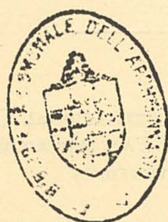
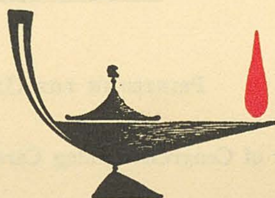
The Encyclopedia AMERICANA

The International Reference Work



Complete in Thirty Volumes

1829  1956

AMERICANA CORPORATION

New York • Chicago • Washington, D.C.

Forms of Mortars.— Throughout other parts of North America there were many forms of mortars distinctly different from those in use in the region already indicated, but closely related to one another in shape. Among the Iroquois and other northern and eastern tribes of the United States and parts of Canada the natives made use of wooden mortars hollowed into the top of a block cut from the trunk of a tree. In this hollow, which was of considerable size and depth, the corn or other substance was put, in a dry or wet condition, and pounded into a more or less fine powder or into a soft, semi-liquid mass, by means of a long wooden pestle, with a pounding surface at both ends. The remains of very primitive mortars in many parts of the American continents show the various processes through which the modern mortars have passed to reach their present perfection. Originally a rough unworked flat stone was used as a grinding surface and an unshaped rounded stone served to do the pounding. From this primitive utensil to the carefully shaped metate of the Mexican or the handsomely carved and hollowed mortar of the Alaskan and British Columbian tribes is a long step which bridges a lengthy period of cultural development. In the granite rock of California mortars in the shape of excavations are frequently found on the sites of old Indian villages. Some of these are very primitive in form, while others, evidently of a much later development, are carefully shaped and seem to follow a regular plan of structure. It is probable that the flat stone metate form and the hollow mortar form both originated in pounding grain on a flat surface, the two natural methods of preventing the loss of the pulverized grain being to reduce the pounding to rubbing or rolling, and to pound the grain, in a deepish hole, as was done in the California granite rock. The tribes of the great forest area of the North, having no hollow rock beds or stones easily worked, hollowed out the ends sections of tree trunks or sides of logs by means of fire which also hardened the inner surface of the mortars, dried the wood and made them very durable. In regions where stone and wood were not available, bone, rawhide and other materials were converted into mortars for the grinding of food materials. In the whale country some of the races addicted to whale hunting used the vertebræ of that animal for mortars. Some of these are still employed. In the Eastern States of the United States primitive mortars made of hollowed but otherwise unshaped boulders are frequently encountered; and similar mortars are formed in California, side by side with other globular mortars, which are evidently but a more artistic development of the boulder form. A further evolution of the artistic form was reached when stones were quarried from the rocky bed, shaped to exact pre-determined form and proportions and frequently decorated with conventional forms, mystic signs or figures of household gods.

The pestle took upon itself as many shapes and designs as the mortar, and like relation of the latter to the metate, it was first cousin to the muller, both of which had their origin in the rough, unworked stone used by primitive man to pound or crush his food, and other objects. Some pestles were heavy and several feet long; others were short instruments which could be used with one hand. Metates and mortars were of many shapes, sizes and designs, and their uses were almost as varied as their forms.

Uses of Mortars.— Indians, throughout the buffalo country, put the buffalo meat into a rawhide bag which they placed in a hole in the earth with the open mouth upward. While here they pounded the meat into shape for pemmican. Some Indians placed their shallow mortars in closely-woven baskets considerably larger than the mortars so that the grain that fell from the latter, in the process of grinding or pulverizing, might be saved. Others of the Pueblo Indians placed a basket-shaped hopper in the mouth of the mortar to prevent the pounded grain from hopping out. It is probable that very large «mortar holes» found in rock were also used as boiling pots, in which the heated water was obtained by dropping superheated stones into the hole. The large wooden portable mortars of the forest-region Indians were generally set on the ground so as to make them firm and steady. The ordinary metate of Mexico and Central America has generally three legs upon which it stands steadily. In many cases these give it an artistic appearance. Most of these metates are made of lava rock, especially in the districts where lava is plentiful. Metates are made of rocks of different grades of coarseness. Thus it is possible, by passing ground grain from one metate to another, to finally obtain a flour as fine as the finest turned out by the best modern mill machinery. Fine metates and mortars are also made from granite, limestone, sandstone and other rocky material. Perhaps the most artistic development of the mortar is to be found among the Haida Indians of Alaska, who probably learned their art from Asiatic tribes. Not only are mortars of a great variety of forms and designs but they are also of many sizes, ranging from tiny little vessels to huge excavations. The reason is that they were put to a variety of uses. The smaller mortars were employed as receptacles in which to grind paints, medicines, shells, tobacco and other substances used in medicine, personal decoration, ceremonies, incantations and dances. All the grinding of corn and other food products was almost universally done among the American Indians by women; but in the case of the ceremonial substances, especially those considered of a sacred nature, where the efficacy of the charm, ceremonial use or medicine depended upon the manner in which the grinding was done, this work was generally left to the medicine men, who were learned in all the ceremonial forms and traditions of the tribe.

Bibliography.—Hodge, ‹Handbook of American Indians›; Morehead, ‹Prehistoric Implements›; ‹The American Indian in the United States›; Morgan, ‹League of the Iroquois›; Nordenskjöld, ‹Cliff Dwellers of the Mesa Verda›; Schoolcraft, ‹The Indian Tribes of the United States›; Thurston, ‹Antiquities of Tennessee.›

MORTARA, môr-tä'rä, **Edgar**, Jewish boy whose forcible removal from his parents by the orders of the archbishop of Bologna in 1858 aroused great excitement in Europe and led to protests from several powers, but the Pope

declined to interfere. The plea made in justification of the act was that Mortara had been early baptized into Christianity by a Roman Catholic maid-servant. The Roman Catholic authorities, however, declined to return him; and despite the many protests in the matter, he remained, of his own choice in 1870, with the Church and entered the Augustinian order. Consult 'The True Story of the Jewish Boy, Edgar Mortara' (1860), and Vollet, 'Edgar Mortara' (1881).

MORTARA, môr-tä'rạ, Italy, capital of the province of Pavia, on the Arbogna, also chief town of the Lomellina, and junction of the Novara-Mortara-Alessandria, the Mortara-Milano and the Vercelli-Mortara-Pavia and the Mortara-Casale railways. It has a Gothic church (San Lorenzo) and the Santa Croce convent church, also a theatre, gymnasium and technical school. It has manufactures of machinery and hats and does considerable trade in its rice and cheese products. The Austrians under Duke Albrecht won a battle here against the Piedmontese in 1849. It had a population of 8,770 for the entire commune.

MORTE D'ARTHUR. This great English collection of Arthurian romances, written before 1470 by Sir Thomas Malory, as one of the cardinal books whose influence has reached beyond any mere personal fame. Personally, indeed, Malory has remained almost unknown. Even the probability that this 15th century gentleman and soldier served with Richard, Earl of Warwick, pattern of chivalry, was recovered only 25 years ago; but 400 years have proved the vitality of his book. After inspiring the conduct of noble English youth for generations, it was reinterpreted in Tennyson's most popular poem, 'The Idylls of the King'; and, surviving so unusual a competition, it is still reprinted, read and loved. Yet as a translation, in great part from known French sources, it is not [illegible] modern sense original. Therefore the reaso[illegible] its fame are the more significant as going to the roots of permanent literary interest. The first reason, of course, is style. Writing in the early days of English prose, Malory has the dignity and ease of such early historians as Froissart; but his even and leisurely pace does not preclude the force of direct diction. This rare combination of dignity with simplicity has been sufficient to preserve his work without any great strength of structure, any compelling movement of the whole. The 'Morte d'Arthur' is not composed as a whole, not planned to lead us on stage by stage to a culmination. True, the closing books are felt as the tragic conclusion of Arthur's chivalry in a world of violence; but with many of the preceding stories it has no specific connection. Rather Malory worked as the mediæval romancers from whom he drew had worked before him. Collecting all the well-known stories — and a few less well known — that had come to be associated with the great name of Arthur, he used them much as he found them; and he told each for itself. Though he sometimes suggests complication of plot or development of character, he never worked for these in the ways of the modern novelist. The Renaissance had but touched England; and its literary ideas, even if they had been prevalent, would hardly have moved so thorough a mediævalist as Malory. He turned away from the actual wars of the Roses to the legendary wars of Arthur's knights because of his intense sympathy with the ideals of a passing chivalry. He is far more mediæval than Chaucer. Though in style he has his own distinction, in composition he is the typical mediæval transmitter.

Every one of the stories that he thus brought together has a long history. Many of them reach far back into folklore. Most of them before they came to him had been told over and over again. The successive versions, their relations, their combination, the transference of a tale from Gawain to Percival and then to Galahad, the building up of a cycle of Grail stories and the attaching of this to the Arthurian cycle — all these have claimed much scholarly investigation and still offer problems as difficult as they are significant. But of this Malory was no more aware than the thousands of readers who have gone to him, not for history or folklore, nor for psychology or drama, but for the solace and inspiration of high adventure.

Beginning with the perennial story of the prince wondrously born and sent in the nick of time to claim the crown, right wrong, and establish a kingdom of justice, courtesy, and honor, he ends with the traditional hope that the same king, though in his stricken age borne away to the Isle of Avilon, may yet return to reign. Only to the latter books belongs properly the title 'Morte d'Arthur,' which is borne also by several mediæval poems. Between the young prince smiting the stone with his miraculous sword and the old king fighting his last battle against treason in the dim West, what a store of quests and deliverances, what a goodly array. Balen and Balan still show a primitive wildness in spite of the faint hint of the coming Grail; and the fairies, though crowded to the back of the stage by the stir of chivalry, still peep from their Celtic twilight. Morgan le Fay is dangerous in revenge. The Lady of the Lake gives the magic sword, and to her at the last it returns. Merlin the wizard, after all his triumphs of wisdom and skill, «was assotted and doted on one of the ladies of the lake.» But these are only old echoes. The stories are of chivalry; of Beaumains, youth proving its unconquerable force; of Tristram and Iseult, the immortal lovers, and Guenever, the queen mistress who drew the peerless Lancelot across steel and fire and even across loyalty; of Gawain, his earlier fame tarnished, but still the courteous; of a hundred good knights who sought wild paths and frightful risks and stiff battles because they must make life an adventure.

Following these old adventures with adventurous hearts, readers have always been glad that they are numerous, and have not missed in the thronging of Malory's stories that unity which he did not seek. From the conquest of Rome to the earliest adventures of Lancelot, from Beaumains to Tristram, Malory goes leisurely, but always with zest; and by the way he pauses for yet other stories. The 'Morte d'Arthur' is a storehouse of romance. And above all the other quests, above the errant fighting throng, shines the supreme quest of the Holy Grail, the great romance of the Mass. Malory's aim, then, was not that modern literary distinction which comes from