

They are men of very robust constitution; but ill-looking, savage, vindictive, and passionately fond of fermented liquors. They are omnivorous *animals* in the highest degree; and therefore the other Indians, who consider them as barbarians, have a common saying, "nothing is so loathsome but that an Ottomac will eat it." While the waters of the Orinoco and its tributary streams are low, the Ottomacs subsist on fish and turtles. The former they kill with surprising dexterity, by shooting them with an arrow when they appear at the surface of the water. When the rivers swell fishing almost entirely ceases.\* It is then very difficult to procure fish, which often fails the poor missionaries, on fast-days as well as flesh-days, though all the young Indians are under the obligation of "fishing for the convent." During the period of these inundations, which last two or three months, the Ottomacs swallow a prodigious quantity of earth. We found heaps of earth-balls in their huts, piled up in pyramids three or four feet high. These balls were five or six inches in diameter. The earth which the Ottomacs eat, is a very fine and unctuous clay, of a yellowish grey colour; and, when being slightly baked at the fire, the hardened crust has a tint inclining to red, owing to the oxide of iron which is mingled with it. We brought away some of this earth, which we took from the winter-provision of the Indians; and it is a mistake to suppose that it is steatitic, and that it contains magnesia. Vauquelin did not discover any traces of that substance in it: but he found that it contained more silex than alumina, and three or four per cent of lime.

The Ottomacs do not eat every kind of clay indifferently; they choose the alluvial beds or strata, which contain the most unctuous earth, and the smoothest to the touch. I inquired of the missionary whether the moistened clay were made to undergo that peculiar decomposition which is indicated by a disengagement of carbonic acid and sulphuretted hydrogen, and which is designated in every language by the term of *putrefaction*; but he assured us, that the natives neither cause the clay to *rot*, nor do they mingle it with

\* In South America, as in Egypt and Nubia, the swelling of the rivers, which occurs periodically in every part of the torrid zone, is erroneously attributed to the melting of the snows.