



Ancient Terracotta Figures from Northern Nigeria

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Something was definitely afoot around 1000 B.C.E. in Nigeria—in the quadrangle framed by the Niger River to the west, the Benue River to the south, the Jos Plateau to the east, and the Sokoto River to the north—at the edge of what is now the Sahara. What we know about the civilizations that were forming there comes mainly from terracotta sculpture found initially by accident in the context of surface mining for alluvial tin deposits. No written records have come to light, either in any indigenous form or in the vast historical literature of ancient Egypt, Greece, or Rome.¹ Islamic scholars from the tenth century focused on the empires of Ghana and Mali. By the fourteenth century, Arabic visits had been made to Timbuktu, but they revealed no record of these cultures east of the Middle Niger, which presumably had been gone for a thousand years. Today, these cultures are referred to by the present-day names of one small village in the south and two states in the north: Nok, Sokoto, and Katsina, respectively. The state of Nigeria, of course, did not exist until the colonial period; it was established in 1900.

Nok, the name of the village where the first ancient Nigerian terracotta figure was found in 1928, has become the label for thousands of terracotta figures found throughout an area of one hundred square kilometers in central Nigeria that extends both north and south of the Benue River, through the western edge of the Jos Plateau, and almost to the Niger River. The first objects discovered were found in the 1920s, in tin mines under seven or eight meters of sedimentary sand and gravel; only a little surface excavation was carried out there. Nevertheless many objects were collected under the auspices of the Jos Museum, which was established by Bernard Fagg in 1952. These objects are indisputably original, and they have undergone laboratory tests that serve as the main basis for what we currently know about their period.² A team from the Goethe University's Institute for Archaeological Research in Frankfurt is currently investigating the site. Dating for Nok objects continues to be pushed back as objects are tested, now with early dates extending from the ninth century B.C.E. to as late as 700 C.E.³ Many of the discoveries made in archaeological surveys were found in proximity to iron smelting sites that date at least to the fifth century B.C.E.⁴ Since so many of these objects exhibit intricate decoration that must have been prestigious, it is believed that most Nok figures, both male

Fig. 1. *Male Figure (fragment)*, Nok, Nigeria, 900 B.C.E.—500 C.E. Terracotta, 22¾ x 12 x 11 in. (57.8 x 30.5 x 27.9 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of SusAnna and Joel B. Grae, 2010.6.132

and female, represent important political leaders. Other Nok sculptural subjects include disease and animals such as monkeys, bats, felines, elephants, snakes, and possibly rams. Almost all terracotta figurines have been found broken, suggesting a ritual process of destruction.⁵

Characteristic features of the Nok style are outlined, semicircular, pierced eyes; open mouths; and elaborate braided and bunned coiffure for both male and female figures. Several styles of Nok facial features have been distinguished, and all these styles are found throughout the region of discovery, suggesting that they do not represent regional aesthetics, but rather indicate some other distinction, perhaps schools of fabrication that had wide distribution. The consistency of these artistic conventions, lasting more than a thousand years, suggests a kind of centralization of this society, in which ideas were shared widely and agreed on.⁶ The objects with the earliest dates are of fully matured fluorescence, suggesting that the period of artistic activity in question began much earlier, and that the period of habitation and civilization of these people began before that. But to locate these dates with any specificity, we will need to wait for the results of the archaeological excavations still under way.

Sokoto State is in northwest Nigeria in the Niger River Valley, at the confluence of ancient trade routes. Little is known of the ancient culture, as there has been no controlled archaeological investigation. Bayard Rustin, the civil rights leader of the 1950s and 1960s who originally collected most of the Yale University Art Gallery's ancient terracotta figures in Nigeria, reported that "the Sokoto and Katsina pieces were found in large man-made mounds."⁷ From scientific dating, the culture appears roughly contemporary with Nok to the south, suggesting a period from 500 B.C.E. to 200 C.E. Characteristic of Sokoto features are heavy eyebrows and beards, the latter sometimes braided or bound. Generally these figures are fragmen-

tary, with only the bust remaining, and the heads are often life-sized or even larger than life. How large the full figures would have been is difficult to say—presumably the common West African proportion of one to three or four (the relation of the head to the body) would have prevailed, but even if this is the case, many of these full figures would have been enormous.

Katsina State is on the trade routes between the ancient city of Kano and the Sahara. It is closely linked with Sokoto, and terracotta objects coming from these areas without provenance are difficult to attribute precisely to one state or the other. Furthermore the dating of these objects is encumbered by the fact that no controlled archaeological excavations have been carried out. A period of three hundred years, from 200 B.C.E. to 100 C.E., has been suggested, but this is guesswork based on a very sparse sample, with no stratigraphy on which to rely. It seems that most figures from Katsina were originally attached to the top of globular jars and were perhaps funerary markers. Figures commonly are seated with hands resting on the knees and faces that are relatively naturalistic, with caps on the head.

The works of these three areas, while suggesting distinct polities, also bear many similarities. Nok, Sokoto, and Katsina all produced very large, hollow, thin-walled, low-fired, terracotta human sculptures in similar postures and bearing like ornamentation, many with heads close to life-sized. The medium used throughout is earthenware mixed with quartz and mica for tenacity, surfaced with a slip of ocher or mica schist and burnished with a smooth pebble to achieve a fine finish.⁸ Quite a few sculptures from each of these groups share stylistic similarities. We have a vague idea of the limits of the Nok geographical area, but we have very little idea about ancient Sokoto and Katsina, where no collection data has been recorded. The cultures probably overlapped geographically, at least in part, and certainly were known to each other at particular times.

A collection of sixty-four figural sculptures from these cultures of ancient Nigeria was given to the Gallery in 2010, as part of a donation of 243 objects from SusAnna and Joel B. Grae. Other sculptures in terracotta and stone represent the somewhat later culture of Bura, which was located further up the Niger River in present-day Niger. Most of these objects were in fragments that were reassembled with no attempt at restoration or camouflage, as is common in other collections. The Graes wanted no deception that would interfere with the possibility of research. Rustin field-collected the objects personally in northern Nigerian villages in the 1950s and 1960s during his visits to Nnamdi Azikiwe, who became president of Nigeria at independence.

One of the most fascinating and largest figures in the collection of Nok terracottas is a male torso with a bearded head turned slightly to its right, its right arm (now lost) seemingly once uplifted, as if it were in the act of hurling a spear (fig. 1). Multiple strands of necklace beads are depicted around the neck and shoulders and covering the upper chest above sagging pectorals; from these strands, four long tubular ornaments, possibly representing iron bells, are suspended. Around the waist are more strands of beads, and although what was below the waist is now lost, it probably displayed more ornamentation, including a breechclout or penis sheath, as is commonly found in similar works. Around the proper left side of the figure, hanging from the right shoulder, are what seem to be strands of fiber or leather forming a strap from which are suspended three small containers, possibly meant to hold medicine, as one sees in later West African sculptures. Elaborate ornamental bands are found around the left arm at the shoulder, the elbow, and the wrist. The figure may represent a military leader—one is tempted to say a king—but we have no idea about the political system that was in force.⁹

Another Nok sculpture represents a male figure with his hands upraised, the fingers,



Fig. 2. *Male Figure with Arms Upraised*, Nok, Nigeria, 900 B.C.E.–500 C.E. Terracotta, 21½ x 7 x 7 in. (54.6 x 17.8 x 17.8 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of SusAnna and Joel B. Grae, 2010.6.114

delicately rendered, touching above the head (fig. 2). The pectorals are again represented. Around the neck is a single band, and some sort of packet hangs from the proper left shoulder. Around the waist is another single band, tied in front, and a long, decorative penis sheath is tied with multiple bands at the top. The face is exquisitely rendered with full lips slightly parted, large circular eyes with heavy eyelids, and a prominent, arched brow. What could this elegantly attired person be doing, in a gesture that, with no cultural clues, we might interpret as reverential? This may be the only example of such a figural posture in the corpus of Nok objects published to date.

A seated male figure from Katsina may have originally been built atop a globular vessel, which would have constituted a very large object (fig. 3). The bearded figure, apparently squatting, and nude, rests his hands on his knees, one higher than the other. He is decorated with a band around the neck, and multiple bands on the wrists, knees, and ankles and around the back of the waist. His facial expression resembles the one on a bust of a figure from Sokoto that is impressive in both its size and its boldness of features (fig. 4).

The Sokoto figure is a bearded and mustached male, with hair dressed elaborately in a profusion of vertical projectiles and with a braided band along the forehead. He is further decorated with a necklace with multiple striated pendants, resembling feathers. The hands rest against the chest, and in the proper right hand is what seems to be a flail wrapped over the shoulder. The presence of the flail, an insigne of authority that is commonly seen throughout West and Central Africa, would seem to indicate that this is the representation of a political leader.

In the known corpus of both Nok and Sokoto works, there are numerous suggestions of visual affinities with another culture in Africa, which overlapped in time with these Nigerian cultures, though it has been documented as being of much greater antiq-

uity—that of ancient Egypt. If we may take the earliest reaches of these Nigerian civilizations as a group to extend through the first millennium B.C.E., and possibly further back, they would be contemporaneous with a period of the Egyptian civilization beginning at the end of the New Kingdom, from the late dynasties of the Third Intermediate Period (including the Kushite dynasty of Nubia), and extending through the Roman period. I would like to suggest not that Egyptians and the people of ancient Nigeria necessarily knew each other, or had direct contact, but that a pan-Saharan set of conventions may have spread along the trade routes.

Far from posing as a barrier, the Sahara has been a maze of highways for commercial contact between the North African coast and the West African minefields for thousands of years.¹⁰ Deserts and bodies of water are much more penetrable than forests and jungles, which bear the challenges of mountain ranges and chasms, not to mention hostile forces, both two-legged and four-legged. Some of the most well-known routes ran between Niani, in current-day Guinea, and Timbuktu; Timbuktu and Fez; Gao and the area of current-day Benghazi and Tripoli; and Fez and Cairo. These were all documented by the eighth century. Did they exist one thousand years earlier? From the beginning of dynastic Egypt, five thousand years ago, routes led five hundred kilometers from Akhmim on the middle Nile to the Dakhla Oasis, and more than six hundred kilometers from Aswan to the Selima Oasis, and then beyond to the southwest.¹¹ It has been suggested that both copper and tin were exported from the Nok area to as far as Egypt as early as the second millennium B.C.E.¹² We know from the depictions at Saharan sites such as Tassili n'Ajjer at the Algeria–Niger border and Oualata-Tichitt in Mauritania, not far from Timbuktu, that cattle were herded across vast areas as early as 2000 B.C.E. and that the horse (before 1000 B.C.E.) and then the camel (c. 400 B.C.E.) were introduced by the next millennium (although we do not



Fig. 3. *Male Figure*, Katsina, Nigeria, 200 B.C.E.–100 C.E. Terracotta, 26½ x 7¾ x 8 in. (67.3 x 19.7 x 20.3 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of SusAnna and Joel B. Grae, 2010.6.109



Fig. 4. *Male Figure (fragment)*, Sokoto, Nigeria, 500 B.C.E.–200 C.E. Terracotta, 18 x 11½ x 10½ in. (45.7 x 29.2 x 26.7 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of SusAnna and Joel B. Grae, 2010.6.152

know when they reached West Africa).¹³ If camels were at Tassili in the fourth century B.C.E., they were clearly traveling south; travel, not animal husbandry, was their *raison d'être*. Today the Tuareg traverse the entire Sahara on camel caravans, following a tradition known for millennia. One of the most famous journeys, chronicled by the Arabs, was the trip by the emperor of ancient Mali, Mansa Moussa, from Timbuktu, in present-day Mali on the Niger River, through Alexandria (where he was said to have crashed the market with his abundance of gold), and all the way to Mecca in 1324. There must have been many precedents for such a voyage for the king to have attempted it. Northern Nigeria would have been mid-route between Niani and the Nile. Ancient migrations, however, would have been primarily pedestrian, and it should be noted that a camel caravan does not travel much faster than a human caravan, although it enables the transport of heavier cargo. Most travelers, of course, would have traded between intermediate sites, with goods passed along from trader to trader, along with stories and ideas.¹⁴

In fact, possible routes can be traced from northern Nigeria to the Nile that do not traverse the Sahara. It is 2,500 kilometers as the crow flies. Suzanne Blier has shown evidence of a forty-day trek from Lower Niger sites through Lake Chad and Darfur to the Nile in Lower Nubia.¹⁵ Furthermore, one can travel almost the entire distance by water, with rivers that connect, or closely reach each other, during the rainy season and sometimes flow the opposite way. The Benue River is an example, reversing and reaching Lake Chad at certain times of the year. The source of the Sokoto River nearly touches that of the Hadejia River, which flows into the Komadugu Yobe River and then into Lake Chad. From here, continuous waterways (the Erguig, Bahr Bola, and Bahr Azum rivers) flow to Darfur, from which caravan routes went all the way to Kerma in Lower Nubia. Alternatively, additional seasonal waterways, such as the Wadi Howar and the Wadi al

Malik, could be connected to arrive at Napata, at the fourth cataract of the Nile.

Beads travel enormous distances very quickly, as witnessed at both Djenné, in Mali, and at Nok, where Egyptian faience has been found in excavation.¹⁶ Ideas travel quickly too, and ideas about conventions lead to ideas about forms and to forms themselves. Many of the formal affinities between ancient Egypt and modern Africa may be the result of more regional invention based on independently evolved ideas about space, utility, form, and ornament. But some forms may have followed ideas that traveled the routes of trade, religious missions, or migration, from one end of the continent to the other.

The relationship of Egypt to the rest of the African continent is becoming of more interest to scholars than it has been in the past. Most Egyptologists now acknowledge that ancient Egypt was a crossroads between Black Africa and the Near East. It is generally assumed that with the final desiccation of the Sahara about 4000 B.C.E., a movement of peoples began toward the Nile. Many comparisons have been made between the rock art and pottery of the early Sahara and the imagery of ancient Egyptian art.¹⁷

As I have indicated, the Nok civilization was contemporary with the final millennium of dynastic Egypt. A number of comparisons can be made with Egyptian conventions, although we have no cultural context and thus no sure interpretation of the forms. Many Nok figures are depicted with elaborate necklaces of multiple strands, probably representing beaded collars of the type that were a prominent feature of royal Egyptian dress. The shepherd's crook and the flail were the principal emblems of kingship in ancient Egypt and they are found, sometimes together, sometimes singly, on terracotta figures from Nok and Sokoto. In these instances, the figures carry them in a way similar to that seen in Egyptian sculpture. (In ancient Egypt they are crossed at the figure's chest and fall in front of the shoulders; in ancient Nigeria, they are tossed over each shoulder.) Some

figures carry an axe over the shoulder, resembling a practice among the Dogon of Mali today, both in life and as depicted in their sculpture. The penis sheaths worn by kings and gods are also similar in the Egyptian and the Nok and Sokoto cultures, depicted as long cloth tubes tied with elaborate bows.¹⁸ Additionally, many figures from Nok, Sokoto, and Katsina depict a male wearing a long beard that has been bound or braided into a single column. Braided and bound beards have symbolized kingship throughout Africa, as they did in ancient Egypt. Not only forms but also iconography seem to have been shared across the Sahara. A perching bird figure from Nok with a human face resembles figures from dynastic Egypt, as well as from later Nubian sites, representing an aspect of the human soul, *ba*, which could move back and forth from the dead body. A curious circle on the forehead of some Nok heads recalls the sun sign of ancient Egypt, and one that, in fact, in Ghana today is worn on the forehead as a symbol of the soul. Certain conventions that we find both on the Nile and on the southern border of the central Sahara may have enjoyed a broad distribution, origin unknown.

Who are the descendants and heirs of these cultures at the border of the Sahara that seem to have disappeared after the fifth or sixth century? A number of cultural groups in the region today might be candidates: among others, the Dakakari, the Jukun, or even the Yoruba of southern Nigeria and the Republic of Benin, all of which show some affinity artistically with these earlier cultures. Today, northern Nigeria is dominated by the Hausa and the Fulani, both relatively new immigrants to the area, Islamized for centuries, and unsympathetic to figural sculpture. After two thousand years, the heirs of Nok, Sokoto, and Katsina would be spread very widely, even to New York City and around the globe.

Since 2006 the Gallery has received a large number of gifts of African antiquities created prior to European contact, including

several objects from the Sapi of Sierra Leone and many objects of sculpture, pottery, jewelry, and tools from the Inland Niger Delta in Mali; Bura in Niger; Koma in Ghana; and Nok, Sokoto, and Katsina in Nigeria. Together with Professor Roderick McIntosh, of Yale's Department of Anthropology and Curator of Anthropology at the Peabody Museum, we have collaborated in bringing this collection to Yale, and we have begun using the collection in several ways with archaeology classes. As one of the foremost archaeologists working in Africa, McIntosh has been a champion for honesty and ethics in the collecting of African antiquities. We agreed that of all the possible dispositions of this collection, already long in private hands, the acquisition by Yale, and its disclosure internationally through widespread publication, would be the best option. A smaller collection of African antiquities came with the gift of Charles Benenson, B.A. 1933. The antiquities have been given prominent display in the African gallery, with more than fifty objects on view.

Those of us who have studied African archaeology are concerned about the issues of collecting, displaying, and studying the vast body of material that has come out of Africa undocumented, without the benefit of the archaeological context. Archaeological work is hindered by many factors in Africa, including the recalcitrance of local African governments, an inhospitable climate, prohibitive local customs, a lack of funding in the West, and a paucity of students. Until we have more controlled archaeological excavation throughout the continent of Africa, the periods discussed here—from the rise of ancient Egypt to the development of civilizations in the area of the Niger River—will largely remain subject to speculation. Uncontrolled, illicit excavation by local, amateur diggers destroys the context of the objects' stratigraphy, dating, use, and association with other artifacts, which can provide information about the people who produced these cultural objects. Objects are damaged in careless

digging, but there has also been the deliberate smashing of terracotta sculptures by local people suspicious of the dark powers these artifacts might bear.¹⁹ The flooding of the market with Nok figures has been complicated by diverse and ingenious methods of forgery, including the construction of whole figures around an original fragment, major restoration of the surface and body parts, the joining of unrelated body parts, and many other tricks, all meant to satisfy a relentless international demand. Thermoluminescence tests on such objects have inaccurately conferred authenticity.

Recognizing the critical importance of controlled excavation, Yale University's involvement in archaeology in Africa has been extensive, beginning with Nubia from 1961 through 1963, led by William Kelly Simpson, in collaboration with the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. This resulted in a significant Nubian collection at the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History. Most recently, McIntosh has been working with colleagues in Mali at the site of Djenné on major excavations that began in 1977 and continue today. Additionally, Yale archaeology students are currently excavating early urban centers in the area of Timbuktu in what is now the Sahara Desert, with discoveries that will overturn our current understanding of the antiquity of Africa.

The Graes, who have supported archaeological work in the Negev, collected African art already in the United States, beginning in the early 1970s, in the hope of depositing these important documents in museums that would promote their active study. As Joel Grae has frequently said, "If you go to most museums, you get the impression that Africa had no art before the nineteenth or twentieth century." It is the wish of the Graes, and of the Gallery, that the collection be used to educate the public about African art, the importance of archaeological excavation, and the untold wealth of the African heritage that is also our own.

1. The Cyrenean geographer Herodotus, who gave the earliest reference to Ifriquiya, in the fifth century B.C.E., knew something of Nubia on the Upper Nile and the Garamantes of the Fezzan in southern Libya, but nothing of the area south of the Sahara. Roman armies clearly reached the Fezzan, and it has been suggested that they crossed the Sahara, but no documentation indicates they had any knowledge of the Sahel. See Sir Harry H. Johnston, *A History of the Colonization of Africa by Alien Races* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1899), 48; and Labelle Prussin, *Hatumere: Islamic Design in West Africa* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1986), 7.
2. See Bernard Fagg, *Nok Terracottas* (London: Ethnographica, 1990), for a large corpus.
3. Yashim Isa Bitiyong, "Culture Nok, Nigeria," in *Vallées du Niger* (Paris: Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, 1993), 393–415; J. F. Jemkur, *Aspects of the Nok Culture* (Zaria: Amadu Bello University, 1992), 69; Ekpo Eyo and Frank Willett, *Treasures of Ancient Nigeria* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 57–64. Objects' testing dates after 300 C.E. tend to be somewhat aberrant in style.
4. Jemkur, *Aspects of the Nok Culture*, 64.
5. Nicole Rupp, Peter Breunig, and Stefanie Kahlheber, "Exploring the Nok Enigma," *Antiquity* 82 (2008): 313.
6. Bitiyong, "Culture Nok, Nigeria," 398–407.
7. Reported in a letter from Wayne Cancro (dealer) to Joel B. Grae, July 12, 2004 (curatorial archives, Gift of SusAnna and Joel B. Grae, Department of African Art, Yale University Art Gallery).
8. Fagg, *Nok Terracottas*, 21.
9. This figure had been in the Grae collection for many years, with the head in numerous fragments. In consultation between the conservator, Carol Snow, and me, the decision was made to reassemble the fragments with a reversible acrylic adhesive. Polyethylene foam structural supports, toned with acrylic and gouache paints, were positioned on each side of the head to suspend the fragments of coiffure in place above the face.
10. Prussin, *Hatumere*, 8.
11. Regine Schulz and Matthias Seidel, *Egypt: The World of the Pharaohs* (Cologne: Könemann Verlagsgesellschaft, 1998).
12. Bitiyong, "Culture Nok, Nigeria," 409.
13. Jemkur, *Aspects of the Nok Culture*, 62.

14. It should be acknowledged that both J. F. Jemkur and Peter Breunig reject the idea of influence from Egypt or North Africa on Nok culture, in favor of independent invention. Jemkur, *Aspects of the Nok Culture*, 64; Breunig, quoted in Matthias Schulz, "German Archaeologists Labor to Solve Mystery of the Nok," *Spiegel Online*, Aug. 21, 2009, www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,druck-642521.00.html (accessed Feb. 26, 2010). I would argue that completely independent invention does not exist. Nevertheless, other cross-fertilization might have been at play.

15. Suzanne Preston Blier, "The Forty-Day Trade Route: Ifé, Benue, and the Nile c. 1300," Mar. 2011, unpublished paper, Fifteenth Triennial Symposium on African Art, University of California, Los Angeles.

16. Susan K. McIntosh and Roderick J. McIntosh, "The Inland Niger Delta before the Empire of Mali: Evidence from Jenne-Jeno," *Journal of African History* 22 (1981): 1–22; Lois Sherr Dubin, *The History of Beads* (New York: Abrams, 1987), 125.

17. Andrew B. Smith, "Desert Solitude: The Evolution of Ideologies among Pastoralists and Hunter-Gatherers in Arid North Africa," in *Desert Peoples: Archaeological Perspectives*, ed. Peter Veth, Mike Smith, and Peter Hiscock (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 272–73: "The vast landscape of the Sahara allowed cultural contact from Mali to the Nile Valley as far back as 9,000 years ago. There appear to have been no barriers to movement, and even political entities which may have grown up did not deter culture transmission. . . . The distribution of wavy-line pottery ca. 9,000 BP is virtually the same as that of diamond rocker-stamped wares ca. 6,000 BP . . . of Niger."

18. Edna R. Russmann and David Finn, *Egyptian Sculpture: Cairo and Luxor* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 95–97.

19. Fagg, *Nok Terracottas*, 18.