and their former owners forced to migrate west of the Mississippi River. The first reference to Ponta and Chickachae is found in the manuscript journal of Régis du Roullet, the French army officer, who in 1729 made the first official exploration of the Choctaw country.[4] The two villages again appear on the map and in the

[2] *Archeological and anthropometrical work in Mississippi.* Smithsonian Misc. Coll. **78** (1). 1926.

[3] *Bernard Romans' map of 1772.* Publ. Miss. Hist. Soc. **6**: 415–439.

[4] In Mississippi Department of Archives and History and in Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress.



Figs. 1–7. Potsherds from site of Chickachae, old Choctaw village in northeastern Clarke Co., Miss. Figs. 8–16. Potsherds from site of Ponta, Northern Lauderdale Co., Miss.

accompanying report of Capt. Bernard Romans, dated 1772, based on his exploration of the Choctaw country for the English colonial government during the preceding year. It was principally by means of the Romans map that Prof. Halbert, with his intimate knowledge of the geography and early history of the region, was able to locate the sites of many of the old Choctaw villages.

The pottery from these two sites, of which typical decorated pieces are shown in the plate, is of a hard uniform texture and is usually tempered with sand so fine that it can hardly be detected by the unaided eye. Both inner and outer surfaces are smooth and sometimes rather highly polished. In color the sherds range from light red and buff through gray into black, the largest proportion being buff or light gray. The color was usually produced by polishing the surface, merely intensifying the shade to which the firing had brought the clay. A few sherds, however, most of them from Chickachae, have received a slip of light brick red on both surfaces.

Little can be learned from the sherds as to the original form of the vessels except that most of them appear to have been bowls of medium depth.

The preponderance of decorated rims and the corresponding scarcity of rims among the many plain pieces suggests that the decoration was largely confined to the upper part of the vessel. As may be seen from the plate, this decoration, which is the most important and characteristic feature of the pottery, consists of straight or curved bands made of finely incised parallel lines. These bands, formed usually by five or six lines, range in width from about 5 to 10 millimeters. The uniform distance between the lines, as well as their uniform depth, shows that they were made by trailing a fine, comb-like implement across the surface of the vessel while it was still soft. Among the 118 decorated sherds of this type from Ponta, there are fewer than half a dozen in which the lines seem to have been drawn free hand. The lot of 67 similar sherds from Chickachae shows a slightly larger proportion on which the lines are somewhat irregular. The bands on the majority of sherds from Chickachae are also a little broader than those from Ponta, the average width being between 8 and 9 millimeters as compared with about 6 millimeters for the Ponta pieces, and the lines composing them are likewise somewhat deeper. With these slight variations, however, the ware from the two sites is identical.

No other well defined ceramic type is represented in the potsherds from Ponta and Chickachae. Less than 20 sherds from these two

sites bear decorations other than of the type described: these few are of cruder ware and are meagerly ornamented with irregular incised lines. There is, in addition, comparatively little undecorated ware of a cruder type; the greater part of the plain sherds, of which there are many, are of the same smooth compact ware as the decorated pieces.

The potsherds from Chickachae and Ponta represent the only adequate samples that were obtained. Very scanty collections of sherds were picked up on the sites of Yowanne in Wayne County, Okhata talaya in Newton County, and Halunlawasha in Neshoba County, and yet among the handful of sherds thus obtained one or more of the banded type was found at each of the three places.

The presence of this single type of decorated ware from such widely separated Choctaw settlements, covering the entire area known to have been occupied by that tribe, suggests very strongly that it was the prevailing type of pottery in use at some period of their history. It may safely be regarded as historic, in the sense that it is found thus far only at Choctaw sites known to have been occupied as late as the 19th century, but further than this its age cannot at present be determined.

In texture and color this Choctaw pottery is similar to a widespread type from the mounds in western and central Mississippi and in parts of Arkansas and Louisiana. It is strikingly different, however, from the prevailing type of mound pottery from eastern Mississippi. The pottery from the mounds of this section is usually rough and crumbly and contains rather coarse tempering material. The decorations most often found are produced either by "brushing" or by impressing cords or coarse fabrics on the soft surface. Sometimes there is an ornamentation consisting of carelessly incised lines or punctations, and, infrequently, of the stamped curvilinear designs so common in Georgia and Florida.

It is too early to speculate, on the basis of this ceramic distribution, as to whether this Choctaw pottery developed locally or whether it had its origin to the west. Consideration of this question, as well as that of a possible earlier occupancy of the Choctaw territory by some other tribe, must be deferred until more complete information is available. It would be very desirable, for this purpose, to have additional collections of potsherds from other known Choctaw village sites and from the little known mounds and unidentified sites of central and western Mississippi.