

NOTES UPON ANCIENT SOAP-STONE QUARRIES,
WORKED FOR THE MANUFACTURE OF
COOKING UTENSILS.

AN interesting letter from Dr. Emil Schmidt, of Essen, Prussia, to our associate, Mr. F. W. Putnam, in the *Fifteenth Annual Report of the Peabody Museum*, p. 59, describes the present appearance of some ancient steatite quarries at Chiavenna, about ten miles north of the head of Lake Como, where cooking utensils, closely resembling those formerly made in large quantities by the natives of various parts of our own country, have been manufactured from very remote times. The traces of ancient workings occur in the sides of a deep cutting made in the 14th century to isolate the so-called Paradiso, and form an impregnable citadel out of a mountain spur over-looking the little town. Chiavenna has always been regarded as one of "the keys of Italy," since it commands the outlet of three important Alpine passes, the Splügen and the Septimer, which were used in the times of the Romans, and the Maloja, leading directly into the Engadine. This accounts for the execution at this place of works upon such an extensive scale as this cutting. Dr. Schmidt says: "Probably there existed a smaller ditch a long time before; this would be shown by the engraved Latin name SALVIVS in the upper part of the western wall. Also it is known that the Gauls had fortified the Paradiso already before the time of the Romans. Pot-stones may have been broken there since that time, and their manufacture may have been continued until the achievement of the ditch. Of course the stone-pot manufacture was most flourishing in the district in the first centuries of our era, and at Plurs [just east of Chiavenna] it continued until 1618, when this place was totally destroyed and covered by the falling down of Mount Conto [Conte]. Still soap-stone pots are now manufactured to a certain extent at Lazanda [Lanzada], in the Malenco valley, near Sondrio."

In a description of a steatite quarry upon the island of Santa Catalina, formerly worked by the Indians of southern California, by Mr. Paul Schumacher in the *Eleventh Annual Report of the Peabody Museum*, p. 259, he also traces the fabrication of cooking utensils out of soap-stone back to a very remote period. He says: "The stone of which this utensil for culinary purposes, and some other articles of our Indians were worked out, has been well known and in use for like purposes

since the classic times of Theophrastus and Pliny. The magnesian stone (*μαγνητικὸς λίθος*), and the kind quarried at Siphnos and Comum—the *lapis ollaris* of a later period—of which in ancient times vessels were hollowed out in the turning-lathe and carved, coincide in nature and composition with the pot-stone of our Indians. The stone is steatite and is usually of a greenish grey color." The reference to Pliny will be found in his "Natural History," book 36, chapter 44: "At Siphnos there is a kind of stone, which is hollowed and turned in the lathe for making cooking utensils and vessels for keeping provisions; a thing that to my own knowledge is done with the green stone of Comum, in Italy."

When we call to mind that Pliny, if not a native of Como, certainly had a villa upon the shores of the lake, where he spent a great deal of time, it seems not an unreasonable inference that these ancient steatite workings at Chiavenna, where a Roman inscription may still be read, are the identical quarries to which he refers. I have never met with an instance of the use of the phrase "*lapis ollaris*" in a classic author, and am inclined to think it merely a retranslation of the French expression "*Pierre ollaire*." This, or simply "*ollaire*," according to Larouse, Dict. *sub voc.*, is the name given to a variety of stone from which sauce pans (marmite, olla) are made, from which the name is derived. The material is commonly called "stone of Como," as the most important sources of its supply are there.

Prof. Baird, of the Smithsonian Institution, first directed attention to the site of a soap-stone quarry worked for similar purposes by the Indians of our own country. This is at Chula, Amelia Co., Virginia, and it has been thoroughly explored and described by Mr. F. H. Cushing in the *Smithsonian Report* for 1878, p. 45. Mr. Putnam in his *Eleventh Annual Report of the Peabody Museum*, p. 273, gives a very interesting account of a similar quarry examined by him in the town of Johnston, R. I., with a description of the method of manufacture of the vessels; and Mr. Elmer R. Reynolds describes with full details another locality in the District of Columbia, *Twelfth Annual Report of the Peabody Museum*, p. 526. Prof. Baird states that "since the discovery of the Virginia quarry . . . similar sources of aboriginal supply have been discovered in Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama and Wyoming," *Smithsonian Report* for 1878, p. 46. It does not appear, however, that they had any knowledge of the quarries at Frankestown, N. H., and at Grafton, Vt., from which the material is principally obtained at the present time in this country.

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