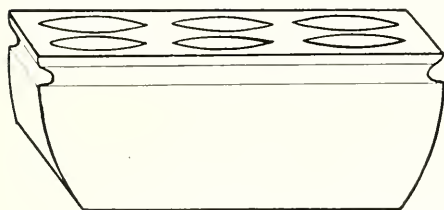


INLAID AND ENGRAVED VASES OF 6500 YEARS AGO.

BY EDGAR JAMES BANKS.

Field Director of the recent Expedition of the University of Chicago to Babylonia.

IT was 4500 years B. C. or nearly 6500 years ago, that Babylonian, or rather pre-Babylonian or Sumerian art was at its height. Four thousand years later, toward the close of the Babylonian empire, after intercourse with the Persians and Greeks had been established, during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, there was a revival in art, yet while the last of the Babylonians may have excelled in some respects, in others they were inferior. Even to the archaeologist accustomed to study the things most ancient, these statements will seem strange, yet my own excavations at Bismya, in Central Babylonia, have



INCENSE CASE OF CALCITE.

5007-8

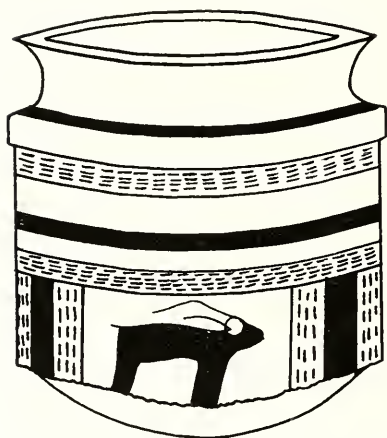


COSMETIC CASE OF MARBLE.

shown that the early dwellers of lower Mesopotamia possessed an artistic skill which was hardly surpassed during the forty following centuries before Babylonia fell into the hands of the Persians. The building bricks of that early age, if not so well formed, were finer moulded and better baked. Pottery was more durable. The engravings upon the early seal cylinders are far superior to those of a later date, and the only recovered Babylonian statue in the round, with the arms at the elbows free from the body, adorned the Bismya

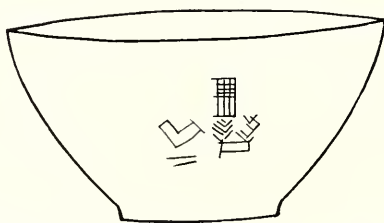
temple about 4500 B. C.* Engraved and inlaid vases of marble, alabaster, onyx, porphyry, granite and of softer stones scarcely appear excepting in the earliest times; the few of a later date, which have been recovered, generally lack the graceful form, and especially the designs and inlaid work which beautifies the vases of the fifth millennium B. C. It is these early vases from Bismya which the present article would describe.

The archæological treasures with which the Babylonian excavator enriches the museums of Europe and America, are in most cases objects which were discarded by the ancients as worthless, or because they were broken and no longer of use. Therefore the ex-



5009 TERRA COTTA VASE.

Gray with heavy lines in red and short light lines in white



ALABASTER VASE. 5010

Streaked with red veins. $21 \times 10\frac{1}{2}$ inches.

cavator who finds the ancient dump heap where the broken or discarded utensils of antiquity were thrown, is indeed fortunate. Such was my own lot at Bismya. At the edge of a large platform upon which the first great temple at Bismya was constructed during the fifth millennium before our era, in an angle formed by an inclined plane which served as a stairway, was the ancient temple dump. It had been covered deep by the ruins of the later structures which had been reared on the site, and it was only by accident, while digging down through them to learn the depth of the platform foundation, that we came upon it. For ten days a gang of nine men worked at the old dump, and dozens of baskets full of fragmentary and

* See the author's article, "The Statue of King David and What it Teaches," in *The Open Court* for April, 1906.

entire vases, and other objects of stone, ivory, mother-of-pearl and bitumen, were recovered. This old dump gave us our first picture of the magnificence of the early temple service and the highly developed art of the greatest antiquity.

Naturally most of the stone vase fragments were plain, and they needed no adornment other than the beautifully streaked onyx or pure alabaster of which they were made. About forty of the fragments were inscribed with the earliest forms of cuneiform writing, and a hundred or more were engraved with the figures of men, animals, buildings and plants, or inlaid with stones of another color, ivory, mother-of-pearl and bitumen.

The forms of the inscribed and engraved vases were generally identical with the plain, yet the shape given to those of a soft stone,



DESIGN ON AN INLAID STONE.

4999

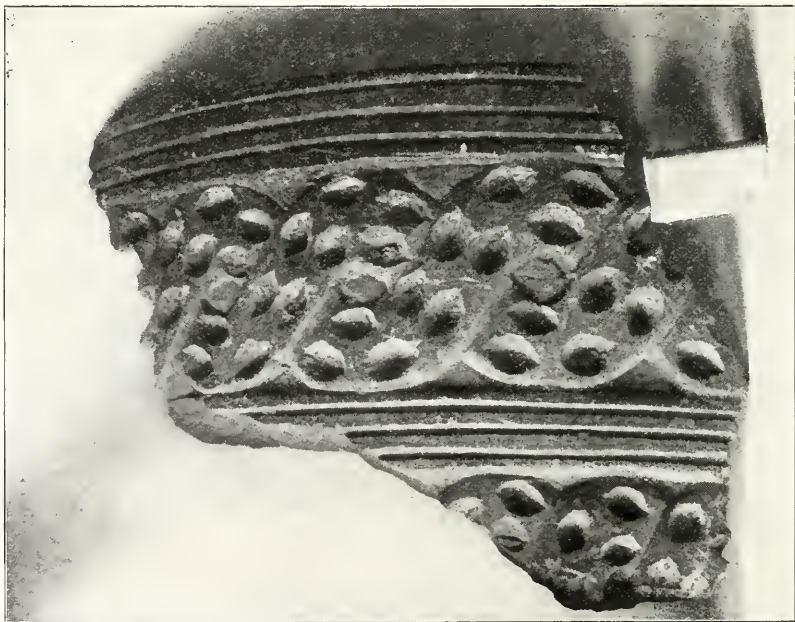
Drawn by E. J. Banks.

as alabaster, free-stone and sand-stone, was more complicated than those of harder stones, as onyx, porphyry and granite. Judging from the examples which we recovered it would seem that few modern forms were unknown to the ancients, yet Bismya yielded no stone vases which were provided with handles other than holes for the purpose of suspension. In size the vases varied as greatly as in form. Some were as small as a modern egg cup; of others fragments were found showing walls nearly two inches in thickness, and a diameter not far from two feet.

Of all the engraved, inlaid vases, one represented by three fragments of a soft, dark-blue stone, with vertical walls, is perhaps the most remarkable. The entire exterior is covered with figures of men, and upon the three fragments at hand are parts of thirteen.

The design represents a procession of exceedingly grotesque figures, headed by two musicians playing upon harps. The first figure behind the musicians may be the king, and running to meet them are others bearing branches, and holding them on high.

It is not the grotesqueness of the figures, nor their unusual costumes, nor the unknown event which the engraving would describe, which gives the vase the greatest interest. Although the figures, the costumes, the harps and three branches were all engraved, they were also partly inlaid with ivory and stones. Fortu-



FRAGMENT OF DARK BLUE STONE VASE.

5000

The vase was inlaid with stones to represent the spots on the intertwined serpents.

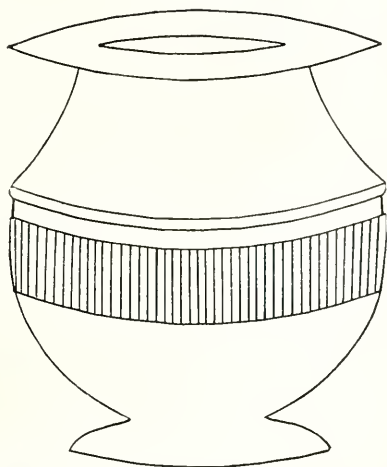
nately one square piece of ivory which was found with the vase, fitted into the place made for it in the dress of one figure. That figure wore a skirt of ivory, as did probably the others. In one of the branches a few small pieces of lapis-lazuli are still held in place by means of bitumen, the common cement of antiquity. What material was employed to represent the eyes of the figures, the bracelets, the hat-bands, the braids of hair, and the harp-strings, for they were all inlaid, we can only imagine. The fragments of

this remarkable vase, now in the museum of the University of Chicago, form one of the most inexplicable, unique, and valuable treasures of the most ancient art. A small fragment of a similar vase upon which an inlaid cow's head is engraved, was also found in the temple dump.

A second inlaid vase, also of a dark-blue stone, is represented by a single large fragment broken from the rim. Running parallel with the edge, and apparently encircling the entire vase, are two large serpents, gracefully entwined. At close intervals along the serpents were inlaid pieces of some other material, as if to represent



ALABASTER VASE INLAID WITH
5001 LAPIS-LAZULI.*



VASE OF BITUMEN. 5002
Largest diameter 27.5 in.; height 15 in.

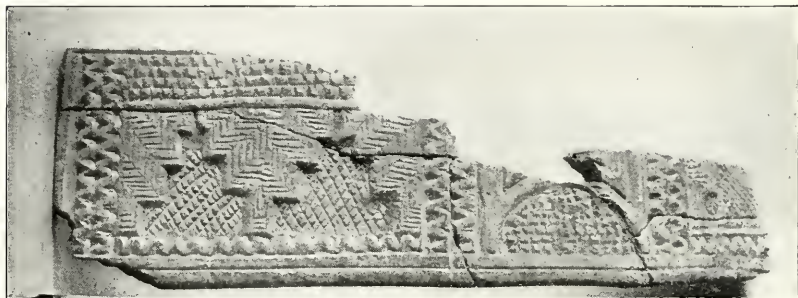
the spots upon the skin. Between the coils, larger circular pieces, probably of a different material, were inlaid.

Two vases, each originally standing about seven inches in height, and identical in shape, were recovered from the temple dump. One is of white marble, and the other of alabaster, and both are inlaid. The same geometrical design appears upon them. The grooves which were cut upon one to receive the inlaid material still contain a few bits of lapis-lazuli; upon the other the black bitumen which contrasted sharply with the white marble, is still clinging.

In general, the more richly the vase was decorated, the more

* A duplicate of this vase in size and design is of white marble inlaid with bitumen.

simple was its form. The vases whose fragments were literally covered with engravings, possessed walls which were vertical or nearly so, while the more complicated forms and the more beautiful stones, were left unadorned. A small fragment of a light-blue soap stone vase bears an engraving which is of value to the student of early architecture. It has long been supposed that the square staged tower which was a prominent part of every Babylonian

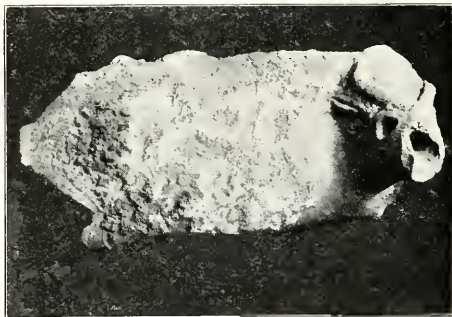


FRAGMENT OF A BLUE STONE VASE.

5003

Showing that the staged tower existed in Babylonia as early as
4500 B. C.

Photograph by E. J. Banks.



5026 BLACK STONE VASE.*

LAMP TERMINATING IN A RAM'S HEAD.

Photograph by E. J. Banks.

temple, was of comparatively late origin. This vase fragment from the early temple dump crudely represents a tower of four stages, and the excavations in the temple itself have shown that as early as 4500 B. C. the tower was perhaps its most prominent feature. Other vases were engraved with figures of animals, and one of a hard black stong, now in several fragments is represented with four

* Decorated with leaping rams and palm trees.

leaping rams in very high relief. Alternating with them are trees probably intended for the palm. The execution of the animals is especially good.

Also from the same temple dump were several marble and alabaster lamps, which if employed in the temple, might lead one to infer that as in the synagogues of later times, a light was continually burning. The lamps were given the shape of the conch shell from which they were copied, and the snout was curved that the wick which it supported might not easily slip back into the coil of the dish. Some of the lamps are plain; others are decorated with reticulated lines, and the snout of one terminates in a ram's head



5025

MARBLE LAMP.

ALABASTER LAMP.

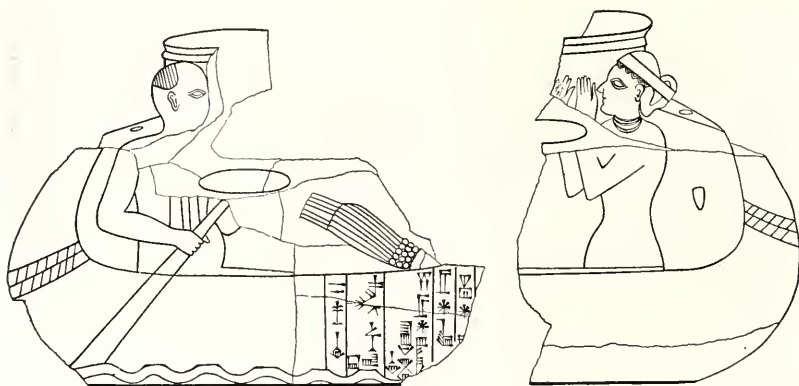
Photograph by E. J. Banks.

which held the wick projecting from its mouth. The eyes of the head, now represented by large holes, were only fitted with eyeballs of a different material, probably of lapis-lazuli.

Still another vase of a beautiful design was made of the bitumen which is still obtained in the hot springs of Hit on the upper Euphrates. The soft black pitch which oozes from the ground, is still collected and boiled, when it becomes hard and may be worked as if it were stone.

A large marble vase, also found in connection with Bismya temple, but at a distance from the ancient refuse heap, comes from a much later date. The character of the inscription which it bears

shows it to have been made not far from 2800 B. C. The fragments, about twenty in number, were discovered at different times, and fitted together until finally the general design became evident. It represents a double prowed boat which is being paddled along the water, and beneath it the waves are crudely represented. Upon the front of the starboard side is a dedicatory inscription. Within, upon the same side, sits a man holding an oar with which he is propelling the boat. Upon the other side, opposite the projection which forms the vase proper, is a woman holding her hands to her face in the customary attitude of worship. Although the vase is nearly two thousand years later than those described above, it shows less, rather than greater skill in its execution. It was never of practical use; the holes which pierce its ends show that it was suspended in the temple to which it was dedicated.



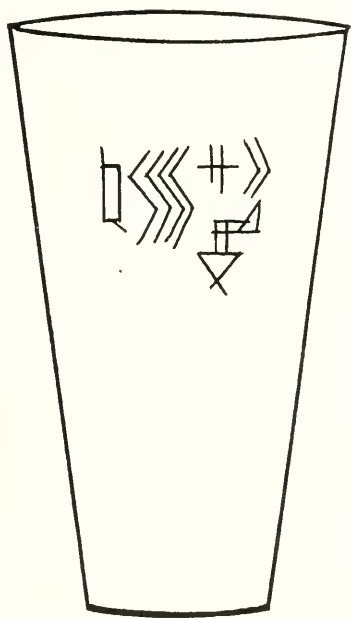
TWO SIDES OF A MARBLE BOAT VASE.

5004

The stones from which the Bismya vases were worked are of a very great variety, and the sources from which they were obtained were far distant, either in the hills of Armenia far to the north, or in the mountains which rise from the plateau of Central Arabia. Certainly they speak of long journeys to distant lands. Sargon of 3800 B. C. speaks of an expedition across the desert to the Mediterranean sea coast; the earlier Sumerians must have undertaken equally great expeditions.

It may seem surprising that the people of 6000 years ago were able to shape the hardest of stones into beautiful, perfectly symmetrical vases, and decorate their exteriors with complicated designs, and the question, how they did it, naturally rises. The only instruments which they are known to have possessed were of bronze

and of stone, and with these their work was done. They were acquainted with the lathe, and with it they turned the beautiful seal cylinders from stones as hard as jasper, lapis-lazuli and serpentine, and most of the vases from the temple dump also bear its marks. Just what the cutting instrument was, or how the lathe was constructed, is uncertain. In Bagdad at the present time, the workers of wood, brass and iron use a primitive lathe turned by a bow held in the hands, while the chisel is held and pressed with



A PORPHYRY VASE WITH INDISTINCT INSCRIPTION.

5005

Photograph by E. J. Banks. 5005-5006 Diagram with inscription restored.

the toes against the object to be cut. This instrument seems primitive enough to have survived unchanged during all of the sixty centuries or more since the beautiful vases from the ancient Bismya temple dump were made. These vases, perhaps more than any of the other antiquities which the ruins of Babylonia have yielded, speak of a high development in art and culture, and therefore of a general civilization which a decade ago would have been thought impossible at so remote an antiquity.